

Laughing in the Devil's Face by Ines Rüttinger

There are many possible descriptions of Sigmar Polke: a photographer, capitalist realist, even alchemist, definitely graphic artist, a painter without a shadow of doubt, and perhaps also a caricaturist.

Descriptions of his work are equally numerous: brightly-coloured, black and white, ironic, realistic, funny, serious, ready-made, original, unique, reproduced, enigmatic, direct, somehow weird, and yet straight to the point.

Let us take a look at *The Berlin Devil*; the first thing we notice is a threatening figure before a garish yellow back-ground. It floats menacingly above a group of men testing their strength in a tug of war. The figure is blurred and distorted, but we see quite clearly how it is wielding a whip. Is it spurring the men on to further efforts? Does it propose to interfere and drive them apart? Its relationship to the men in the foreground is as vague as its appearance is monstrous and distorted. One could almost believe that those engaging in the tug of war do not notice the figure floating above them at all. But with its whip and grotesque dimensions, it appears to be pulling the strings here: unnoticed but whipping on relentlessly.

In this work from 2001, published by Edition Staeck in Heidelberg, Sigmar Polke again shows himself to be the alchemist among artists, skillfully combining different materials, techniques or motifs into a new, perhaps obscure but nevertheless (or perhaps for that very reason?) fascinating whole. Here, Polke brings together a 20th century photograph and an artistically adapted original image from the mid 19th century and unites them in a serigraphic work. And so here, once again, we can clearly discern the caricaturist who creates a parody by means of exaggeration and distortion.

After more careful examination, the photograph used for the lower third of the piece appears as absurd as the distorted vision. The men are struggling over the rope with all their might, but the group including the man with sunglasses and a moustache surely won some time ago? The second man from the right has stepped over the line, and so his group has lost. Is this a struggle for an already long-lost position? The losers even had fewer men, for we can only see two combatants there. The outcome of the contest was clear from the outset, therefore. It is unclear where and when exactly this occurred. Children in the background suggest a fair, and so the tug of war seems to have been a game for pleasure. But the seriousness of the situation is obvious nevertheless – after all, everyone wants to win. And so the political charging of an amateur sport is perhaps more than coincidence here, especially when one looks very carefully at the top part of the image.

This is because the second motif originated from the title-page of the comic satirical-political magazine *Satan*, previously known as *Berliner Charivari*.¹ Such comic magazines were the successors to earlier political pamphlets and always had to fight against censorship, which often led to changes of name. The *Berliner Charivari* appeared on a weekly basis and was known as *Satan* as from the issue, and *Der Teufel in Berlin* (The Devil in Berlin).

The motif readopted by Polke here could be found on the title page of *Satan*, (May 1848), and also of *Der Teufel in Berlin*, (mid June 1848). In the original, an oversized devil dressed as Mephistopheles in a feathered hat and cloak swishes his whip over the distraught population of Berlin, who then flee head over heels through the Tiergarten. *Der Teufel in Berlin*, No. 1, printed an "Open letter from Old Fritz" below this image, a parody of Prussian absolutism under the "Soldier King", Friedrich Wilhelm I.²

The distortion of original historical images is a recurrent creative element in Polke's artistic oeuvre. Although many works, like the cycle of paintings *Seeing Rays* (2007) or the 3-part serigraph *RIGHT or LEFT SEER* (2001), investigate natural scientific processes or the work, in *Hermes Trismegistos* (1995), of their alchemist predecessors, the choice of the devil is no surprise. This

image source in particular must have been a fascinating, attractive one for Polke. As he did, the political pamphlets commented on the events of the times, on conditions, social shortcomings or absurdities using parody, satire and grotesque humour. Often, the laughter over authority offered by comic political magazines was the only possible form of resistance, and the establishment still had opportunities to intervene via censorship, even here.

According to Michail Bachtin, laughter is also a means to break down deeper-seated resistance: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power that developed in man during thousands of years."³

Polke combines 'his 'devil in altered form with the image of men engaging in a tug of war. Like the source of the devil image, this picture also seems to be a satirical comment on political conditions, the struggle for victory, the (election) campaign, one's own position of power. Above it, the distorted and horrific spectre floats, only identifiable as the devil because of the title. In a strange analogy between rope and whip, the above-mentioned image of the one pulling the strings, the puppeteer, now grows more and more obvious.

Unchallenged by those struggling against each other, he rises above their heads, taking on huge, misshapen dimensions. Polke has changed the title from "The Devil in Berlin" to "The Berlin Devil". So the devil is no longer simply a visitor in Berlin, but at home there. Perhaps a direct analogy with daily politics during the period in which the work was being produced would be a little too much of a good thing. But we can definitely assume a general dig at the power structures of the Federal Republic upon their return to Berlin. Polke's works always address a large number of themes, and in doing so, each is a true child of its time.⁴

The Berlin Devil gives us a smile tinged with irony. In the full spirit of the *Devil in Berlin* dating from 1848, Sigmar Polke brings us face to face with absurdities that we cannot always decipher but ones that seem important, nonetheless. Bice Curiger once expressed this impression in the following way: "Because Polke's laughter always goes hand in hand with a love of dilettantism, the vulgar and the sentimental, the art emanating from Polke's direction is extremely human, warm-hearted, uninhibited, audacious and liberating – all at the same time."⁵

Translated by Lucinda Renniso

1. On this, cf. Ursula E. Koch, *Der Teufel von Berlin. Von der März-revolution bis zu Bismarcks Entlassung. Illustrierte politische Witzblätter einer Metropole 1848–1890*, Cologne 1991, pp. 71ff.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
3. Quoted from Bice Curiger, "Das Lachen von Sigmar Polke ist nicht zu töten" (1977); in: *Sigmar Polke. Wir Kleinbürger!*, exhib. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle 2009, p. 196. Cf. Michail Bachtin, *Literatur und Karneval*, Munich 1969.
4. Cf. Martin Hentschel, "Printed Matter, or The Art of Communication. Sigmar Polke's Prints, 1963–2000"; in: Jürgen Becker, Claus von Osten (eds.), *Sigmar Polke. Die Editionen 1963–2000*, pp. 361–398, here p. 394.
5. Bice Curiger, see note 3, p. 197. Cf. *Kunst und Nachrichten* 6, September 1977, pp. 153 f.