THE ART WORLD

SHOCK ARTIST

A Sigmar Polke retrospective.

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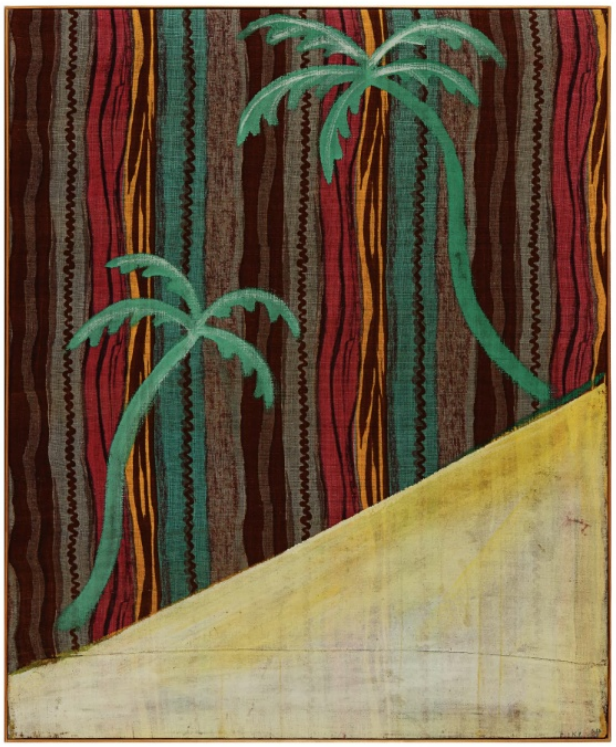

"The Palm Painting" (1964). Polke could seem to hit a reset button from phase to phase.

COURTESY ESTATE OF SIGMAR POLKE/ARS, NY/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN, GERMANY; PHOTO: ALISTAIR OVERBRUCK

"Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010," a wondrous retrospective of the late German artist's work at the Museum of Modern Art, is the most dramatic museum show of the century to date. It may also be the most important, if its lessons for contemporary art, both aesthetic and ethical, are properly absorbed. I fancy that young artists will feel put to a test. Even longtime Polke fans may be amazed by the cumulative power of the two hundred and sixty-five works on view, in painting, sculpture, graphic art, photography, and film. The modes range from the cartoonishly figurative to the augustly abstract, and the mediums from paint and pencil to toxic chemicals and meteorite dust. There is no Polke style, but only a distinctive force of talent and mind. With caustic humor and cultivated mystery, he could seem to hit a reset button from phase to phase, and even from piece to piece, and he regularly frustrated the efforts that curators, dealers, and critics made on his behalf, in ways that blurred his public image and hobbled his sales. He would still be at it, if he had lived to finish collaborating on "Alibis" with Kathy Halbreich, MOMA's associate director. (Polke died, of cancer, in 2010, at the age of sixty-nine.) Halbreich says that Polke rejected a chronological arrangement of the work. There's no telling what sort of unnerving layout he would have demanded. Mercifully for viewers, Halbreich has imposed a conventional order, except for an olio of big works, from different periods, in the museum's atrium. The effect is intensive and intense. We may now begin to understand an artist who, like a fugitive throwing dust in the eyes of pursuers, took pains not to be understood.

Polke was of a generation of Germans who inherited a defiled national culture. The "alibis" in the show's title start, in Halbreich's telling, with a postwar German mantra: "I didn't see anything." Polke came from the East, like Gerhard Richter, his peer and, for several years in the nineteen-sixties, his close friend. (It's a bit distorting, but irresistible, to deem Richter the cunning Apollo, and Polke the rampaging Dionysus, of the period's renaissance in German art.) Polke was born in 1941 in Oels, Silesia, the seventh of eight children of a father who trained to be an architect. In 1945, the family fled to Soviet-occupied Thuringia, during an expulsion of Germans from Silesia, which became part of Poland. In 1953, abandoning nearly all their possessions, they escaped to the West on a train, with young Polke ordered to feign sleep, to deflect suspicion. They settled in Düsseldorf, where Polke apprenticed to a stained-glass manufacturer and entered the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1961. Modern art was then enjoying a lofty prestige in West Germany, as a counterweight to the scalding memories of the Reich and to the menacing ideology of the East. Polke embraced the art but scorned the piety, resisting even the utopianism of the academy's charismatic guide and teacher, Joseph Beuys. Polke quickly became a galvanic presence in a cohort that included Richter, who, nine years older, and living on refugee assistance, had recently escaped the East after having been schooled unhappily in Socialist Realism.

Young German artists were stirred by the emerging Pop art of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Polke took to painting proletarian consumer goods—chocolate bars, soap, plastic buckets—and ordinary news and magazine photographs, in a rugged variant of Lichtenstein's Benday dots. The first was a scrappy image of Lee Harvey Oswald. In 1963, Polke, Richter, and two artist friends, unable to interest galleries in their work, mounted a group show, in a former butcher shop, of what they termed "Junk Culture, Imperialist or Capitalist Realism." The last two words

resonate with an exquisite ambivalence, skewering both parties to the Cold War: the commercial West and the dogmatic East. Polke and Richter, like Warhol, conveyed underclass perspectives on popular spectacles of commerce and glamour—"outdoing each other in terms of the lowest forms of banality," according to the German art historian and critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who knew both men at the time, and is interviewed in the show's catalogue. But they did so with lacerating skepticism, which, in Polke's case, abided no distinction between the vulgarities of mass culture and the pretenses of fine art. What Polke didn't raise up he brought down, as in a work of 1968 that might qualify as the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" of postmodernist sensibility: "Moderne Kunst," a painting of generic abstract shapes, lines, squiggles, and splashes, with a white border like that surrounding a reproduction in a book. It is both savagely sarcastic and seductively lovely. Time and again, Polke projects the unlikely comic figure of a would-be destroyer of art who keeps being ambushed by onsets of beauty and charm. He is angry, but his anger makes him cheerful. His lunges become dances.

Polke was a big man with the twinkle of a gamin. I met him a few times and found him dazzlingly intelligent, funny, and exhausting. As Buchloh says, "You could not have a conversation with Polke without his continuously destabilizing your sense of self, without his suggesting that it rested on some type of oblivion or disavowal." In 2008, I sat through much of an afternoon in his chaotic warehouse studio and home in Cologne while, pulling books from the shelves of his immense library, he discoursed on ancient philosophical and technical sources for a suite of stained-glass windows, in the Protestant cathedral of Zürich, which became his last major project. I felt awash in a sea of exotic erudition and ungraspable logic, listening to Polke as, with absorption and course-correcting irony, he listened to himself. My profit was an inkling of how he made art, monitoring an internal crossfire—or a chorus—of ideas.

There was a fearless, spooky otherness to his cast of mind, in key with an attraction to mysticism. "Higher Beings Commanded: Paint the Upper-Right Corner Black!" is the title of a canvas in the show from 1969; the corner is black. In the early seventies, he shared a farmhouse with many friends and indulged heavily in hallucinogenic drugs, which caused a dip in his career, but, in contrast to the more commonly dicey toll of such a regimen, plainly nourished the brainstorms of his later work. These include: huge atmospheric abstractions, incorporating details of the signature of Dürer; pink photographic prints, made by exposing film to uranium; majestic panels of glass, smudged with soot; paintings that orchestrate antic images from nineteenth-century engravings; and, in a slide show, the beautiful Zürich windows, some of them made of slices of agate and other stones. The Christological symbol of the scapegoat, seen both arriving in the frame and leaving it, hints at a spiritual crisis without end.

Polke trashed the conventions of painting throughout his career—overlaying images on printed fabric in lieu of canvas, for instance, or using resins that rendered cloth semi-transparent—and in the process revitalized a medium that was discounted, in the sixties, by iconoclastic minimalism and Conceptual art. His influence was slow to cross the Atlantic, though, owing partly to his principled elusiveness, and largely to the insularity of the New York art world. But by the early eighties young Americans were plundering his inventions to feed the resurgence in painting that was known as Neo-Expressionism. The belated discovery of Polke's work came as a shock. I remember my first look at "Paganini" (1981-83), a riotous painting, more than sixteen feet long, in which the musician, on his deathbed, and the Devil, playing a violin, are accompanied by swirls of skulls and tiny swastikas. It struck me then as a one-upping of Neo-Expressionism. Here it is again, at MOMA, in a room that Halbreich has brilliantly crowded with tours de force from the artist's middle period. Now I see it as an acrid burlesque of the movement, purging Polke of paternal responsibility for it and, by sheer excess, mocking his own virtuosity. Nearly everything he did reacted, somehow, against something. Celebrity was only one of the threats to the probity of his independence which required an emergency response. He was, and he remains, heroic. ♦