Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963–2010 brings together the work of Sigmar Polke (German, 1941–2010), one of the most voraciously experimental artists of the 20th century. On view from April 19 to August 3, 2014, this retrospective is the first to encompass the unusually broad range of mediums Polke worked in during his five-decade career, including painting, photography, film, sculpture, drawings, prints, television, performance, and stained glass. Polke eluded easy categorization by masquerading as many different artists—making cunning figurative paintings at one moment and abstract photographs the next. Highly attuned to the distinctions between appearance and reality, Polke elided conventional distinctions between high and low culture, figuration and abstraction, and the heroic and the banal in works ranging in size from intimate notebooks to monumental paintings. Four gallery spaces on MoMA's second floor are dedicated to the exhibition, which comprises over 250 works and constitutes one of the largest exhibitions ever organized at the Museum. *Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963–2010* is organized by MoMA with Tate Modern, London. It is organized by Kathy Halbreich, Associate Director, MoMA; with Mark Godfrey, Curator of International Art, Tate Modern; and Lanka Tattersall, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA. The exhibition travels to Tate Modern from October 1, 2014, to February 8, 2015, followed by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, in spring 2015.

Beneath Polke's irreverent wit and promiscuous intelligence lay a deep skepticism of all authority—artistic, familial, and governmental. To understand this attitude, and the creativity that grew out of it, Polke's biography and its setting in 20th-century European history is relevant: in 1945, near the end of World War II, his family fled Silesia (in present-day Poland) for what would soon be Soviet-occupied East Germany, from which they escaped to West Germany in 1953. Polke grew up at a time when many Germans deflected blame for the atrocities of the Nazi period with the alibi, "I didn't see anything."

Alibis is organized chronologically and across mediums, but begins in MoMA's Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium with a sampling of works from across Polke's career. The works presented in this gallery reflect Polke's persistent questioning of how we see and what we know, and his constant experimentation with representational techniques, from the hand-painted dots of *Police Pig* (1986) to the monumental digital print *The Hunt for the Taliban and Al Qaeda* (2002), which he described as a "machine painting." Polke's fluid approach to images and materials and his embrace of chance as a way of undermining fixed meanings is exemplified in the selection of films in the Marron Atrium, all of which have never before been shown publicly. The artist avoided conventional narrative structures and often double-exposed the film material, superimposing different layers of images. 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 (2003), which mocks the art market's reliance on rarity by making a painting out of tacky, mass-produced textiles. Polke 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* (1991), 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.

The exhibition continues in the Marron Atrium with some of Polke's earliest works, alongside notebooks and publications from throughout his career. Polke made most of the works in this section 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, he offered a sharp critique of consumerist behavior and popular taste, with its desire for both sleek new furnishings and kitsch decorative elements. As the juxtaposition of images and contradictory approaches in his notebooks demonstrate, Polke remained a contrarian throughout his life.

The first gallery within MoMA's Contemporary Galleries begins with Polke's work in the 1960s, when he 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 page as cartoons and advertisements. Polke was particularly interested in the halftone reproductions (images made up of grids of tiny dots that the eye blends to form a picture) that were common in cheaply printed mass media. From 1963 onward, Polke created a series of paintings in which he painstakingly transcribed—albeit not always faithfully—the dots of his halftone source. He often began by spraying a layer of paint through a perforated metal sheet; to these dots he added others by hand. By creating or amplifying distortions in his source images, he undermined the photographs' alleged fidelity to reality and collapsed the distinction between

figuration and abstraction. Works on view include *Chocolate Painting* (1964), *Girlfriends* (1965/66), and *Japanese Dancers* (1966).

The exhibition continues with Polke's work from the late 1960s, when he repeatedly treated himself as a test subject and manipulated the structures of science to question its rationality. By taking on such varied guises as a palm tree, his own doppelgänger, and a telepathic medium, he embodied his own fluctuating view of reality. Against the backdrop of worldwide political and cultural upheavals

and the space race between the USSR and the United States, Polke made it clear that the aims of science, such as precision, measurement, and objectivity, were not necessarily utopian or progressive. For *Cardboardology* (1968–69) and *People Circle* (1968), he used office materials such as cardboard, ballpoint pen, and twine 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. The works in this gallery also represent Polke's caustic dialogue with art from the past and present. In the drawing *Constructions around Leonardo da Vinci* (1969), Polke's 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* (1968), 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.

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 the painting *Modern Art* (1968), he cataloged 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 more like a cheap reproduction. In the early 20th century, the Soviet Constructivists heralded the social and utopian purpose of abstract art. But Polke evokes a contrary association with the black and white lines in *Constructivist* (1968); by mimicking the form of a partial swastika, Polke suggests that the return to abstraction in West Germany was a specious attempt to mask the reasons for its previous abandonment. Other paintings, in turn, conflate abstraction with the mundane realm of decoration and kitsch, as when he 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 outlandish sunset scenes dominated by pairs of herons in *Heron Painting I* (1968) and *Heron Painting II* (1968). Polke's approach to abstraction was one of interrogation, however, rather than absolute rejection.

The works in the following galleries were largely 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, and paintings,

Polke created layered, mutable visions of everyday life, including altered states of consciousness. This dense constellation of works 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. Polke's constant companion during this time was his Beaulieu movie camera. To the handful of these films he showed publicly during his lifetime, Polke 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 in search of unfamiliar experiences. All the while, he remained keenly responsive to the political climate in Germany, as in *Dr. Bonn* (1978), a painting that responded to the controversial deaths in 1977 of imprisoned members of the Red Army Faction, a leftist German terrorist group. Works on view in this section include the paintings *Mao* (1972) and *Menschkin* (1972), and the films *How Long We Are Hesst/Looser* (c. 1973–76) and *Quetta's Hazy Blue Sky* (c. 1974–76).

In 1981, after returning from more than a year of travel, 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* (1982), he used a few materials— including a common, non-artistic synthetic purple pigment—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* (1981–83) combines the figure of the Italian virtuoso 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* (1983) juxtaposes painted rows of binders—with the clinical inscriptions "Heilung" (healing) and "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.

The next 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 known as *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. Three works in a vitrine use photography, xerography, drawing, and printmaking to simultaneously degrade images and generate new, unforeseen ones. In *Purple* (1986), 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* (1986), Polke transposes 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, multidimensional space, distinct from the clearly defined perspectival space of Renaissance painting that Dürer intensely explored.

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 in 1989, and the reunification of Germany-Polke worked with a broad view of history in the works on view in the following gallery, which are among his largest paintings. Between 1984 and 1988, Polke 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 in the image is commonly used for hunting in Germany, but such structures also overlooked the border between East and West Germany and 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 with ornamental skeins of soot created with an ancient oil lamp.

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 distorted forms that blur the distinctions between abstraction and figuration, handmade and mechanical, and copy and original. In his *Printing Error* works, he similarly 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* (2007), 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, recalling the origin of the word *alibi*—a Latin word meaning “in or at another place.”