

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**The Museum of Modern Art****IMAGINATION AND WIT OF SIGMAR POLKE EXAMINED IN MAJOR EXHIBITION AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

First U.S. Show to Focus on Works on Paper Includes Many Works Never Before Seen Outside Polke's Studio

Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper, 1963-1974
April 1-June 16, 1999

In the early 1960s, Sigmar Polke (German, b. 1941) invented an expressive idiom that was crude, humorous, outrageous, and seemingly trivial, with a social message that was obvious but often ambivalent. Inspired by the images and messages of modern urban life--which he recast and marked with his own brand of humor--Polke aimed to create art for a broader public than those he saw as the cultivated and privileged middle class. Now a major exhibition examining Polke's early works on paper opens at The Museum of Modern Art on April 1, 1999. While exhibitions of Polke's drawings have been organized in Europe, his works on paper, and in particular those from the years 1963-74, have never been fully presented to an American audience.

Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper, 1963-1974 comprises approximately 180 drawings and gouaches, and some twenty sketchbooks. Created at the time Polke was coming of age as an artist, they introduce iconography and techniques he would incorporate throughout his career. Most of the works are drawn from private and public collections in Germany, including many works taken directly from the artist's studio. The exhibition is organized by Margit Rowell, Chief Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, in consultation with the artist.

The exhibition begins with small drawings from the early 1960s, progresses to Polke's larger, more colorful works, and culminates in several monumental drawings, including the series *The Ride on the Eight of Infinity* (1969-71). This is the first time the latter, a spectacular cycle of four works, has been displayed as a group in the United States. The last gallery of the exhibition is reserved for Polke's sketchbooks, which are an essential part of his oeuvre and provide a repertory of the elements and imagery found throughout his work.

"These drawings show a uniquely critical vision of modern society, translated by a mercurial mind in a deliberately provocative and populist idiom," says Ms. Rowell. "Low-key, as compared to the high style of American Pop Art, their message is all the more insidious, and their images continuously take us by surprise."

Born in East Germany, at age twelve Polke moved to Düsseldorf, where he studied from 1961 to 1967 at the Staatliche Kunstakademie. The artistic references in currency at that time at the Academy ranged from an art that drew on commercial imagery to one that encouraged a more social and spiritual approach. Polke's artistic identity is a blend of these two orientations. His imagination, sardonic wit, and eclectic creative

process have made him one of the most stimulating artists of his generation. Polke's choice of untraditional supports and unrefined materials works to dismantle elitist mythologies of artistic creation and production. High-art motifs are executed on newsprint, wrapping paper, cardboard, fabric, or sheets from stenographic pads and loose-leaf notebooks with such mediums as ballpoint pen, pencil, or watercolor and poster paint.

The rudimentary markings in these works show quixotic human figures or hybrid animal forms, evoking advertisements, cartoons or comic strips. The drawings from the 1960s can be loosely divided into groups based on medium and thematic content. The largest group is the ballpoint pen drawings on small sheets of notebook paper, which span the entire decade and treat extremely diverse subject matter.

The imagery includes isolated foodstuffs or ordinary household items, such as thumbtacks or dish towels; banal domestic situations, such as eating or bathing; leisure activities or exotic places; political commentaries, sometimes accompanied by crudely printed lettering; and subjects inspired by movie posters and marquees, commercial advertisements, or women's magazines. The images of food and household commodities clearly express the lack of basic necessities in the postwar years, while other motifs--referring, for instance, to dance halls and palm trees--reveal nostalgia for an inaccessible leisure life.

The majority of these drawings are reminiscent of children's jottings, anonymous graffiti, or newspaper cartoons in their use of spare, linear figures. Polke's recasting of his material in these vernaculars makes them appear innocent and harmless. In fact, they reflect a sharp critical and historical awareness. Polke's experience of the depressed economies on both sides of the Iron Curtain allowed him unusual insight into the realities and fictions of the "New Germany." His drawings contain themes of capitalist commodities and recreational activities that were mere fantasies of postwar society--fantasies arguably generated by political and economic objectives, rather than a genuine desire to enhance the happiness and welfare of the general population.

A number of larger drawings produced by Polke are also perverse and ambivalent. This group of watercolors and gouaches is devoted to specific themes: the "platypus," 1963-64; children's drawings, 1964-65; "potato heads," 1965-66; ghosts or spirits, 1963-69; "baroque" motifs, 1963-68. While the imagery is derived from personal experience, it contains a universal vision of a society progressively emptied of communication and compassion.

The "platypus" series shows figures whose silhouettes are both frightening and comic. Executed in felt-tipped pen on torn wrapping paper, the isolation of each motif highlights its emotional barrenness. The "face-to-face" and "potato head" series present conventional couples--mother and child, man and woman, or heads of state--translated as juxtaposed caricatured silhouettes, portraying a false togetherness. Drawings with the "ghost" or *geist* theme show the folk spirit of his potato heads, metamorphosed into the immaterial spirit. The "baroque" series contains stylized floral motifs and abstract curvilinear thrusts that are reminiscent of the painted and sculpted details found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Silesian and Bavarian architecture. Polke's energy and deliberately awkward style are preserved in the rippling curves, stylized volutes, and cockleshells that traditionally connote the tension between the spiritual and the sensuous inherent in the Baroque style.

Another small group is the "raster-dot" drawings of 1963-69. In this series, Polke explores a technique that he would elaborate in his paintings. The raster dot refers to the black-and-white rasters of the television screen. In contrast to Roy Lichtenstein's mechanical precision in his use of benday dots, Polke favored a handmade process, so that in the raster drawings, the dots are frequently off-register or blurred. In his first raster-dot experiment on paper in 1963, he counted the minute dots in a newsprint reproduction of a photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald. He then covered a sheet with a penciled grid and, using an inked pencil eraser, manually stamped the exact number of dots on the grid. In the resulting drawing, the original image is defused and neutralized. Polke sometimes abandoned the photographic model and created his own subjects, utilizing various genres such as portraiture, mythology, still life, interiors, and landscape. He also switched to a handmade perforated metal stencil and spray gun.

Polke's sketchbooks, which will be displayed in vitrines, provide a grammar of the artist's visual motifs, styles, and themes. With their extraordinary inventiveness and variety, the sketchbook drawings reveal Polke's desire to revitalize art through works that are in constant metamorphosis. They often contain experimentation with toxic chemicals, by means of which Polke studied the transformative properties of pigments. The knowledge gained from these early experiments has been employed in later works, in which colors change over time or in response to exhibition conditions.

This exhibition is made possible in part by the Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Foundation and the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder.

Additional support is provided by Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky. The accompanying publication is supported by Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Museum of Modern Art will host a panel discussion titled "A Round Table for Sigmar Polke" on Tuesday, May 4, 1999, at 6:30 p.m. The panel will include Bice Curiger, Editor-in-Chief, *Parkett*, and Curator at the Kunsthhaus, Zürich; Richard Flood, Chief Curator, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Charles W. Haxthausen, Faison-Pierson-Stoddard Professor of Art History, and Director, Graduate Program in the History of Art, Williams College; and Martin Hentschel, Director, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart. The panel will be moderated by Margit Rowell, Chief Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, and organizer of the exhibition. For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212.708.9781

PUBLICATION

The fully illustrated accompanying publication will contain essays by Margit Rowell, Chief Curator, Department of Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art; Bice Curiger, Curator at the Kunsthhaus in Zürich and Chief Editor of *Parkett*; and Michael Semff, Curator of the Twentieth Century Drawings Collection at the National Drawings Collection in Munich. Selected bibliography, chronology. 325 illustrations, including 298 in full color, 200 pages, 9 x 11". Clothbound, \$50, distributed in the United States and Canada by

Harry N. Abrams, and paperbound \$24.95, both available in the MoMA Book Store.

TRAVEL

The exhibition will travel to the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, July 16-October 17, 1999.

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