

# Otto Piene

## *The Proliferation of the Sun*

6.2. –  
10.5.2020

MEDIA ORIENTATION

4.2.2020, 11 am

OPENING

5.2.2020, 6 pm

curated by Sabine Schaschl

Haus Konstruktiv is the first museum in Switzerland to devote a comprehensive solo exhibition to Otto Piene (b. 1928 in Bad Laasphe, d. 2014 in Berlin). A selection of works produced between 1955 and 2014 are being presented. Alongside early paintings influenced by abstract expressionism, there will be grid, smoke and fire paintings, light installations and air sculptures on display, in which the artist incorporated the elements light, fire and air to create a unique oeuvre that is still just as relevant today as it ever was.

Conceived to include the artist's estate, which is managed by Sprüth Magers, the exhibition begins with seven large-scale stars from 2014, in yellow, orange, red, violet, blue, indigo and green. In a rhythmic sequence, the fabric objects are filled with air by noisy fans, then collapse again. These works are from the *Inflatables*, air sculptures, with which Piene already established himself as a pioneer of sky art in the 1960s. Piene's interest in integrating unconventional elements into his work, such as air, light, fire and smoke, and in renewing art in this way, went hand-in-hand with the post-war era's atmosphere of social awakening, which made a lasting impression on Piene.

Born in 1928 in North Rhine-Westphalia, Piene grew up in Lübbecke and was drafted into the German army as an anti-aircraft auxiliary in 1944. After graduating from high school, he attended Munich's Academy of Fine Arts (AdBK) in 1949. He then switched, in 1950, to Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf for three years, before obtaining a degree in philosophy at the University of Cologne in 1957. Like many artists of his generation, who experienced the devastation of the Second World War, Piene began to seek new artistic means and forms of expression in the mid-1950s. The swift post-war reconstruction and rapid economic growth prompted him, in 1965, to ask the question: "Is there anywhere a synthesis of the technological, urban world and the world of natural forces? Must these preclude each other or might we trust in the fact that the sun makes roses grow and, at the same time, feeds power stations? That fire broils steaks and propels rockets?"

Firmly determined to stir up the art scene, he founded the group ZERO in 1958 together with Heinz Mack. Three years later, Günther Uecker also joined. In numerous exhibitions and happenings, they collectively promoted the zero point and a new beginning for art. The ZERO artists were particularly fascinated by the medium of light, which Piene would spend his whole life addressing. Many exhibits on the second floor at Museum Haus Konstruktiv bear witness to this.

In order to capture light in a painterly way, the young Piene first experimented with various grid meshes made of cardboard or sheet copper, which he would lay on the pre-primed painting surface and apply pastose paint to with a spatula. The resulting grid structures comprising raised points of paint generate a variety of light-and-shadow effects, as seen in the works *Zur Geschichte des Lichts* (On the History of Light, 1959) and *Lichtsirene* (Light Siren, 1959/1960). Following the same principle, Piene then created smoke drawings and paintings by directing sooty smoke from candles and oil lamps onto the pictures' ground through a grid mesh. This group of works is related to his fire paintings, which have blisters, crusts and soot causing dramatic visual effects on their surfaces, such as in *The Battle of the Amazons* (1980s) or *Bausch* (Ball, 1998). These were the result of Piene setting fire to canvases treated with spray-paint and fixatives, then waving them back and forth and extinguishing them again. "Images of the sun turned into afterimages of the sun," he wrote in 1965, a fire dance on the retina and a choreography of fire on the canvas. I ignited solvent that otherwise would have dried into an existence of 'gemütlich' [comfortable] contemplation, and pictures grew within seconds on a border line between destruction and survival – the *Fire Flowers*."

Piene's fire paintings often have something cosmic about them – the most powerful fire in the sky is ultimately the sun, which is as destructive as it is vital. With the exhibition's title, *The Proliferation of the Sun*, Museum Haus Konstruktiv is referring back to a 1967 artwork of the same name. This consists of 800 slides bearing colorful painted suns, which the artist used to counter the era's political discussions about nuclear power with pointedly poetic imagery. Half a century later, in the context of today's climate debate, *The Proliferation of the Sun* seems more relevant than ever. Like light, air is also of central importance in Piene's oeuvre. His move to New York in 1965 opened up new opportunities for him: In 1968, at the invitation of György Kepes, Piene became a fellow (and, six years later, director) of the newly founded Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, which is still famous for interdisciplinary collaboration between scientists, engineers and artists today. There, he found ideal conditions for the realization of his visionary sky-art projects, which were initially developed for outdoors: He caused large-format objects, inflated with air and helium, to rise into the sky. Sketches and drawings, in which Piene recorded the development processes behind his sky events, are displayed together with the star-shaped *Inflatables* in the large entrance hall.

On the fourth floor, visitors have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of a precisely choreographed light ballet, which is what Piene called the installations that he began to develop from his grid paintings in 1958, in which light shines out of rotating mirrored objects, through perforated walls and into the darkened room. Initially still powered by candles and handheld lamps, his light ballets became increasingly sophisticated, thanks to advanced mechanical equipment. The same exhibition space also accommodates three light sculptures from 1966/2014, entitled *Blauer Lichtgeist* (Blue Light Ghost). Each of these three works comprises four individual upwardly tapering blue stained-glass bodies sitting on a pedestal. Inside each pedestal, a light bulb sends light pulsing upward at pre-programmed intervals, so the hand-blown glass bodies radiate blue light with varying shades and intensities.

The exhibited light installations and air sculptures make it more than clear that, as Otto Piene himself kept pointing out, he was always concerned with the transfer of energy in his art. At the same time, he succeeded in making an innovative contribution to so-called immaterial art, with a radiance that endures to this day.

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Wed 26 February, 6.30 pm  
SPECIAL TOUR ON OTTO PIENE  
In German

Guided tour through the exhibition *Otto Piene – The Proliferation of the Sun* with Evelyne Bucher, Curator Museum Haus Konstruktiv, and Eliza Lips, Research and Curatorial Assistant Museum Haus Konstruktiv

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