

# Sigmar Polke

## Der heimische Waldboden. Höhere Wesen befehlen: Polke zeigen! [The Native Forest Floor. Higher Powers Command: Show Polke!]

Sep 12, 2024 – Feb 2, 2025

### Ground Floor

#### 1 Mu nieltnam netorruprup, 1975

Four-color-offset print on cardboard, 70 x 50 cm; Jürgen Becker Collection, Hamburg

The Kunsthalle Kiel used this print as a poster for an exhibition of the same name in 1975. The title reads backwards as part of a line from the children’s song *Ein Männlein steht im Walde* [Eng: A Little Man Stands in the Forest], which is supposedly about a fly agaric mushroom. From the 1970s onward, fly agaric mushrooms recur in Polke’s photographs and prints, a period in which he developed a fascination with non-European cultures, the occult, and the expansion of consciousness through psychoactive substances. In the 1970s, recipes for making psychedelics from the skin of the fly agaric mushroom were part of the scene’s knowledge.

#### 2 Festival d’Automne à Paris, 1988

Edition, silk-screen on cardboard, 61 x 31 cm

This edition was created for Sigmar Polke’s participation in the 1988 *Festival d’Automne* in Paris— an annual festival of the arts in various disciplines, including theater, music, dance, film, and visual arts. That year also marked the anniversary of the May 68 civil unrest in France. In the picture, the rat is digging up the ground as an allusion to the slogan of the time, “Beneath the pavement lies the beach.”

#### 3 Untitled (Dr. Bonn), 1978

Casein on patterned wool, 130 x 131 cm; Collection Museum Groninger, Groningen, Netherlands

In the late 1970s, Polke’s work was strongly characterized by a humorous and at the same time socially critical view on political situations. He was particularly skeptical of state authorities and institutions. A white cone of light made of emulsion paint illuminates an office scene from the right on a stretched woolen fabric. A faceless figure sits at a desk with a slingshot aimed at himself. Above him hang the wanted pictures of Jan-Carl Raspe and Andreas Baader, members of the extreme left-wing militant group Red Army Faction (RAF), clearly recognizable in contrast to the anonymity of the figure. The grid [Ger.: Raster] from the fabric alludes to the so-called dragnet [Ger.: Rasterfahndung], a controversial police investigative procedure that was developed in West Germany in the 1970s as the basis for the search for members of the RAF. The search dominated the news media at the time, and the mug shots became etched in the collective memory. The slingshot refers to the so-called Night of Death on October 18, 1977 in the Stuttgart-Stammheim prison, in which Raspe and Baader, as well as Gudrun Ensslin, died and which led to speculation about the actual cause of death.

#### 4 Untitled (Lapis Lazuli), 1992 or 1998

Tempera, resin on canvas, 97 x 79 cm; Private Collection

As a playful quotation from gestural painting, *Lapis Lazuli* demonstrates Polke’s tireless joy in experimenting with different techniques. This work, one of Polke’s many ‘material paintings,’ is one of the alchemical experiments in painting that culminated in the creative phase of the 1980s. The deep blue pigment of the precious stone lapis lazuli had already been used in the Renaissance, as had tempera, a binding of pigments with a water-oil mixture, and testifies to Polke’s interest in the history of painting and his own unique approach to it, which is broken here by the use of synthetic resin. Polke uses the title to foreground the material, thus leaving room for associations.

#### 5 Untitled (Sicherheitsverwahrung) [Preventive Detention], 1979

Dispersion, spray paint, safety pins, razor blades, brooch, sweets on decorative fabric, 130 x 110 cm; Collection Musée d’Art Toulon, France

This comic-like figurative work was created in two versions. It depicts a woman trying to free herself from the violent grip of the police and seems to step out of the picture. Safety pins, brooches, gold chains adorn to a floral embroidery that is used as the canvas are recognizable as objects attributed to women, which, in juxtaposition with the self-confident figure dressed in jeans and a shirt, question the social role of women in the 1970s and 1980s. The Women’s Movement, which became visible to the public through worldwide protests, shaped a new wave of feminism and is also reflected in Polke’s painting.

#### 6 Untitled, from ca. 1968

Selection of black and white photographs, partially reworked, 164 pieces; Private Collection

A compact camera was Polke’s constant companion; in the darkroom he experimented with different chemical processes and forms of exposure during the development of the prints. In some cases, he colored the prints by hand afterwards. The selected photographs document his everyday life, early exhibitions, performative acts, but also his close connection to his companions, especially in the Rhineland. Polke also used the camera to stage himself in playful self-portraits, for example with prism glasses in the middle of an opening that seemed to be of little interest to him.

#### 7 Tischrücken (Séance) [Table Turning], 1981

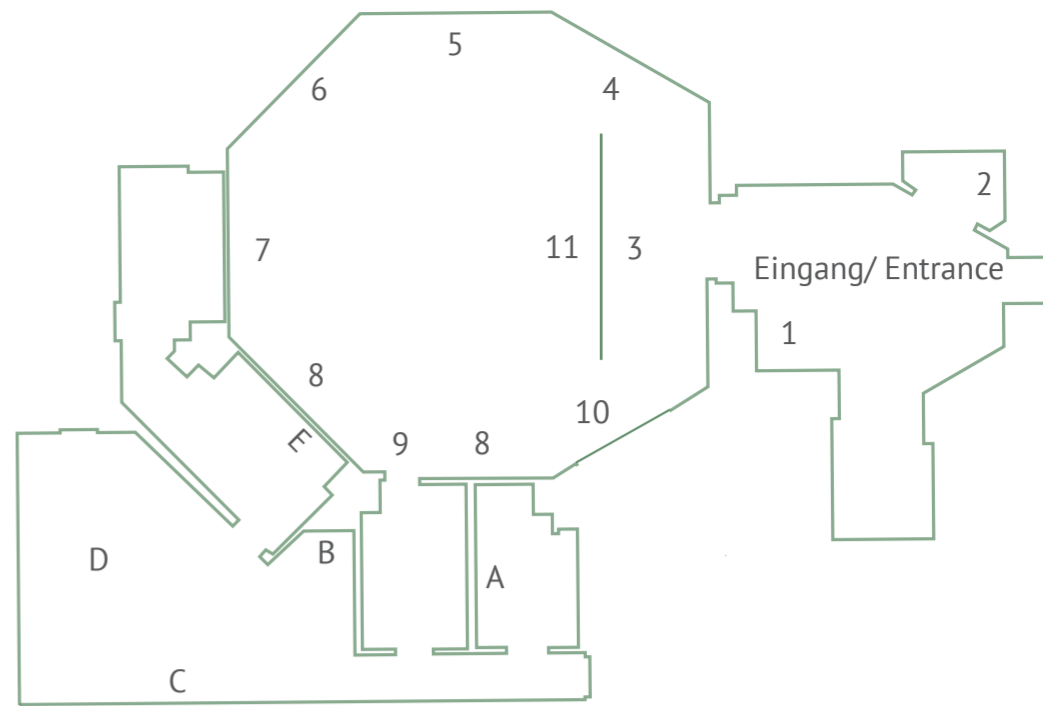
Dispersion on fabric stretched in wooden frame, 205 x 200 cm; Speck Collection, Cologne

In the 1960s, Polke discovered industrially produced, printed fabrics as a painting ground for his works. However, the fabrics do not function as a substitute for a picture support, and Polke does not integrate them into his paintings as found objects; rather, the fabrics play an essential role in the conceptual structure of the paintings. The red fabric of *Tischrücken (Séance)* [Table Turning] is reminiscent of a tablecloth, both in its texture and in the way it hangs loosely from the frame. A sketchy black drawing depicts schematically a table and its movement. White emulsion paint, which Polke lets run over the fabric and exposes to chemical reactions, suggests something figuratively ghostly beneath the drawing. Polke’s Düsseldorf circle in the 1970s and 1980s was fascinated by the occult. The title alludes to the spiritual practice of necromancy, in which a table is moved in order to make contact with supernatural beings. In the painting, the supernatural is juxtaposed with the question of perception and chance as an aesthetic principle.

#### 8 ... Höhere Wesen befehlen [Higher Beings Command], 1968

14 offset prints, one front page, 4 drawings, 21 x 14.8 cm or 29.5 x 21 cm; Jürgen Becker Collection, Hamburg

The portfolio was published in 1968 by Galerie René Block, Berlin. It consists of fourteen offset prints after photographs by Sigmar Polke and Chris Kohlhöfer and four drawings. Here, Polke elevates the seemingly mundane to the central motif of his art. In this portfolio, various everyday objects are transformed into new kinds of palm trees. The title *...Höhere Wesen befehlen* [Higher Beings Command] pokes fun at the authority



and seriousness of art production, suggesting that artists do not work independently but follow a higher, almost mystical directive—named ‘inspiration.’ This is an ironic reflection on the expectations placed on art and artists.

#### 9 Spargeld [Savings Money], 2002

Color offset lithograph and color serigraph, 70 x 50 cm

Polke pasted an advertising headline from a newspaper onto the center of a checkered sheet of paper, framed by two arms sealing a deal with a handshake. In contrast to the advertising message, which was directed at the consumer, Polke’s figure seals a deal with himself, thus reducing the transaction between two parties to absurdity. For this carnivalesque critique of capitalism Polke deliberately used inferior graph paper and banal writing utensils. The Stroke appears naïve, almost amateurish and undermines the noble notions of traditional printmaking. The work also reminds us of Polke’s drawings from the 1960s, when Polke—along with Gerhard Richter, Manfred Kuttner, and Konrad Lueg—proclaimed ‘Capitalist Realism’ as a rejection of established art movements.

#### 10 Die Schmiede [The Smithy], 1975

Acrylic and metallic paint on cotton, 150 x 130.4 cm; Private Collection

Two motifs overlap in this painting: Inconspicuously placed in the background is the image of a blacksmith striking an anvil. Polke appropriated this motif from a stamp. He took the image of the four men looking down at the viewer from each side from the comic “The Adventures of Phoebe Zeit-Geist” (text: Michael O’Donoghue, drawings: Frank Springer), which appeared in German translation in 1970. Phoebe, the daughter of an aristocrat, is drugged at a party and suffers various sadistic assaults before being brutally murdered. The four figures depicted by Polke are businessmen who have their way with the young woman’s dead body. In his painting, Polke anticipates the end of the comic and thus superimposes the linear narrative: A flower seller takes revenge and shoots Pheobe’s tormentor, with the red splashes of paint, in reference to the comic medium, exaggerating the action. The viewers are physically below the figures and look up at them through the veil of blood.

#### 11 Wo ist der Hirsch? [Where is the Deer?], 1983/84

Acrylic and violet pigments on textile, 225.4 x 210 cm; Private Collection

For this work, Polke sewed together two trivially patterned fabrics, dividing the canvas in half almost in the middle. The textiles contrast with each other and evoke a restless background. Atypical of Polke’s painting style, he deconstructs and abstracts a deer with a few quick brushstrokes: nostrils, ears, an implied eye, and a leg are loosely scattered across the canvas. For his paintings, Polke uses a purple pigment produced in aniline factories since the 19th century, which he used for many of his works after a trip to Southeast Asia in 1983. This period is characterized by Polke’s curiosity and interest in pigments and their stories. In terms of motif, Polke takes up another hunting theme in addition to his series of raised hides. One part of the antlers echoes the pattern of the leopard print. Brushstrokes and patches of color run across the canvas, foreground and background merge into one another, and Polke invites the viewer to play a game of search: Where is the deer?

## Filmic Works

#### A Interview with René Block (Excerpts) from the Archive of the Anna Polke Foundation, Cologne

Video, color, sound, recorded by Anna Polke, Berlin January 8, 2020, 28:50 Min.

René Block (b. 1942) opened his gallery in West Berlin in 1964. In the early years, he mainly exhibited young, not yet established artists and focused on the new trends of Fluxus and so-called ‘Capitalist Realism.’ The latter term for an art movement that dealt with images from the media and the consumer world of postwar Germany was largely shaped by him. In a conversation with Anna Polke, he talks about the beginnings of his gallery, the first exhibitions with Sigmar Polke in the 1960s, and the reactions of the public. With special thanks to René Block.

#### B Klaus Mettig – Salto Arte, 1975

Super-8-Film, HD Scan, color, sound 23:31 Min.

On May 23, 1975, a group of artists entered the arena of a circus in the city center of Brussels. Dressed in feather boas and eye-catching costumes, they presented an extraordinary spectacle. One of the highlights was a risky knife-throwing act with the scantily clad Beuys student Katharina Sieverding. The *Manifestation Salto Arte*, which was co-organized by the renowned Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, served to support the left-wing art magazine *POUR (écrire la liberté)*. The artist Klaus Mettig, one of the participants, captured the colorful goings-on with his Super 8 camera.

#### C Ernst Mitzka – Zürichtapes, 1975

Black-and-white-films, digitalized, sound, excerpts

For Polke, the 1970s were characterized by the Zurich subculture, in which iconic protagonists such as Looser or Lady Shiva played a central role. In the staid Zurich of the 70s and 80s, model, sex worker, IT girl and actress Lady Shiva, alias Irene Staub, was an icon of that time for an artistic scene that was wild, courageous, loud and shrill. Filmmaker Ernst Mitzka was part of this circle and filmed them with a newly developed portable hand-held camera. The result was unique insights into the artistic work of the time. Excerpts from works such as *Frauen sehen Frauen* [Women see women] (1975), *Holz-fällen* [Wood Cutting] (1975) and *Lady Shiva* (1975) illustrate the great interest in the performative arts that took place outside the established art institutions.

#### D Galerie Block – Berliner Fenster, 1975

Super-8-Film, digitalized, b/w, sound, SFB/ rbb media GmbH-Production from March 12, 1970, written by Jan Franksen, excerpt 03:45 Min.

A contribution to Polke’s exhibition in René Block’s gallery was made for a recording by rbb (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg) in 1970. While Block talked about the exhibition in front of the camera, Polke stood in the exhibition space and philosophized about being or not being and showed no interest in explaining himself or his art. Following the short monologue, Polke began to listen intently to the walls. His search for something hidden from the viewer leads him to a store and finally to the Berlin Wall, to which Polke also presses his ear.

## E Britta Zoellner with Astrid Heibach – The Rainbow Serpent: Entering a New Inner Space, a New Inner Time, 1980–1/2014/2024

Super-8-Film, HD-Scan, color, silent, 20:01 Min.

This poetic film documents the journey that Sigmar Polke and his then-partner Britta Zoellner took to Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Australia between March 1980 and April 1981. During this time, Polke neither painted nor drew. He filmed with his 16 mm camera and took photographs. Zoellner filmed him with a Super 8 camera, capturing the same motifs as Polke from her perspective. A shorter version of the film was first shown in 2014–15 as part of the retrospective *Alibis. Sigmar Polke 1963–2010* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne.

## First Floor

### 12 Schlangenhaut [Snake Skin], 1977

Unique photograph, manipulated b/w technique, 168 x 90 cm; Private Collection

Sigmar Polke's experiments with materials, structures and repetitive motifs characterize his work, the snake motif also appears frequently. His passion for dots is not only evident in his famous halftone grid paintings. When he was not painting them himself, he found dot-like structures in nature and used them in numerous works, such as the white dots on the cap of the fly agaric mushroom or on snakeskin, the structure of which is created by the dense juxtaposition of elliptical scales. He once said, ironically, that he loved dots and was married to them.

### 13 Messerwerfer [Knife Thrower], 1975

Four-color offset print on coated paper, 37 x 26 cm; Private Collection

In the 1970s, circus and magic motifs increasingly appeared in Polke's work. Together with artist friends, Polke was often active in the show and variety milieu during this period—he was very interested in the performative that took place outside of bourgeois life and art institutions. The work shows a knife being thrown at a rotating disc, on which the outline of a person is faintly discernible. The rapid rotation reveals the image of a fly agaric mushroom in the center, a recurring theme in Polke's exploration of the expansion of consciousness. The pictorial space self-reflectively opens up to questions of illusion and the illusory. The print was part of the multiple box *Salto Arte* (see: B Klaus Mettig – Salto Arte), which was sold in Brussels in 1975 in the context of the circus-like *Manifestation Salto Arte* action to financially support the left-wing magazine *POUR (écrire la liberté)*, initiated by Harald Szeemann and temporarily banned. In addition to Polke, twenty-seven other artists participated, including Katharina Sieverding, Klaus Mettig, Astrid Heibach, and Achim Duchow.

### 14 Eiförmige Aureole mit Akanthusblatt [Egg-Shaped Aureole with Acanthus Leaf], 1986

Pigment and resin on fabric, 69 x 50 cm

Several layers of paint are superimposed in this small-format painting study. In the center of the picture an enormous lacquer bubble arches, under which the eponymous ornament is hidden. The thistle-like acanthus leaf has been a recurring motif in ornamentation since the fifth century B.C. A glance at the choice of colors reveals that Polke was experimenting with different paints, under which the ornament appears in fragments. The violet pigment, which played an important role in the 1980s and 2010s together with Polke's bulks [Ger: Schüttungen], can be seen here.

### 15 Bernd Jansen – Willich: Sigmar Polke mit Schlangenhaut [Sigmar Polke with Snake Skin], 1973

Gelatin silver prints, 36.5 x 25 cm; Loan from Petra Lange-Berndt, Michael Liebelt & Dietmar Rübel, Hamburg

These photographs from a 7-part photo series were taken by Bernd Jansen and show Sigmar Polke in make-up, rolled up in a snakeskin and lounging on a carpet. The photographs can be seen as an ironic take on the so-called *figura serpentina* [Eng: serpentine figure], a depiction of coiled bodies that characterized the late Renaissance. The photographs were taken in 1973 at Gaspelshof in Willich near Düsseldorf, a farmstead that Polke rented for several years beginning in 1978, where he lived in a commune with other artists.

### 16 Untitled (Dr Pabscht het z' Schpiez s' Schpäckbschteck z' schpät bschteut), 1975

Latex paint, acrylic, spray paint on nettle, 50 x 40 cm; Private Collection

The painting with a Swiss tongue-twister as its title, which literally means that the Pope in Spiez ordered his bacon cutlery too late, shows two crossed spoons protruding from an open cutlery box. In 1991, the painting was reproduced as a multiple (edition object) in a then innovative four-color inkjet print on Vinyl. Polke found the motif in the collage novel *Une semaine de bonté* [Eng: A Week of Kindness] by the Surrealist artist Max Ernst, published in 1934. While Ernst dealt with themes such as jealousy, murder, and death in his collages, Polke chose a trivial detail from these and humorously linked it to the Swiss idiom. With the hanging suggested by the artist, the right angle is placed on the corner, and the picture suddenly reveals many more right and acute angles, in a composition that playfully references Mondrian.

### 17 Untitled, 1975

Photo emulsion, acrylic und spray paint on canvas 40 x 50 cm; Private Collection

From the mid-1960s, Polke began to experiment with photography as a medium. Initially, he photographed a lot in his home environment and within the Düsseldorf artist scene. From the 1970s onwards, Polke increasingly undertook long journeys, which he recorded photographically. During this time, he also began his alchemical experiments in the darkroom with multiple exposures or cross-fades and interruptions in the development process, with chance playing a decisive role. Each print thus became unique. The unfinished print is blurred in places; the motif shows toadstools, which are known for their psychedelic effect. Polke colored some elements of the black-and-white print and thus appropriated the motif in a painterly manner.

### 18 Handlinien [Hand lines], 1968

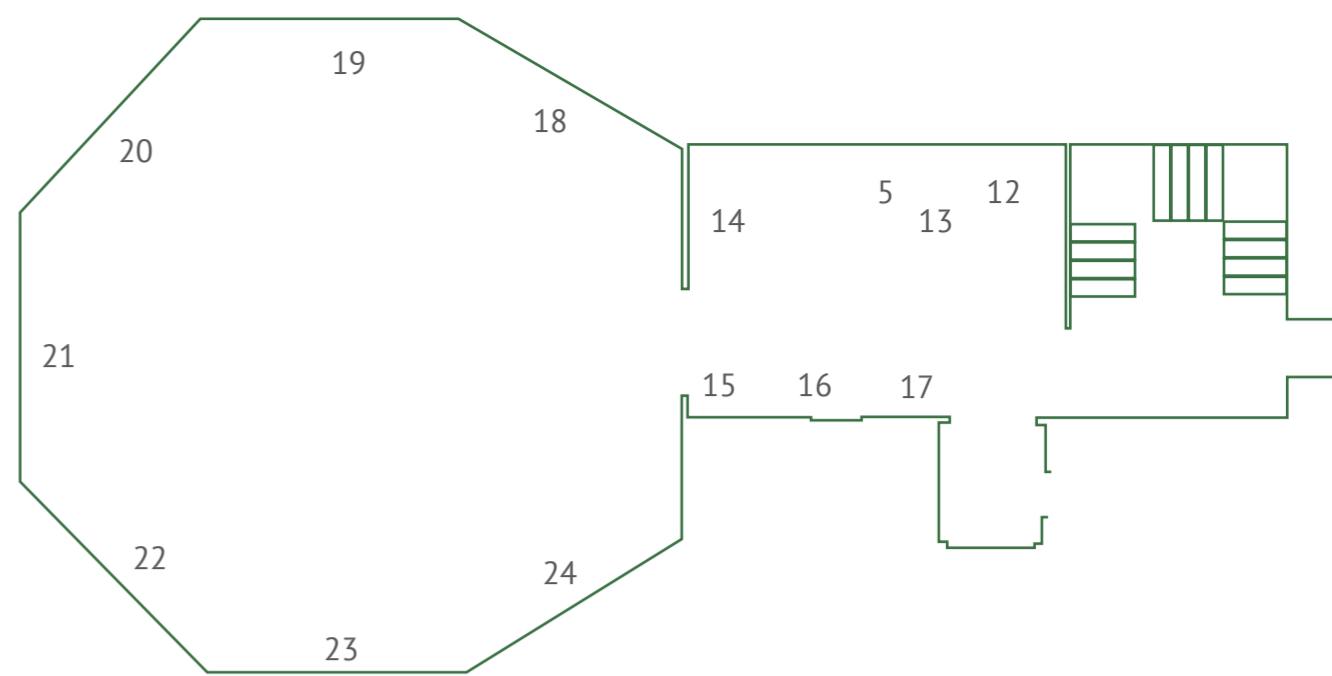
Brush drawing on fabric, 90 x 75 cm; Private Collection

In the 1960s, parallel to the emergence of the halftone dots that would become his trademark, Polke began to use industrially printed fabric as a painting surface instead of neutral canvas. On a greenish patterned fabric, Polke hand-painted fine intersecting lines, a recurring motif in his early work. Polke, who was as enthusiastic about astrology as he was about parapsychology and fortune-telling, found a motif in palmistry that he reduced to its essentials. In this way, he made fun of the mania for interpretation in the wake of abstract art. During this time, Polke also painted star constellations in which his name can be found. Both parody the pathetic and heroically loaded image of the artist of his time.

### 19 Flüchtende [Fugitives], 1992

Acrylic and resin on fabric, 225 x 300 cm; Collection Careé d'Art, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes, France

This painting from 1992, one of Polke's best-known political images, was inspired by a photography prize awarded on the occasion of German reunification. It depicts a couple on the run, packed with the bare necessities of life, in a greatly magnified halftone grid. On the back of the canvas, Polke outlined the couple with green emulsion paint to bring them back into focus. Driven by great haste, the two are representative of the countless nameless refugees around the world who are forced to leave their homeland because of war and repression, persecution and natural disasters. Even after more than thirty years, this work has lost none of its relevance.



### 20 Carl Andre in Delft, 1968

Acrylic, dispersion on textile, 87.5 x 75 cm; Speck Collection, Cologne

Underneath a patterned fabric rectangle depicting the faience tiles known as Delft Blue, Polke wrote the title in block letters, as if on a didactic wall chart. Delft Blue, once a status symbol in the seventeenth century and then forgotten, experienced a revival in the 1960s, finding its way into bourgeois households. On October 21, 1967, Konrad Fischer opened his exhibition space in a narrow passageway in Düsseldorf with an exhibition dedicated to the American artist Carl Andre, who was still largely unknown in Europe at the time and would later become known worldwide as a pioneer of minimal art. On display was the work *5 x 20 Altstadt Rectangle*, which consisted of a total of 100 steel plates that, like Polke's work, formed a rectangle. During this time, Polke met Carl Andre personally, and they traveled together to Brussels (see: B Klaus Mettig – Salto Arte). Polke's painting is a response to Andre's exhibition as well as an ironic commentary on both minimal art and the philistinism of the 1960s.

### 21 Gangster, 1988

Plastic seal, synthetic resin, gold leaf, on polyester fabric, 300 x 230 cm; Speck Collection, Cologne

In the 1980s, Sigmar Polke increasingly worked with synthetic sealing lacquer, which he poured in many layers onto the horizontal picture ground. The result in this work is a honey-colored, semi-transparent picture support that makes the unconventional frame construction visible and thus integrates it into the pictorial space. Polke gave this artistic practice a leading role like no other. The large-format work is one of Polke's poured and lacquer paintings and sketchily depicts a half-dressed man offering goods for sale out of his coat. The cigar, trench coat, and hat allude to the popular gangster film genre of the 1980s, which has shaped the gangster stereotype to this day. At the same time it can be understood as a clever allusion to the social role of artists, a popular aspect of Polke's work. Polke's painting thrives on a permeable referential space for both political events and pop-cultural phenomena.

### 22 Lösungen V [Solutions V], 1969

Lacquer on burlap, 150 x 125 cm; Viehof Collection, formerly Speck Collection

The fifth work in a series from the 1960s, this painting questions the logical rules of mathematics. Simple equations, arranged one below the other as in a school exercise book, are solved arbitrarily. For Polke, the incorrect was always a trigger to think about alternative solutions. Alongside Polke's interest in astrology and alchemy, it is precisely these 'solutions' that, in their apparent triviality—black numbers on mono-chrome primed canvas—document his questioning of painting and the formation of canons without his own artistic impetus and genius loci and demonstrate his well-founded interest in art history.

### 23 Atemkristall [Breathing Crystal], 1997

Plastic seal, synthetic resin on polyester fabric, 350 x 280 cm; Speck Collection, Cologne

The title is taken from Paul Celan's poem cycle of the same name, which was illustrated with drawings by Gisèle Celan-Lestrange. Sigmar Polke inserts one of his own children's drawings into the picture, which he reproduces in a grid, painted point by point by hand. The grid—in Polke's work a stylistic means of enlargement and de-individualization—refers to the world of printed matter. The grid meets the spontaneity of the generous pouring of color. Like the title, *Atemkristall* [Breathing Crystal], both question our perception of time, which is preserved in painting.

### 24 Telepathische Sitzung II: Sender: William Blake – Empfänger: Sigmar Polke [Telepathic Session II: Transmitter: William Blake – Receiver: Sigmar Polke], 1968

Lacquer on canvas, cord, image size per panel: 50 x 43 cm; Viehof Collection, formerly Speck Collection

During the political upheavals of 1968, Polke, like many of his contemporaries, was fascinated by the supernatural and the occult. Telepathy was one of the much-discussed supernatural phenomena in which military research was also interested at the time. In addition to William Blake, Polke turned to the artist Max Klinger, also deceased, for another 'session' in an attempt to establish a connection to a possible afterlife. Polke is making fun of the experimental arrangements and text-heavy, austere works that were rampant at the time under the label 'conceptual art.' The structure of the pictures is reminiscent of the so-called ESP (Extrasensory Perception) test forms that were used in parapsychology in the 1960s to test extrasensory perception.

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PHILLIPS Between Bridges

