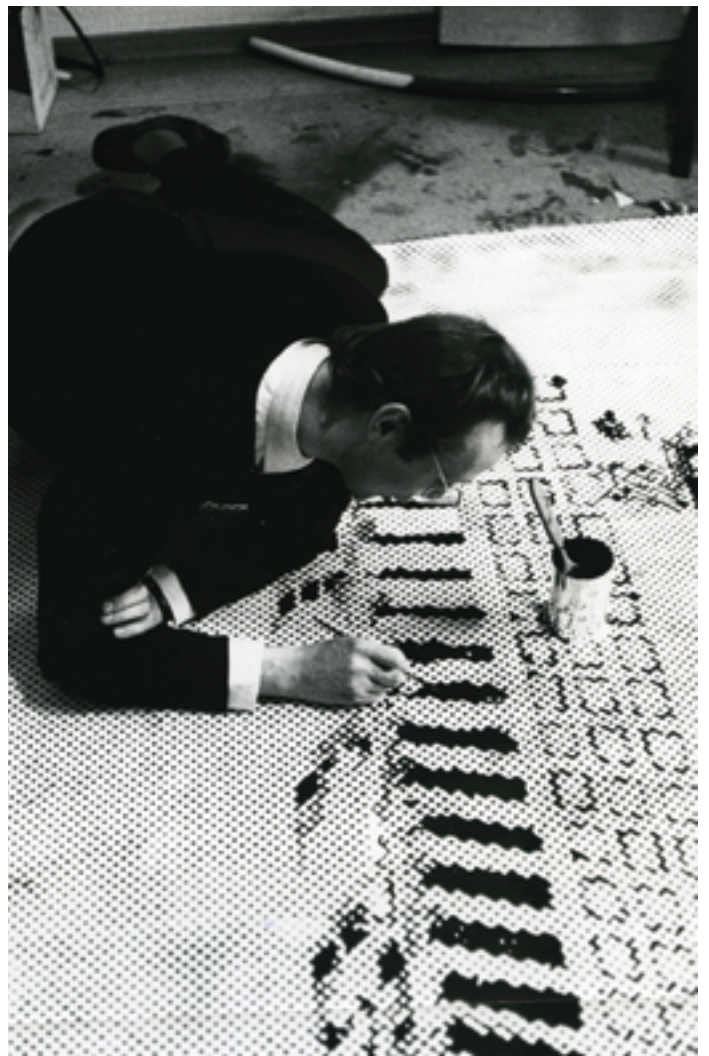


Sigmar Polke

Beneath the Cobblestones, the Earth

01.03 – 26.10.2025



Sigmar Polke painting *Häuserfront* (Front of the Housing Block) in his studio in Düsseldorf, 1967.
Photo: Manfred Leve © Marc Leve, Estate of Manfred Leve

While the title of this exhibition refers to the famous French slogan of the May '68 movement, "beneath the cobblestones, the beach", it is also a nod to one of the artist's favourite motifs: the potato. Vincent van Gogh had already made it the symbol of farm labour and peasant life; almost a century later, it shows the attraction of Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) to popular culture in a Europe impoverished by the Second World War.

However different Van Gogh and Polke may seem, they both shared a positive disposition, characterised by a profound humanism and a desire to escape the norms of mainstream art.

This retrospective devoted to Polke, the first to be shown in France since 2014, brings together more than sixty works, some of which have never been seen by the public before. Visitors are invited to discover, or rediscover, one of the most important and innovative artists of our time.

Two paintings by Vincent van Gogh, *Peasant and Peasant Woman Planting Potatoes* and *Basket of Potatoes* (Nuenen 1885), open the exhibition.

Exhibition curator: Bice Curiger,
assisted by Margaux Bonopera

1941:

Birth in Lower Silesia, a German region of central Europe which would become predominantly Polish from 1945; the United States entered the war.

Sigmar Polke was 12 years old when his family decided to flee East Germany (GDR) and settle in West Germany (FRG). Based in Düsseldorf, he studied art at the Kunstakademie from 1961 to 1967.

1961:

Erection of a barbed wire fence that would become the Berlin Wall; in the same year, the painter Gerhard Richter fled the GDR and also settled in Düsseldorf.

While studying and when he was only 22 years old, in 1963, Polke, along with Konrad Fischer-Lueg, Manfred Kuttner and Gerhard Richter, contributed to the emergence of a pseudo-style called "Capitalist Realism". This was a nod to the artistic doctrine of "Socialist Realism" put forward by the USSR to promote the principles of communism, but also to the positivist glamour of the Pop Art movement imported from the United States to Western Europe.

Polke came up with a significantly different aesthetic, full of irony, which allowed the difficult reality of German daily life at that time to filter through.

1962:

First concert by the Rolling Stones, in London.

Sigmar Polke created his first so-called raster paintings, such as *Tisch* (Table, 1963). With this canvas, the artist turned his attention to the mass production of photographic images in the media. Here, he replicated the commonplace image of a table taken from a newspaper, reduplicating by hand all the halftone dots and even the dust and printing defects, to produce a delicate and vibrant visual poem.

1963:

John Fitzgerald Kennedy visited Europe, where he delivered his famous speech "Ich bin ein Berliner"; he was assassinated a few months later.

Polke's focus on everyday life is also evident in the appearance of the potato motif in *Kartoffelhaus* (Potato House, 1967–1990). The inclusion of the humble tuber established a direct link with Vincent van Gogh, who throughout his life repeatedly depicted the vegetable in various forms. Both artists associated this foodstuff with rural and working-class life, emphasising the difficult living conditions of a large part of the European population in the 19th and 20th centuries.

1966:

"Polke / Richter" exhibition at the h Gallery (Hanover) and first solo exhibition at the René Block Gallery (Berlin).

After completing his artistic training in 1967, Polke focused his research on the notions of artistic genius and inspiration. His portfolio ... *Höhere Wesen befehlen* (... Higher Beings Command, 1968), consisting of fourteen offset printed photographs, features amusing and poetic compositions in which objects and words meet in a Dadaist and surrealist vein.

1968:

Events of May '68 in Paris; assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis (United States).

In 1969, Polke took part in his first collective exhibition abroad (in Lucerne, Switzerland), which presented the Düsseldorf art scene. He continued his explorations of the potato, notably with the installation *Apparat, mit dem eine Kartoffel eine andere umkreisen kann* (Apparatus Whereby One Potato Can Orbit Another, 1969)—a work full of irony that questions art and the multiple interpretations of the world that it can produce.

1972-1978:

Polke lived in Gaspelshof, a former farm that was home to Düsseldorf's young art scene.

1975:

Opening of the high-profile trial of the Baader gang in West Germany.

During the 1970s, Polke carried out extensive work with photography, both in his daily life and during his various travels—for example in 1974 in Pakistan and Afghanistan. During a stay in Paris, he experimented with numerous innovative techniques for capturing and developing images. In the resulting series, *Paris 1971* (1971), photography ceases to be a simple reflection of reality and becomes a means of contradicting and calling into question its own objectivity. Polke's pictorial and photographic practices influenced each other, with the artist even going so far as to paint canvases with the chemicals used for developing film.

1977:

Opening of the Centre Pompidou in Paris; presumed suicide of several members of the Baader gang.

Polke's attraction to distant lands and cultures continued with a trip to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia in 1980–1981. On his return, certain elements of his style became more pronounced, such as the use of shop-bought fabrics as a backdrop to his paintings. The use of materials outside the realm of regular artistic practice is particularly visible in *Tischrücken (Séance)* (Table Turning, 1981) or *Lumpi hinter dem Ofen* (Lumpi Behind the Stove, 1983).

1981:

Election of François Mitterrand as President of France.

In the 1980s, Polke's production was characterised by monumental canvases such as *Paganini* (1981–1983). This work, which brings together several emblematic elements of his art, directly confronts the viewer with German history and the stigmata of Nazism. Unlike many artists of the time, including his teacher Joseph Beuys, Polke was convinced that art has the ability and the power to deal with the most monstrous events in history, and thus to participate in the preservation of collective memory.

1982:

Polke took part in documenta 7, a major art event that takes place every five years in Kassel (Germany). The new paintings he exhibited there challenged the expectations of his audience.

The 1980s also marked the beginning of Polke's research into the history of pigments and the alchemical nature of painting. He constantly experimented with new ways of painting, generally with industrial materials. The series of paintings entitled *Negativwert* (Negative Value, 1982) centres on the synthetic pigment violet, as does *Walross* (Walrus, 1984). This colour would never cease to feature in his work.

1985:

Release of the film "Shoah" by Claude Lanzmann.

Polke's "alchemical-pictorial" experiments reached their peak during his participation in the Venice Biennale in 1986, where he represented Germany. On the walls of the German pavilion, he applied different pigments that reacted to the ambient humidity, changing from pale red to pale blue, thus highlighting the "sensitive" and scientific properties of paint. This work earned him the prestigious Golden Lion, the most coveted prize of the Biennale.

1986:

Explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (USSR).

1989 was a particularly productive year, with Polke producing some twenty pieces for the bicentenary of the French Revolution, often inspired by old engravings. Examples include *Valmy* and *Tambour* (Drum, 1989). These works emphasise the unique diversity and wealth of Polke's sources and references, far removed from the preoccupations of the artists of his generation. That same year, the fall of the Berlin Wall changed the history of Germany and the whole world for good.

1991:

First solo exhibition of Polke's photographic works, in Baden-Baden (Germany); fall of the USSR.

For a long time, Polke kept his photographic and pictorial works separate. This exhibition, "*Beneath the Cobblestones, the Earth*", presents them together, alongside several films made with or by him, in which he appears or which present accounts of his work. These documents are invaluable in understanding Polke's mindset and the climate in which he experimented with and revolutionised art and its processes.

1994:

Polke's second exhibition in a French museum, at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes.

From the 1990s onwards, Polke was considered one of the major figures in contemporary art, featuring in numerous exhibitions and retrospectives around the world. A few months before his death, the stained-glass windows he designed for the Grossmünster Cathedral in Zurich were officially unveiled. Made using combinations of precious stones (agate and tourmaline) and images taken from ancient biblical illustrations, among other things, they are a reference and tribute to the stained-glass windows that were already in place by the Swiss artist Augusto Giacometti.

10 June 2010:

Death of Sigmar Polke in Cologne.

Vincent van Gogh

1853–1890

The son of a Protestant pastor, Vincent van Gogh grew up in a predominantly Catholic village. At the age of sixteen, he moved to The Hague to join the art dealers Goupil & Cie and went on to work at the company's branches in Brussels, London and Paris. He gradually lost interest in the art business, practising as a lay preacher in Belgium between 1878 and 1879. In August 1880 he decided to become an artist.

A painter of everyday life, and, above all, of peasant life, van Gogh followed in the footsteps of artists such as Jean-François Millet. From the early 1880s, he became focused on the theme of the potato, which he depicted in numerous paintings.

Joining his brother Theo in Paris, he discovered the art of Japanese prints and rubbed shoulders with the Impressionists. Convinced that colour was the key to modernity, he moved

to Provence in February 1888. In October of that year, Paul Gauguin joined him to create an artistic community in Arles. But by the end of December their collaboration was over, following a violent argument that led van Gogh to self-harm.

In May 1889, disillusioned and ill, he committed himself to an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. He stayed for a year and found the peace he needed to develop his work. During his twenty-seven months in Provence, Van Gogh created more than five hundred paintings and drawings.

In May 1890, he left for Auvers-sur-Oise, where, in the space of two months, he painted the last seventy-four pictures of a body of work that numbered over two thousand. He died on 29 July 1890 at the age of thirty-seven.

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