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Ambivalence and Double Vision in Sigmar Polke's "Goya" Series (1982-84)

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This essay examines the German artist Sigmar Polke's series of photographs known as the "Goya" series, or *Goya (Die Alten)*, that was made between 1982 and 1984. The subject of the series is Francisco Goya's allegory of *vanitas, Time* (1812). Polke's work is often recognized by its ironic, witty and experimental maneuvers. Not as well-known, however, is Polke's interest in making works of art that transform over time, blur the distinction between photography and painting, and raise questions about the agency of art. The "Goya" series is emblematic of these overarching concerns. This essay compares the themes and techniques found in the "Goya" series with other works made by Polke spanning his career. The ambivalent nature of Polke's art calls for a continued reassessment of his practice across formal and chronological divisions.

The thesis of Maxwell Schatz Tolleson is approved.

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Table of Contents

Ambivalence and Double Vision in Sigmar Polke's "Goya" Series (1982-84)

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Between 1982 and 1984, Sigmar Polke created a series of roughly fifty unique photographs and photocopies of Francisco Goya's painting, *Time* (1812), that destabilizes the painting's meaning and undermines its authorship.[1] Curator and Artistic Director of Documenta 7, Rudi H. Fuchs, has considered this series an exceptional body of work that allegorically stands for Polke's artistic practice at large.[2] But which practice, or perhaps which *Polke*, does it represent? Does it remind us of the deconstructive practices he used in the 1960s, the ones associated with the Polke who founded, with the artists Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg, the sardonic style of Capitalist Realism? Or does it tell us about the Polke of the 1970s, who made thousands of photographs, traveled from his studio near Düsseldorf, Germany to Brazil, Afghanistan, Australia and other faraway places, and made films that documented his encounters there? Or is it an allegory of the "alchemical" Polke who emerged in the 1980s deeply fascinated by the chemistry of paint, and who returned to painting at the same time art historians began to debate the "re-materialization" of the art object? The "Goya" series not only exhibits tendencies of each seemingly disparate period of Polke's practice, but also is significant because it calls into question the very division of his practice by period or medium. [3] An in-depth examination of this

[1] Goya's painting is interchangeably referred to as either *Time* or *The Old Women* by art historians. For the sake of clarity in this study I have chosen to refer to it as *Time*.

[2] Rudi H. Fuchs, "What You Don't See," in *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1997), p. 236.

[3] Polke's works from the "Goya" series are commonly referred to as *Goya (Die Alten) Goya (The Old Women),* but this title only accounts for and privileges the final three photographs Polke made in 1984. Almost all of the "studies" and "surmised drawings" are untitled in catalog reproductions. *Goya (Die Alten)* tends to relegate the earlier phases to a secondary status. In this study, I advance the "Goya" series as a new title that encourages an inclusive, non-hierarchical treatment of the different phases as equally significant.

series will illuminate Polke's shifting artistic techniques in the 1980s and expand upon the role photography played in his experimental investigations of image making across mediums.

The "Goya" series is emblematic of Polke's overarching thematic concerns for painting's capacity to transform over time, blurring the distinctions between painting and photography, and the spatial orientation of the viewer to a work of art. Traditional art historical accounts of an artist's practice organize works by medium, and discuss thematic concerns as progressively developing over time. One effect of this approach is the imposition of categorical boundaries based either on formal or thematic differences, and another is the classification of an artist's work by time period. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh argued that 1971 marked the "end of Polke," because Buchloh believed Polke had "gone off into the world of drugs…[where] there was no cutting, biting, aggressive political dimension at all."[4] However, Polke had always sought a "usable" art that had a direct effect on the viewer and their environment and this is facilitated by his introduction of fugitive pigments, poisons and chemicals as supports for his paintings in the 1980s.[5] Yet even as they diverge formally from Polke's previous work, these works retain an interest in the transmutability of art, the malleability of time, and the upending of conventional modes of apprehension. This study aims to build upon the work begun by scholars interested in studying Polke across mediums and chronological boundaries, and the "Goya" series pivotally transgressed these boundaries while informing viewers of Polke's overarching concerns.

While looking at a postcard printed on one side with a reproduction of Francisco Goya's painting, *Time* (1812) (Fig. 1) in 1982, Polke saw there was more to the picture than visible to

[4] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "c. 1976: An Interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh," in *Alibis: Sigmar Polke, 1963-2010* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), p. 203.

[5] Sigmar Polke, "Poison is Effective; Painting is Not," conversation with Bice Curiger, 18 December 1984, *Parkett 26* (1990), p. 20.

the naked eye, and he envisioned what was painted *behind* Goya's *Time*.[6] As it is presented to the viewer, *Time* depicts an allegory of *vanitas*. Two old women narcissistically gaze into a mirror while Saturn, the personification of Time, sneaks up on them like the inevitability of death. However, what fascinated Polke most of all were the *pentimenti*, visible traces of an earlier painting that Goya seemed to have left unconcealed in the upper left corner. Though subtle, this disruption was apparent to Polke even on the postcard's reproduction, and indicated that the artist had painted over another painting. This discovery compelled Polke to travel from his studio near Düsseldorf to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille, France to photograph the painting, and thus initiated Polke's "Goya" series that lasted from 1982 to 1984.[7] In 1983, Polke photographed the painting and photocopied overdrawn photographs of the painting to make what he called "studies" and "surmised drawings," inductively reasoned hypotheses for what Goya had unsuccessfully attempted to cover with *Time*.[8] Polke's conjectures for the underpainting's content included imagery of demons, angels, warriors, jesters, and simplified line doodles that exacerbate the painting's indeterminacy. After making his "assumptions," he came upon an X-ray photograph of the painting at the museum, revealing that the underpainting was a depiction of the Resurrection of Christ oriented horizontally on the canvas. The X-ray captured and merged imagery from both the overpainting and underpainting, which also merged the two allegories into a grotesque hybrid, suggesting that looking and resurrection are closely related. Polke would attempt to "resurrect" painting, literally bring it to life, in his painterly experiments

[6] Paul Schimmel, "Polkography," in *Sigmar Polke: When Pictures Vanish* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 77.

[7] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Polke's Recipes for Arousing the Soul," in *Sigmar Polke: When Pictures Vanish* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 56.

[8] Fuchs, "What You Don't See," p. 236.

that coincided with and followed the "Goya" series. The final three-photograph culmination of the "Goya" series made in 1984 presents the findings of his two-year investigation, demonstrating the sublimation of death in and through the use of humorous gestural emulsion drips, raster screens, and techniques like cropping and reversal.

One might wonder why Polke was so drawn to Goya at this moment in the 1980s. According to Gloria Moure, Polke shared both a similar outlook on the creative process, and established a sympathetic and empathic relationship to Goya's own intellectual and political circumstances of the late eighteenth century.[9] Moure writes that Polke "recognizes [Goya] as an archetype of the more or less covert enlightened agitator who ends up having to go into exile and who prefers the Romantic strand in the Enlightenment…"[10] Polke, she continues, admired the way Goya intensified irony and opposed to reason the "peculiar" and the "grotesque." Art historian Janis Tomlinson has remarked that Goya's *Caprichos* exhibited a "pluralism" that enabled the artist to address themes ranging from bourgeois drama to the flights of witches. This in turn introduced a cast of characters that imply changing perspectives and keep the viewer in continual flux.[11] Tomlinson suggests that Goya relinquished control over the world he created by introducing a polyphony of voices in the form of quotations of previous artistic traditions, personalities of subjects portrayed, and projected desires of intended publics or patrons.[12] Similar to Goya, Polke depicted subject matter from a broad range of themes, incorporated various styles of art making that amount to multiple artistic personae, and was interested in unearthing the

[9] Gloria Moure, *Sigmar Polke: Paintings, Photographs and Films* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2005), p. 8.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Janis A. Tomlinson, *Goya In the Twilight of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 6-7.

[12] Ibid.

unforeseeable in his work. Tomlinson and art historian Pamela Kort have both used Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the narrative and the grotesque as a productive method of analyzing the work of Goya and Polke respectively, and by doing so they recognize the instability and ambivalence that permeates each artist's practice.[13] This ambivalence in Polke's paintings and photographs manifested as a multiplicity of layered meanings (for example, the inclusion of a generic patterned fabric as the ground for a "self-portrait as astronaut" blurs the distinction between kitsch and fine art traditions), the combination of which opens up rather than forecloses their potential for significance.

Polke's return to painting in the early 1980s and its transformative capacities came at a time when the art world cynically celebrated the recent resurgence of painting and sculpture, and art critic Kevin Power acknowledges Polke as one of the international spokesmen of the "modishly ligitimised [sic] return to painting."[14] Hal Foster writes that while a number of such artworks appeared to mimic previous modern art movements of the twentieth century—like Minimalism in sculpture and Expressionism in painting—this return as Neo-Geo and Neo-Expressionism knowingly "drained [art] of its aesthetic value," so that it might perform "satiric literalizations and strategic inversions."[15] However, according to Foster, a slippage occurred in the process where the potential for ideology critique manifested as contempt and deconstruction as complicity. In other words, these works ran the risk of becoming reified as commodity art,

[13] For Tomlinson's interpretation of Goya see *Goya In The Twilight of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), and for Kort's interpretation of Polke see Pamela Kort, "Double Take: Sigmar Polke and the Tradition of the Grotesque-Comic," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 265-280.

[14] Kevin Power, "Polke's Postmodern Play," in *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), p. 109.

[15] Hal Foster, "The Art of Cynical Reason," in *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 118-120.

kitsch, or decoration. Neither sincere in their beliefs, nor willing to give them up, Foster considered these "simulations" to be exponents of "cynical reason."[16] Art critic Donald Kuspit argues that the situation in Germany at this time was unique because the return of modern painting after Hitler's abolishment of it carried the potential for a new German identity.[17] Writing in 1983, Kuspit observed that "[Polke] has always been against the idea of the work of art as a useless commodity, and against the egotism of artists, their use of their art to articulate an empty individuality."[18] Instead, Polke "demythologizes recent avant-garde high art, leaving us with a sense of excruciating void…ambivalence about the nature and value of art—a sense of indeterminateness of both, and an insistence that art be left in an undefined state…"[19] As his works made in the 1980s took on poisonous substances, light- and heat-sensitive chemicals, and radioactive minerals as subjects and supports for paintings and photographs, they added a temporal dimension to perception that challenged existing discursive frameworks for painting and photography as well as abstraction and figuration.

Current scholarship on Polke either gravitates toward Polke's conceptually driven techniques of appropriation of iconic imagery and parody of artistic style, or an orientation toward Polke's process and his scientific investigation of materials and their properties. Scholars generally agree on a shift to alchemy as a guiding metaphor in Polke's artistic activity around the middle of his career. This began in 1986 when Polke made his first explicit reference to alchemy in his work titled *Athanor* (1986) for the 42nd Venice Biennale, though latent "alchemical"

[16] Ibid.

[17] Donald B. Kuspit, "Acts of Aggression: German Painting Today, Part II," *Art in America* (January 1983), p. 99.

[18] Ibid., p. 131.

[19] Ibid.

interests might still be detected in earlier works.[20] With few exceptions, Polke's photographic work typically rests on the margins of existing literature, while critique is centralized around his painting. However, the 2012 exhibition *Alibis: Sigmar Polke, 1963-2010* proposed a model of viewing Polke's work *contra* modernist notions of medium-specificity, though it neither includes nor addresses the "Goya" series. Though Polke's artwork has been exhibited since 1963, his photographic work did not receive a comprehensive retrospective until the exhibition *Sigmar Polke: Fotografien* at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in 1990 (this is also the first instance in which the "Goya" series was publically displayed and catalogued as a whole). *Sigmar Polke Photoworks: When Pictures Vanish* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MoCA) marked the first public exhibition of his photographs in the United States in 1995. Even though photography was a mainstay in Polke's career alongside painting since 1968, it was rarely exhibited alongside or critically compared to his painting. *Alibis* introduced a discursive framework for viewing Polke's art practice as cross-disciplinary, a mode of analysis this study invokes.

Art historians interested in the first two decades of Polke's career (1963-1982) tend to rely on Polke's postmodern "play" with cultural signs and styles of artmaking as their primary interpretive framework. David Campbell argues that the reemergence of the historical avant-garde in post-war Germany during Polke's formative years situates Polke within the neo-avant-garde as an inheritor of conceptual themes and techniques such as chance procedures, parody,

[20] *Athanor* is a term that designates an alchemical oven used in the process of transubstantiation. While Polke makes explicit reference to alchemy in this work, some scholars take Polke's invocation of alchemy more literally than others. In any case Polke's so-called "alchemical turn" can be understood as a turn toward an investigation of material properties, their combinatory effects, and the production of transformative and chemically unstable artworks. For further discussion of alchemical terminology in relation to Polke see the glossary section of *Sigmar Polke: Works and Days* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur and Kunst Verlag, 2005), p. 203.

and appropriation.[21] Buchloh argues that Polke's work of this period epitomized the dilemma between high art practice and mass culture, and was concretized in the juxtaposition of iconic appropriations from low culture and stylistic appropriations from high culture.[22] Polke's hand-painted *rasterbilder*, or dot screen paintings, which portray iconic images reproduced from mass media photographic sources are advanced by Buchloh as examples of this tendency because they appear to critique iconic images as cultural signs. Ultimately, Buchloh argues, this position is bereft of social or political agency (something once thought possible by the historic avant-garde) and looks at modernism from the *inside*, a "cultural" stance which, according to Buchloh, is already entrenched within the echelons of high art.[23] While Polke does seem interested in getting "inside" modernist painting, in doing so he opens up its potential to signify non-coded, alternate realities. But David Thistlewood writes,

> What makes the work of Polke, in particular, so challenging to critical conventions is that he apparently is able to effect changes of 'signature' so drastic that they compare to changes of creative persona, and in effect constitute changes of 'signature *style*' as diverse as if different personae had in fact created them.[24]

Thistlewood explains that Polke's stylistic eccentricity alienates him from the critical discourse of modernism as characterized by its practitioner's "integrity" and progressive aims toward

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[21] David Campbell, "Plotting Polke," in *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), pp. 19-41. Campbell argues Polke's introduction to the avant-garde came in the form of exhibitions like *Dada: The Documents of a Movement* in 1958 at the Kunstverein for the Rhineland and Westphalia in Düsseldorf, and 'Festum Fluxorum' organized by George Maciunas in 1963 at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (and participated in by Joseph Beuys, one of Polke's teachers at the Kunstakademie). While Polke attended the latter, the former was publicly praised in the German media and would have been widely known.

[22] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke," in *Neo-avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art From 1955-1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 343-365.

[23] Ibid., p. 364.

[24] David Thistlewood, "Sigmar Polke and the Critical Problem of Multiple 'Signature Styles,'" in *Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), pp. 3-4.

essential notions of medium. At the same time, it alienates Polke from the avant-garde and its critical discourse of "intentionality" as "the multiple nature of [his 'signature style'] negates notions of uniqueness and cultural indispensability, and in fact may be aimed at undermining the *prioritised* [sic] culture on which the majority of post-war criticism of the avant-garde has been predicated."[25] Instead, according to Thistlewood, Polke's work generates "constituencies of interested parties" whose responses are "knowingly manipulated" by Polke's "loaded" stylistic and iconographic choices.[26] While Polke may seem to quote Goya for the "Goya" series and employ his dot screen as signature motif in the final phase of the series, this series characterized a new approach for Polke based upon inductive reasoning and scientific inquiry. As art historian Kathleen Howe notes, "the transmutations, investigations, and restatement of Goya's painting, move beyond any simple strategy of appropriation."[27] Instead, Polke's investigation gets inside Goya's painting, and expands the potential for painting's renewal in the wake of its perceived "death" at the hands of photography and mass production.[28]

A second general category of scholarship, and one that seems most resonant with the "Goya" series, is constituted by Polke's concerns for materials, their effects and combinations, as

[25] Ibid., p. 3.

[26] Ibid. For another analysis of Polke's appropriation of style see Hartmut Böhme, "Dot, Line, Flow," in *Sigmar Polke: Works and Days* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur and Kunst Verlag, 2005), pp. 28-42.

[27] Kathleen Howe, "Alchemical Researches: The Photoworks of Sigmar Polke," *On Paper*, vol. 1, no. 2 (November-December 1996), p. 15.

[28] Citing Walter Benjamin in his now famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," Yve-Alain Bois posits that the crisis brought on by industrialization led to a discourse around the appearance of photography and mass production as signifying the end of painting. Bois writes that "Photography and mass production were also at the base of the essentialist urge of modernist painting…Challenged by the mechanical apparatus of photography, and by the mass-produced, painting had to redefine its status, to reclaim a specific domain." Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting: The Task of Mourning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), p. 231.

well as alchemy as a model/metaphor for his exploratory process.[29] While alchemy's pursuit of transubstantiation was physically manifested in early chemistry, it was understood metaphysically as a process of transformation and rejuvenation. The scholarship in this group primarily focuses on works made during the 1980s and particularly after 1986, when Polke began using fugitive materials in his paintings to create site-responsive works of art that unfold over time. These scholars assert that by employing poisonous pigments, hygroscopic pigments (sensitive to changes in humidity) and obscure/antique pigments and resins, Polke's painting resists reproducibility and insists on the "here and now" of the work's experiential qualities. Most of Polke's photographic works find their place in this literature due to the artist's liberal application of chemicals during the developing stage and ambivalent relationship to "the rules" of the darkroom. Polke's photographs in such cases became unique photographic prints rather than faithful reproductions of negatives.

Charles W. Haxthausen argues that Polke's art questions oppositions between uniqueness/reproducibility, painting/photography, subject/object, and art/nature by reducing these oppositions to the level of technical application.[30] Haxthausen points to Polke's photo-chemical experiments in the darkroom, which expose the photographic print's "double indexical nature" (index of a moment in the existence of its referent, and index of its transfer to a sheet of photopaper during the developing process).[31] Scholars from this group tend to see Polke's orientation to process as unwavering throughout his career and across mediums. Like the

[29] Maria Morris Hambourg and Paul Schimmel argue for a process oriented reading of Polke's photography in *Sigmar Polke: When Pictures Vanish* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995). Jochen Poetter also takes a similar approach in *Sigmar Polke: Fotografien* (Baden-Baden: Staatlische Kunsthalle, 1990).

[30] Charles W. Haxthausen, "The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability: Rethinking Painting and Photography after Polke," in *Sigmar Polke: The Three Lies of Painting* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1997), p. 201.

[31] Ibid., p. 193.

previously noted scholars, those in this group also cite Polke's *rasterbilder* from the 1960s as examples of his technique of appropriation; however, this group of scholarship makes connections between Polke's iconic *rasterbilder* and his later non-figurative paintings based on what they perceive as Polke's sustained conceptual interest in time, durational process and memory. Here, *rasterbilder* are emphasized as unique works of art that demonstrate Polke's interest in re-asserting the originality, presence, and agency of painting. While there is some overlap between the concerns of both types of existing scholarship, scholars in this group, particularly Marcelle Polednik and Haxthausen, argue that discussion of Polke's photography and painting ought to be more closely aligned as Polke mixes the traditional procedures and materials associated with each medium. [32]

The "Goya" series, I would like to argue, foresees Polke's transmutable and relational paintings of the mid to late 1980s because it breaks open and reconstitutes the picture plane as an activated and relational territory. In other words, there is an argument to be made that Polke's work has an agency that affects the viewer through optical, spatial, and conceptual strategies. The "Goya" series demonstrates Polke's interest in introducing a multiplicity of perspectival positions from within, behind and around the surface of the painting, perspectives the camera and radiogram provide the means of visualizing. Invoking the cross-disciplinary model demonstrated in the *Alibis* exhibition and building upon the work of scholars who emphasize that Polke's work questions oppositions like uniqueness/reproducibility, painting/photography, subject/object, and art/nature, this study will show how Polke often blurred these distinctions to encourage

[32] Marcelle Polednik, "History in the Making: Sigmar Polke and Photography" (PhD Diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, September 2009), p. 7.

unforeseeable results. Ultimately, such works are able to deflect the rigidity of medium-specificity and so avoid reification as they have the capacity to continually transform.

Scholars have different understandings of what exactly constitutes the "Goya" series and where it begins. If we discount the postcard as an ancillary catalyst to the work, then we must discount the X-ray as well, since Polke made neither. The studies then become secondary to the final three-photo *Goya (Die Alten).* But we need to consider the "Goya" series as comprised of four distinct and significant phases which include photographs, some made by Polke, some not, in concert with objects of fascination, like the postcard and Goya's *Time*. It seems plausible that Polke intended it to be viewed this way, as he was an active participant in the organization of his retrospective at MoCA in 1995 (where it was shown) and contributed this series (and its studies) from his private collection.[33] The studies Polke made, his 45 "surmised drawings" and preliminary photographs of the painting demonstrate the methodical working out of a hypothesis that difference and transformation can be ascertained in and through repeated looking. The "Goya" series suggests that through sustained focus on one object, new perspectives, temporal dimensions, and even transmutations can be visualized.

The Raster Beyond Itself[34]

The "Goya" series tests the limits of vision, and it begins when Polke refuses to take Goya's painting—reproduced on the side of a postcard—at face value. But *Time*, as Goya

[33] Archival records for the retrospective at MoCA indicate that photographs from the "Goya" series shown in 1995 remained in the collection of the artist prior to their display. In the published catalog for the MoCA exhibition the wording was changed to "private collection."

[34] This section title self-consciously refers to *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition,* eds. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), in which "beyond" indicates a deliberate engagement with heterogenous modes and conventions of making, as well as the pluralized conception of the medium.

painted it, is tightly bound in its own iconographic and allegorical framework as a darkly humorous reflection on vanity. The painting, as reproduction, would have depicted a maid servant holding a mirror for an aristocratic woman (most likely Queen Maria Luisa) who stares into it while Saturn, the god of time, is seen with arms raised about to violently thrust them into the next world. [35] This allegory of *vanitas* and its inextricable theme of mortality is compounded when we notice that Goya included the words "Que Tal?" (What's up?) on the back of their mirror. Clearly, what is up is their time on earth. But the women in Goya's painting seem oblivious to the phantasmagoric personification of Time/Death behind them, and in this way it is a dark joke made self-consciously for the viewer of this painting. Goya exaggerates the metaphor of *vanitas* to include hallucinatory signs of a distorted other world as the skin of one woman seems to sag unnaturally while the other's eyes and nose are skeletally concave. But for Polke, it is the *pentimenti* that disrupt the surface of the painting and draw extra attention to the surface. Like the raster dot screen Polke used to deconstruct the iconicity of images, Goya's *pentimenti* (conveyed through their photomechanical reproduction), break down the authority of his allegory and allow Polke to break into Goya's painting.

Roland Barthes describes a similar type of disruption, which sometimes occurs in photographs, as a *punctum*. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that the *punctum* is that element (or "accident") of a photograph which "pricks" the viewer, a "detail" or "partial object" that disrupts the coded scenario depicted in the photograph.[36] This *punctum*, Barthes writes, has "a

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[35] Janis Tomlinson, *Francisco Goya y Lucientes, 1746-1828* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), pp. 209-212. The identity of the aristocratic woman as Queen Maria Luisa is debatable as Goya probably made the painting after the 1808 abdication of Carlos IV and Maria Luisa, so such a lingering obsession with the Queen would be hard to explain. Tomlinson suggests Goya appropriated the Queen's adornments and garments to satire an aging aristocratic *type* rather than individual, though the resemblance to the Queen is convincing.
[36] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 27.

power of expansion." When it occurs "the photograph really transcends itself…annihilate[s] itself as *medium*, …[is] no longer a sign but the thing itself."[37] For example, when Barthes discusses the *punctum* in Lewis H. Hine's photograph, *Idiot Children in an Institution,* he hardly notices the "monstrous heads and pathetic profiles" of the subjects because he is distracted by the "off-center detail," which is the little boy's huge Danton collar and the girl's finger bandage, that insists on his attention and that disrupts the coded scenario.[38] *Studium*, on the other hand, would be the "monstrous heads" and "pathetic profiles" of these children because such qualities indicate for Barthes cultural knowledge, something the viewer can read as a kind of description or indication of "who," "what," "where," etc. The most important implication of the *punctum* for our purposes in studying Polke, is that, when noticed, it denies a picture's authority and expands the possibilities for what a picture may signify.

We know, after Polke's encounter with the *pentimenti* in the photomechanical reproduction of Goya's *Time* that he then investigates the actual painting, breaking into and transforming its potential to signify the allegory of *vanitas*. But before this occurs, it is the *pentimenti* in the *postcard reproduction* that "pierce" through the picture. Just as the postcard of Goya's painting is a sign of that painting, perhaps Polke's recognition of its *punctum* allows him to investigate Goya's actual painting as if it too had a *punctum*. Barthes' theory of the *punctum* it seems need not be limited to the ontology of photography but can include other mediums when understood more broadly as an aberration in the fabric of a picture. Not only does photography,

[37] Ibid., p. 45.

[38] Ibid., p. 51.

in this case, contain the explosive possibility of a *punctum*, a painting too, is subjected to expansion, its medium susceptible to "transcendence."

Polke's way of noticing the *pentimenti* in the photographic reproduction of Goya's *Time* complicates not only the relationship of photography to painting, but pigment to image by implying that paint's physical and metaphysical properties share equal importance. What Polke demonstrates by observing the build-up of paint, the *pentimenti* in the upper left corner of Goya's painting (on the postcard), is an interest in the simultaneous reading of the picture as both a picture and not a picture: a picture whose material exceeds its role as support for a pictorial idea. In this case, paint not only has the metaphysical quality of signifying Goya's *Time*, but a pronounced physical quality, which pierces through its capacity to signify an idea. Polke's scrutiny displays his belief in the postcard's reproduction since it is clearly enough to compel him to see the original in person, while also denying its authority. Perceiving the postcard this way asserts that a photographic copy, a sign, that refers to an original work elsewhere can carry with it the potential to undo the authority of its referent, an original. In this first stage of the "Goya" series, Polke acknowledges the non-coded, abstract brush strokes of the *pentimenti* alongside the coded, symbolic, figuration of Goya's allegory, effectively calling attention to a fissure in Goya's painting that punctures its logic.

Polke had noticed similar differences before in photomechanical reproductions throughout his career, and while such media images are not photographs per se, they nonetheless pose as signs meant to convey a particular reality to the viewer. Polke's approach to sign-images conveys a deconstructive way of looking that is a foundation upon which he builds other artistic techniques. An early example from 1963, *Lee Harvey Oswald* (Fig. 2), characterizes his ability to destabilize the codes of pictorial conventions by incorporating a raster dot screen, which is used

in certain photomechanical reproductions as an illusionistic device to support the reproduction of an image. *Lee Harvey Oswald* began with looking, as Polke saw a photomechanical newspaper reproduction of Oswald, the man accused of assassinating John F. Kennedy. But instead of reading the image for its narrative and ingesting the pathos behind the sensationalism of this media spectacle, Polke understood that the carefully orchestrated combination of raster dots that create the illusion of a unified image was what allowed the image to authoritatively convey "Oswald" as an icon to the viewer.[39] Polke then appropriated the iconic picture of Oswald, hand-painting his face in profile with large and exaggerated raster dots, which elucidate how the image works. Transforming Oswald's image from a photomechanical reproduction into a painting, rife with expressive mistakes, exaggerated the media image's remove from reality while simultaneously transforming Oswald's image into something undeniably original. This was to be the first of many *rasterbilder* to come.

Much of the literature on Polke's *rasterbilder* discusses their rootedness in the post-war German experience, their critique of the introduction of commodity goods or celebrity spectacle through new media to the everyday life of capitalist West Germany. Not surprisingly, Polke's *rasterbilder* have been positioned in relation to the Pop Art movement for their generally similar interest in the social reality of post-war consumer culture (though the case for Polke working in West Germany is distinct from that of artists like Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein in America).[40] Polke used the dot screen in a way that both deconstructed the iconicity of the image it represented and likewise reversed its intentions by transforming it from a reproducible and

[39] Polednik, "History in the Making," p. 39.

[40] Joseph E. McHugh, "Connecting the Dots: Sigmar Polke's *Rasterbilder* in their Sociopolitical Context," in *Sigmar Polke*: *Back to Postmodernity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), p. 49.

ephemeral image to an original painting. However, discussions of the implications of Polke's *rasterbilder* typically do not extend beyond instances in which Polke literally uses the raster dot pattern. But as Haxthausen and Polednik suggest, Polke's work often crossed various media, subject matter and techniques of application, scrambling the cultural codes viewers came to expect. The raster is asserted here as a method of intervention Polke used for expanding the possibilities of image making, which may have begun as a technical device but ultimately was implemented as a versatile way of looking that deconstructs the structural framework that supports the signifying capacity of pictures.

In *Camera Lucida,* Barthes does not seem to account for Polke's treatment of photographic material as divorced from a referent and thus original. "The Photograph," Barthes writes, "belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both…(no photograph without *something* or *someone*)."[41] And yet this reading does not account for the "double indexical" nature of photography, that is the index of a moment in the existence of its referent, and index of its transfer to a sheet of photopaper during the developing process.[42] This second type of index accounts for supports like raster screens or mixtures of silver gelatin and timed exposures to light, all of which can produce errors or glitches in the final photograph or photomechanical reproduction that may be peculiar, grotesque, perhaps even desirable and certainly transformative. Barthes does not discuss this as he believes that the photograph "aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of language."[43] But like the practice of mimicry,

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[41] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* p. 6.

[42] Haxthausen, "The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability," p. 193.

[43] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* p. 6.

which, according to Pamela Kort, "willfully exaggerates, in order to achieve surprising forms that possess an unusual eidetic power beyond the reach of the mere imitation," Polke's *rasterbilder* both deny the authority of the original and unearth new possibilities from within it. As Polke stated in an interview concerning a body of paintings he produced in the 1960s, "The dot-screen pictures deal with the problem of reproduction, as a problem of printing errors and of becoming autonomous to the point of seceding from the model and to that which is behind it…To exaggerate is also to reproduce, and yet it undoes and denounces the original."[44] When this potential to undo the original latent in Polke's *rasterbilder* is reconceived as not just a technical device but a form of perceptual intervention, there then exists the potential to get inside encountered pictures, to undo and restate their significance through exaggeration, and to re-code a picture entirely by paying close attention to the stray, accidental detail.

The Indeterminacy of Double Vision

The "surmised drawings" and Polke's "studies" that constitute the second phase of the "Goya" series not only throw the authoritative status of the picture into chaos, but also constitute Polke's entry through the *pentimenti* and his exploration of the "inside" of Goya's picture. Polke's intervention brings to the fore the indeterminacy of Goya's painting, and in doing so visualizes its potentially limitless possibilities. In 1983, Polke produced at least 45 photocopies of *Time* and in doing so, split the picture into 45 simultaneous perspectives that are both subtractive and additive (Fig. 3-4).[45] On the one hand, they are subtractive in that they crop the image and often focus on corners of the picture plane. On the other hand, they are additive as

[44] Kort, "Double Take: Sigmar Polke and the Tradition of the Grotesque-Comic," p. 265.

[45] Fuchs, "What You Don't See," p. 235.

nearly all contain overdrawings inserted by Polke (based on his assumptions for what the underpainting depicts). These overdrawings range from barely identifiable representations in the form of soldiers, skulls, or demon faces, to more abstract shapes (Fig. 5-6). Each of these pictures constitutes a photograph of Goya's painting, drawn on and then photocopied, producing a layering of flattened and degraded mediums. Seeing these 45 photocopies aligned in a grid, as Polke intentionally formatted them, entices the eye to compare and contrast (30 are the same size, 15 are two page spreads). In this way, Polke fractures Goya's painting into numerous vantage points, each one unique, visually asserting that sustained looking at a so-called "fixed" object may transform and multiply it.

Polke's photoworks have demonstrated this type of leveling since the early 1970s. In the *Paris* series (1971), Polke began to extend the representational possibilities of photography (Fig. 7). Comprising 41 photographs, the images were captured during Polke's travels to Paris; however, he did not develop them until six months later and under highly experimental circumstances. Under the influence of LSD, Polke developed the 41 photographs in one "trip" with the aim of producing a printed representation of the effects of LSD. The simultaneity of time and space rather than sequentiality is emphasized, as the photographs contain a layering of multiple negatives in one print, and have been subjected to over- and under-exposure and expired and inconsistently applied chemicals that give them a gestural, painterly effect (Fig. 8).[46] The photocopied pictures in the "Goya" series recall the *Paris* series in that they also depict the subject of the photograph from a variety of positions simultaneously. The overdrawings Polke made on photocopies for the "Goya" series also display a simultaneity of mediums in a way that

[46] Schimmel, "Polkography," p. 64.

seems to hold in suspension the differences between drawing, painting, and photography, as all three are deconstructed into grainy reproductions run through a photocopier.

As a helpful comparison, one can examine the overpainted photographs of Polke's contemporary, Gerhard Richter, which he began in 1986; however, Richter applied built-up paint to straight photography in a non-figurative way that contrasts with the subject matter in the photograph. In such cases Richter's paintings remained visibly distinct, as if paint lay here and photography lay there (Fig. 9).[47] But in "Photography by Other Means," Kaja Silverman writes that "[Richter] really doesn't see abstract painting and photographic figuration as contradictory forms."[48] Instead, when combined in the same work of art, they produce an "indeterminacy" that "bring[s them together] without abolishing the distinction between them. They are consequently invitations to see double."[49] Analogy, Silverman argues, is what allows this "double vision" to occur, as "two or more things [are brought] together on the basis of their lesser or greater resemblance," and "although it is through their resemblances that the two correspond, it is only because they are at the same time distinct from each other that they are able to do so."[50] In Polke's "surmised drawings," his method of introducing new forms to the photographs of Goya's painting and then running this through a photocopier, both insists on a correspondence to Goya's painting and also introduces distinct yet neutralized differences. Silverman argues that in Richter's case the difference that separates the "photo painting" from the referent is the

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[47] Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting,* trans. Elizabeth M. Solaro (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 277.

[48] Kaja Silverman, "Photography by Other Means," in *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 169.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 173-175.

precondition for relationality, and this argument could be made for Polke's "surmised drawings" as they produce an indeterminacy that pushes the identity of Goya's painting beyond a 1:1 correspondence to its likeness.[51] It is through their simultaneous relation to, and departure from, the original that they suggest the potential for difference within the same picture.

When Polke made the "surmised drawings," he also made "studies" of *Time* that question the relationship between viewer and object, as Polke included his own body next to Goya's painting in several of these silver gelatin prints. One such untitled photograph depicts Polke setting up a tripod in the Musée des Beaux Arts, preparing to photograph *Time* (Fig. 10). This photograph operates as a *mise-en-abyme* that reflects Polke's investigation of Goya's painting from within, around, and behind the object, and it concretizes the act of looking as an object of visual significance. While it is impossible to imagine Polke appearing behind both cameras simultaneously, it appears Polke occupies two positions, though the second is out of sight, behind our view from "within" the camera. Polke could have and most likely did use a delayed timer for this photographic maneuver, pointing once again to time as both malleable material and subject matter for the "Goya" series. That the photograph we see includes in it a delayed response, which allows for Polke to occupy a "double position," at once articulates Goya's own delayed response to his (now covered) painting of the Resurrection of Christ. After Goya covered the Resurrection of Christ with *Time*, Goya's painting carried with it an alternative, concealed narrative only hinted at by a disruption in the fabric of the picture.

Paintings from Polke's *Hochsitz* (*Watchtower*) series of 1984-88 demonstrate a similar emphasis on the position of the subject and a leveling of any hierarchical relationship between

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[51] Ibid., p. 174.

painting and photography. The works from the *Watchtower* series depict an iconic image of a watchtower Polke had likely traced onto the canvas using a stencil; however unlike Polke's iconic appropriations of the 1960s and 1970s, they are covered in artificial resin and silver solutions, causing the work to appear differently over time and depending on the relative position of the viewer. [52] Artificial resins create glossy surfaces that reflect light, and might be understood as an irritating distraction from the "content" of the artwork. Yet as Haxthausen suggests, Polke embraced this quality as a positive factor that enlivened the picture and subjected it to fluctuations depending on the viewer's position. Haxthausen has noted that because of the resin's reflective quality, "this ever shifting luminosity evokes, appropriately, the ominous effect of a wandering searchlight, as though in observing a watchtower we, too, become observed."[53] Due to the use of resin, the painting transforms itself in a mutual relationship with the observer and has no definitive appearance.

From this series, alongside artificial resins, the work *Hochsitz II (Watchtower II)* employs silver and silver oxide, which risk turning black over time (Fig. 11-14). For Polke, this risk is knowingly calculated, as he coats the canvas with it, emphasizing the darkening effect it will have on the image of the tower. Silver's light-sensitive properties make it the basis for photographic emulsions and Polke harnessed and translated this chemical property from the world of photography to that of painting. By employing silver in a painterly way, Polke again blurs the boundaries between painting and photography, quite literally allowing the painting to "develop." Compared to the "surmised drawings," for which Polke hypothesized through mark-

[52] Polke apparently never discussed exactly how he constructed the *Watchtower* series, but Marcelle Polednik convincingly argues that based on material traces, Polke would have used a stencil to make the silhouette of the watchtower. For more on the *Watchtower* series see Marcelle Polednik's "History in the Making."

[53] Haxthausen, "The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability," p. 196.

making a vast though limited array of possible outcomes, *Watchtower II* seems to manifest limitless outcomes as the painting continues to respond to its environment long after Polke initiated the reaction.

Paintings Have A Life of Their Own

While Polke did not make the X-ray of *Time* (Fig. 15), he effectively incorporates it into the series as it informs the final three photographs and demonstrates his new interest in exacerbating the instability of artworks. Unlike a conservator, in whose hands the X-ray might typically be used to verify the authenticity of the painting, Polke mines the X-ray for its collage-like, combinatory effects of disparate imagery and ghostly smears of white lead-based paint.[54] What the X-ray reveals, albeit in a black and white blur is the ghostly image of Queen Maria Luisa and her servant alongside Christ whose arm is raised appearing to lie sideways in their laps. Should we rotate the X-ray ninety degrees clockwise, the women would appear to lay in Christ's lap (Fig. 16). In the image, neither vertical nor horizontal orientation dominates. Made at two different times in Goya's life, they are shown here as rejoined parts of the same picture. Noticeably in the X-ray, Goya's personification of Time has faded to the background, a semi-transparent blur that no longer occupies the same allegorical significance. Time's reduced presence in the face of this operation is fascinating as the image seems to invert the desired outcome of Goya's allegory of *vanitas*. Instead of Time (a metaphor of death) appearing imminent, we see Christ being resurrected (a metaphor of godliness, eternity, rebirth, ascension). In the X-ray, the revelation of Christ's figure as the underpainting inverts the traditional *vanitas* theme by occupying the idea of mortality and immortality simultaneously in the same picture. In

[54] Arturo Gilardoni et al., *X-rays in Art: Physics-Technique-Applications* (Como, Italy: Gilardoni S.p.A., Mandello Lario, 1977), p. 165.

this combined metaphorical image, which can only be made with the optics of the X-ray, the act of looking is linked to resurrection. But the way in which the X-ray manifests a new meaning for Goya's painting by penetrating the surface of the canvas calls into question the legitimacy of the frame and structural supports through which the meaning of the painting is revealed.

Polke's X-ray of *Time* is made up of smaller, constituent photographs of the painting that are laid flat, edge to edge, so that when seen as a composite there are many instances when the exposed excess surface area of each one creates the visual effect of doubling (for example, Queen Maria Luisa has four eyes in the X-ray and other body parts are extended or multiplied at the seams). [55] Like a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces do not quite match up, the image it is meant to convey is replaced by one that is unexpectedly distorted. As Rosalind Krauss has noted on the effect of doubling in photography, "…it is doubling that produces the formal rhythm of spacing—the two-step that banishes the unitary condition of the moment, that creates *within* the moment an experience of fission."[56] Doubling's relationship to time, the insertion of a fissure not just in the visible space of the picture, but in its "moment" as well, becomes central to the "alchemical" works Polke made in the 1980s.

Polke considered all paintings to be "alive," and by this he alluded to their chemical instability.[57] Just as he conducted his study of *Time*, he rewrote its narrative and recast its figures, and began to exacerbate this instability by smuggling into his work special order fugitive

[55] When making an X-ray of large-scale paintings, rectangular sections of the painting are captured individually and then sutured together in a variety of ways to make a composite. To make as seamless a composite image as possible, the individual photographs will contain excess surface area that can then be tucked under the adjacent film in the suturing process. Polke's X-ray photographs are not seamless. Rafael Barrientos Martinez, Administrative Assistant, Paintings Conservation, at the Kimbell Art Museum, in conversation with the author, January 5, 2018.

[56] Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (Winter 1981), p. 25.

[57] Haxthausen, "The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability," p. 197.

pigments that created unexpected perceptual and bodily effects. Unlike the type of paintings Polke made in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s marked a turning point at which time Polke became interested in transparency, light, time, and the spatial orientation of the viewer, which were in some respects activated through his introduction of new materials.[58] When Polke began to paint with poisons like arsenic, he explained that it "makes you extremely sensitive, and there was a point where it changed my whole frame of reference in time."[59] Polke's painting, *Athanor*, executed on the conch wall at the Pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany for the 1986 Venice Biennale is one example that uses a fugitive pigment, a hygroscopic solution called cobalt (II) chloride, which changes color based upon the humidity in the room (Figure 17-18). Martin Hentschel has described how depending on the hour of the day and the dampness of the air it changed from "an overall milky tone, with tendencies toward both a pale rose or pale blue. But by the next morning at eleven the pictures had changed again: the wall had assumed a saturated turquoise blue color, but with a faint rose undertone."[60] This type of unstable, site-responsive painting does not lend itself well to photographic reproduction as it would seem even thousands of photographs would not be able to index all possible variations. While operating on one visible level as "paint," the painting on the conch wall also creates a fissure in time as it occupies a double position as mercurial heat-sensitive substance. Polke's poison paintings occupy this non-visible, chemically reactive territory as well. In its transformational capacity, Polke's painting is never complete, but continuously "remade" as though time does not contain the painting at any given moment but is merely a unit for measuring its rate of change.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Sigmar Polke, "What Interests Me is the Unforeseeable: Sigmar Polke Talks about His Work," *Flash Art* (May-June 1988), p. 68.

[60] Haxthausen, "The Work of Art in the Age of its (Al)Chemical Transmutability," p. 198.

Just as the X-ray called into question the significance of the surface and material supports of Goya's painting, Polke's work following the "Goya" series shows a critical consideration of a painting's supporting structures. In *Apparition I-III* (1992) (Fig. 19-21), Polke doused not canvas but polyester fabric with irregularly applied synthetic resin and lacquer, which, when combined, gave each painting a glowing, translucent effect. While the resin reflects light, the polyester allows it to diaphanously penetrate its scrim-like surface, revealing the stretcher bars to which it is affixed like painted flesh on a visible skeleton. Further, Polke's choice of pigment and material support heightened the light's effects. As Haxthausen has commented, "…from behind the polyester, the colors radiate softly, seeming dematerialized, just as in a luminous fog mists of color seem to float free of any object."[61] The soft edges brought on by this combination of pigment and support expands the boundaries and discursive framework for painting and color as such. As the picture plane is not only a two-dimensional surface, but a three-dimensional field that extends outward from each painting's physical presence, looking behind and around each painting is just as rewarding as a straight-on frontal approach. *Apparition I-III* also deflect photography's indexical agenda by suggesting that they contain elements that are obscured from sight— "inside" the formal boundaries of each painting—and that require proximate and active penetration by the viewer.

Just as one can read one of these paintings in relation to the viewer's perception, the inclusion of polyester fabric as a material support alludes to clothing manufacturing, fashion, and thus commodification. Polke's substitution of canvas with polyester creates a tension between discourses of phenomenology and those of capitalism that does not resolve, but instead

[61] Ibid., p. 199.

acknowledges the painting as a transitive object caught between two operational modes.[62] Art historian David Joselit has used the term transitive to "capture the status of objects within networks—which are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translation into new contexts…"[63] What defines transitive painting for Joselit, "is its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it."[64] The trap such paintings are able to avoid is that of reification, which indicates that an object has been "halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation."[65] In *Apparition I-III,* Polke makes paintings that are in a state of flux depending on their light source and the viewer's position in relation to them, but also operate on an extra-perceptual level that acknowledges their status as the most collectible type of art—painting—vis a vis their embedded reference to commodification. Despite their sumptuous colors, these works prick the conscious with reminders of their speculative commodity value, and as subjects to heteronomous (as opposed to autonomous) processes, they relate to the viewer and to their surroundings in multiple registers.

At the same time Polke made the "Goya" series, his photographic practice also changed, indicating a specific conceptual reversal of practices and techniques he used in the 1960s and 1970s. I would like to point to the *Paris* series once again and one other group of photographs known either as *Untitled* or *Untitled (Fly Agaric)* (1975) (Fig. 22) as indicative of the broader themes Polke explored *before* the Goya series. While the *Paris* series has already been discussed

[62] David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), p. 132.

[63] Ibid., 128.

[64] Ibid., 129.

[65] Ibid., 132.

for its compression of time and simultaneity of perspective in the hopes of achieving a representation of the effects of psychoactive drugs, *Untitled* hinges on the thematic of the psychotropic mushroom. This mushroom is discernable in the photograph as a representation, however the formal qualities of the photograph—an abstracted and hazy fluidity brought on by the inexact application of chemicals during processing— allude to the mental and psycho-affective state of mind brought on by the drug. Around the time Polke began his study of Goya's painting, he reversed the values of abstraction and figuration by photographing radioactive minerals that result in completely abstract washes of color.

In 1982, Polke captured on photographic paper the energy released by radioactive minerals he collected on a trip to Australia and included these "radium experiments" in his contribution to Documenta 7 (Fig. 23). [66] After keeping it stored in a lead chest and monitoring it with Geiger counters, he decided to study the mineral's behavior by creating photograms that captured the "shadow" of the irradiated substance.[67] Abandoning the negative, these photograms produced an abstract image of its aura. Though these pictures deceptively display sensual radiating colors, they speak quite aptly to the controversial issues surrounding the use of atomic energy after World War II. Though at one time nuclear energy was thought of as a viable field of exploration, the invention of atomic bombs, the violent protests against the construction of nuclear power plants, and the disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 made clear the only sure promise of nuclear physics was radiation.[68] Polke's photographs allude to this controversial iconography while simultaneously demonstrating the transubstantiation of dangerous matter into its (quite

[66] Schimmel, "Polkography," p. 78.

[67] Kathrin Rottmann, "Polke in Context: A Chronology," in *Alibis: Sigmar Polke, 1963-2010* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), p. 55.

[68] Ibid.

beautiful) radioactive aura. What was once only measurable with Geiger counters, here becomes visibly instantiated in a colorful, abstract glow. Polke's investigation of the radioactive mineral demonstrates how the mineral's abstract form as traced on the photographic paper, and its physical existence elsewhere as noxious substance, maintain a 1:1 ratio of equivalency as the one (abstract color) is substituted for the other (specific substance). This series demonstrates how Polke no longer needed to work from a negative, or poetically allude to non-visible states of being because their actual form could be just as effective. In other words, while the *Untitled* mushroom pictures and the *Paris* series attempt to *evoke* the invisible world of forces and energies, the mineral photograms *are* the index of this world.

Just like the "Goya" series, these photograms convey Polke's new interest in studying forces invisible to the naked eye, yet which can be perceived when the classifying divisions between what constitutes art and what constitutes nature are dissolved. In the 1980s Polke wanted his art to be more dangerous, hazardous, and, in a sense, consequential, and perhaps this was a response to the paradigm of "cynical reason" and the re-materialization of art, a way to safe-guard against his works becoming reified and just another commercial object. When asked about his use of arsenic trisulfide in his paintings, Polke commented on its use as a hair removal agent, "So you can, if you like imagine people standing in front of a picture and losing their hair. The pigment would retroactively affect the picture and give it a usable meaning. This art is usable."[69] The third phase of the "Goya" series addresses coming face to face with the potential for a picture to have agency, to redefine itself and the viewer in its presence. Just as the conventional allegory of *vanitas* is denied and reformed to merge the act of looking with that of Resurrection, Polke's paintings with poison, resins, and silver, and experiments with radium, and

[69] Sigmar Polke, "Poison is Effective; Painting is Not," p. 20.

light, all transform or capture a transformation in relation to the viewer and the environment in which they actively respond.

The Myth of Ambivalence

The fourth and final phase of the "Goya" series appears as a summation of Polke's experimental investigation of Goya's painting, and is comprised of three black and white photographs (Fig. 24-26). Notably, each one crops the original work of art to different dimensions: two of the three incorporate a half-tone raster dot pattern, and the other non-raster image is a reversed mirror-image of the original picture by Goya. Polke's composition, his focus on fragments of Goya's painting, is important to understanding his interpretation of the allegory and his scientific findings. Perhaps taking his lead from the X-ray, in two of the photographs (one raster and one reversed photograph) Polke has deliberately cropped out Time. In the reversed photograph (Fig. 25), which only captures the women's faces and the mirror with "Que Tal" spelled backwards, one could read this as an indication of a reversal of the allegory. Instead of "time's up," it might in fact indicate the opposite: "time is nowhere to be found." In the one photograph where Time is present, Polke envelopes only the women in the raster pattern to formally synthesize these figures and their mirror while excluding Time from this synthesis. Each technique and formal element in these final photographs—the raster screen, deliberate cropping, gestural drips of emulsion, reversal—we have seen before, if not in the "Goya" series then in Polke's practice at large. Yet it is precisely how they come together in these last three photographs that introduces the potential for a conceptual reversal of Goya's allegory of *vanitas*.

As documentation of the installation at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden shows (Fig. 27), these final photographs are all larger than the studies, which may indicate that they are to rival

Goya's original *Time* in size, if not in allegorical significance. Polke's way of "seeing through" the postcard of Goya's painting in his first encounter is, in this phase, made visibly manifest as Polke's dot matrix appears like a short-hand for "failed illusion," or the painting's inability to convey its message without interruption. In one of these final photographs, the dot screen is visible as both a screen the viewer must "look through" to see Goya's scene, as well as an integrated component of pictorial composition, which, in this strategic positioning, disturbs the picture's symbolic register by synthesizing the women while excluding Time (Fig. 24). As if worn by the two women like a veil, it organizes and focuses our eyes on what it covers and yet this synthesis fails because Polke exaggerates the screen, makes it present as an illusionistic device that does not "support" the image of the women, but rather, obscures them.

Two of the final photographs are horizontally oriented while one is vertical, recalling the "both/and" logic of viewing discovered in the rotation of the X-ray. The emulsion Polke has allowed to drip and run uncontrollably in one of these horizontal photographs is also reminiscent of the X-ray, particularly for the effect of its ghostly imprints. The resulting image conveys two women surrounded by a blurred fog of shadowy atmospheric tones (Fig. 25). But in Polke's version, the Queen's gaze into her mirror is disrupted by a strange phallic form emerging from her hand. Though Polke did not alter the position of the Queen and her gaze, she appears to stare at this emerging form that is erected between her and her mirror. There is something grotesque and humorous about Polke's intervention here and it turns the order of this picture upside down. Pamela Kort argues that such qualities like the bizarre, the perverse, the deformed, and the exaggerated, characterize the grotesque and have been central to Polke's construction of a rebellious, ironic aesthetic from the outset of his career.[70] Polke's insertion of this phallic form

[70] Kort, "Double Take: Sigmar Polke and the Tradition of the Grotesque-Comic," p. 271.

seems to re-write the symbolic narrative of the picture and allude, through its perverse display, to the potential for alternate realities.[71] And yet the humor of this gesture introduces a kind of laughter and joke derived from "folk culture," a place where "the drama of the body is played out," as in birth, coitus, death, growing, eating.[72] Bakhtin's concept of folk culture and carnival laughter characterizes such expressions as both a typology of culture and a world view, and so such laughter is directed toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Literary theorist Renate Lachmann has interpreted the truth of such laughter as the "truth of the relativity of the truth, the truth of crisis and change, the truth of ambivalence."[73] As both a negation and affirmation, ridicule and triumph, such forms of laughter resist "the single monologic solution and univocalization, the absoluteness of death… [Bakhtin] formulates a myth of ambivalence that denies the 'end' by sublimating death in and through laughter."[74] Polke's photograph seems to literally do just that as he willfully cropped out Time, a harbinger of death, while replacing its absence with a phallic form that humorously undermines the authority connoted by the aristocratic looking women. For Polke, the "staging" of this myth of ambivalence frees the subjects from their particular typological roles and allows the picture to extend beyond itself, to take on a relationality to the world.

In its semi-transparent state Polke's strangely phallic addition to Goya's picture introduces evidence of another world that reimagines the symbolic function of the allegory. In so doing, these drips point outward, beyond the iconography of the image, and cause the viewer to

[71] Ibid., p. 270.

[72] Renate Lachmann, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," *Cultural Critique*, no. 11 (Winter 1988-89), p. 124.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

pay attention to the world around the picture, the time of its making, the moments that have accumulated on the picture plane in the form of stray marks during the developing process. These photographs do not take the camera and its indexical ability at face value but insist on the "double indexical" nature of photography. Instead of replicating Goya's *Time,* Polke seems intent on flooding the picture with more moments and more worlds than one, as applied gestural drips of emulsion cause the finished photograph to jump between times like a needle skipping on a record player. We have seen this play with time and the index before in photoworks like the *Paris* series, but also in painterly works like *Athanor,* where colored pigment literally and visibly reacts to the non-visible elements of the world around it. Could we not then say that *Athanor* is as photographic as this last photograph from the "Goya" series is painterly? The "Goya" series is emblematic of Polke's interest in blurring the difference between painting and photography, and demonstrates Polke's ambivalence about the nature of art. Under Polke's supervision, the mixing of materials like time, light, humidity, or poison, to name a few, create results that challenge our understanding of traditional mediums.

The last photographs of the "Goya" series also represent Polke's overarching interest in the indeterminacy of art, its persistent transmutability in the face of reason's limitations. Split into three unique versions of Goya's *Time,* these final photographs produce an enigmatic sample of the limitless potential for painting to split, multiply and signify beyond itself. Flipped lettering, the two women in reversed positions, Time's absence, and transparent gestural drips tease the eye because they entice it to compare this picture to Goya's original, as if the key to its deciphering will be found in its discrepancies. But for all our efforts, and just like the "surmised drawings," this photograph does not add up to a unified meaning. Instead it lampoons the stability and authority of the picture's ability to signify a singular meaning; it denies our efforts

at linking seeing to knowing. But just like Goya's *Time,* it remains relational as it poses a question to us, the viewer, a riddle now written in reverse on the back of a mirror. Polke's incorporation of indeterminacy, ambivalence, and multiplicity also creates artworks that look back at the viewer, that defy reification by, at times, literally coming to life. We have seen a similar type of living artwork in Polke's *Watchtower* series, paintings whose resin beams light into the eyes of its viewer while its silver pigment allows it to slowly move into another chameleonic look. As ever-evolving photographic evidence of *Watchtower II* attests, this is another one of Polke's paintings that continuously "develops" with unforeseeable results.

The "Goya" series is ultimately emblematic of Polke's interest in visualizing art in the plural, as an unstable, site-responsive presence in the world. Polke is able to show us the instability of *Time* by capitalizing on the *pentimenti*, moments when the underlying materiality of paint disrupts the symbolic content it is meant to support. The divisions between form and content, material and sign-value, and painting and photography become equally unstable, relative, and malleable in the "Goya" series. Like the raster dot screen Polke misuses in order to deconstruct rather than unify images, paint takes on transformative properties. Polke cross-contaminated the processes of photography and painting to confuse, destabilize, and innervate the medium, and the examples put forth in this study characterize an art practice that attempts to expand what we mean when we refer to the processes associated with each one. The "Goya" series exemplifies how Polke blurred these distinctions and opened up the work of art to new types of questions. Polke's radical desire for an art that is useful implies that works of art extend beyond themselves and exert a force on the world, suggesting that questions based upon what art can *do* instead of how art can *look* become central to art historians who wish to study the agency of art.

Figure 1

[image redacted]

Francisco Goya y Lucientes. *Time,* c. 1810-1812. Oil on canvas, 181 x 125 cm. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France.

Figure 2

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *(Raster Drawing) Lee Harvey Oswald*, 1963. Poster paint and pencil on paper, 94.8 x 69.8 cm. Private collection.

Figure 3

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Surmised drawings of the underpainting of Goya's "Time,"* 1983. Two panels with 30 photocopy collages, 29.7 x 21 cm each. Private collection.

Figure 4

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Surmised drawings of the underpainting of Goya's "Time,"* 1983. Two panels with 30 photocopy collages, 29.7 x 21 cm each. Private collection.

Figure 5

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Surmised drawings of the underpainting of Goya's "Time"* (detail), 1983.

Figure 6

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Surmised drawings of the underpainting of Goya's "Time"* (detail), 1983.

Figure 7

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Paris*, 1971. Photograph, 24 x 18 cm. Private collection.

Figure 8

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Paris*, 1971. Photograph, 24 x 18 cm. Private collection.

Figure 9

[image redacted]

Gerhard Richter. *Sils-Maria,* 1987. Oil on color photograph, 10.2 x 14.9 cm. Courtesy of Phillips.

Figure 10

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Untitled (Study for Goya's "Time")*, ca. 1983. Gelatin silver print, 30.4 x 40.2 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Figure 11

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Watchtower II*, 1984-85. Silver, silver oxide, and synthetic resin on canvas, 304 x 225 cm. The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

Figure 12

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Watchtower II* as photographed c. 1987.

Figure 13

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Watchtower II* as photographed September 1988.

Figure 14

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Watchtower II* as photographed c. 1998.

Figure 15

[image redacted]

X-ray of Goya's "Time," n.d. 176 x 129 cm. Private collection.

Figure 16

[image redacted]

X-ray of Goya's "Time," n.d. (Horizontal View).

Figure 17

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Athanor,* 1986. Wall painting with hygroscopic paint, cobalt II chloride, XLII Biennale in Venice, Pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the morning.

Figure 18

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Athanor,* 1986. Wall painting with hygroscopic paint, cobalt II chloride, XLII Biennale in Venice, Pavilion of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the afternoon.

Figure 19

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Apparition I-III*, 1992. Synthetic resin and lacquer on polyester fabric, (triptych) 3 sections, 400 x 300 cm each. Private collection.

Figure 20

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Apparition I-III*, 1992. Synthetic resin and lacquer on polyester fabric, (triptych) 3 sections, 400 x 300 cm each. Private collection.

Figure 21

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Apparition I-III*, 1992. Synthetic resin and lacquer on polyester fabric, (triptych) 3 sections, 400 x 300 cm each. Private collection.

Figure 22

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Untitled (Fly Agaric)*, 1975. Gelatin silver print with applied color, 90.8 x 89.2 cm. Collection of Ron and Ann Pizzuti.

Figure 23

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Radioactive Rocks on Photographic Plates (Radioaktives Gestein auf Fotoplatten)*, 1982. Thirty chromogenic color prints. Installation view in *Sigmar Polke: Neue Bilder (New Pictures)*. Städtisches Museum Abteiberg.

Figure 24

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Goya (Time)*, 1984. Photograph, 127 x ca. 185 cm. Private collection.

Figure 25

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Goya (Time)*, 1984. Photograph, 127 x ca. 180 cm. Private collection.

Figure 26

[image redacted]

Sigmar Polke. *Goya (Time)*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 127 x 185 cm. Private collection.

Figure 27

[image redacted]

Installation photograph of *Sigmar Polke: Fotografien* at the Staatlische Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 1990. *Sigmar Polke: Fotografien* (Baden-Baden: Staatlische Kunsthalle, 1990), p. 171.

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