

Press Release

Otto Piene

The Proliferation of the Sun

May 24–August 10, 2024

Public Reception: May 23, 6–8PM

Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles

Sprüth Magers

Otto Piene (1928–2014), cofounder of the ZERO group and longtime director of MIT's influential Center for Advanced Visual Studies, combined art and technology in works that comprised light rooms, inflatable sculptures, ceramics, drawings, paintings and performances. Colorful and dynamic, they consistently engage the viewer's perception and participation. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present Piene's monumental, immersive installation *The Proliferation of the Sun* (1967/2014) at the Los Angeles gallery, marking the artist's first solo presentation on the West Coast. Featuring seven digital projections of hand-painted slides and a soundtrack of the artist's voice directing them, the work envelops visitors and the gallery in shifting prismatic tones that generate, in Piene's words, a "poetic journey through space."

Particularly fascinated by the medium of light, Piene spent his entire career experimenting with it. *The Proliferation of the Sun* was originally conceived as a multi-slide projection and performance in 1966–67 for the opening of Piene and Aldo Tambellini's Black Gate Theatre in New York. Five projectionists operated Kodak carousel slide projectors, following Piene's scripted narration, which began by telling the performers to "turn your projectors on now." Against the backdrop of the era's spread of nuclear weapons, the work countered the destructive powers of war with an abstract, peaceful visual world.

The current restaging at the gallery accords with the final iteration of *The Proliferation of the Sun*, devised by Piene as the centerpiece of his 2014 retrospective at the Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin. Completed only shortly before his death, the installation is reminiscent of the original performances of the 1960s and updated with automated projectors showing digital copies of the original glass slides. Piene completed the work by adding 160 new slides painted especially for the Berlin staging. These were also digitized and projected onto a large inflatable sphere, inspired by the work's 1967 presentation at Art Intermedia gallery in Cologne. The integration of new technologies reflected Piene's keen interest in innovation and made possible his initial imagining of the work as a large-scale somatic experience. Later in 2014, during the first major survey of ZERO in a US museum, the reinterpretation of *The Proliferation of the Sun* was projected onto a balloon and suspended in the rotunda of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum as a tribute to the late artist.

The slides display vividly colored organic forms, recalling fractals, planets, and cells reproducing under a microscope, evoking the sun's vibrance and life-giving energy. In between, perfectly round black dots resembling eclipses materialize. With increasing speed, the images change to the droning soundtrack of the artist's voice uttering "The sun, the sun, the sun, the sun" – a sort of ritualistic chant that vibrates through the space and anchors audiences in the present moment. Simultaneously, we are transported back to the time of the original performances as younger Piene's voice rings out.

As the slides end, the space becomes bathed in pure white light while Piene intones "white-out, white-out, white-out." Possibly playing on its counterpart, the blackout, which plunged cities into darkness during wartime as lights were turned off to make targets less visible to the enemy, or the fade of theater lights to mark a play's end, Piene surprises viewers with a bright glaring light. Making the color white tangible, this section of the projection taps into Western ideas of purity and emptiness and the new beginnings associated with them, referencing ZERO's symbolic indication of beginning at nothing. Uniting art, life, nature and technology, *The Proliferation of the Sun* functions as a means of expansion, breaking down spatial boundaries and opening up space for contemplation and new forms of perception.

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Otto Piene (1928–2014) was born in Bad Laasphe, Germany, and lived in Munich, Düsseldorf and Cologne until 1964, when he moved to the United States. From 1968 to 1971, he was the first Fellow of the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies, where he ultimately became director from 1974 to 1994, settling in Groton, Massachusetts, and dividing his time between Groton and Düsseldorf until his death in 2014. Selected solo exhibitions include Museum Tinguely, Basel (2024), Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich (2020), Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA (2019), Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (2015), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2014), ZKM Museum Für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe (2013), and MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA (2011). Selected group exhibitions include Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (2023), Kunstmuseum Bonn (2022), Centre Pompidou-Metz (2021), Yayoi Kusama Museum, Tokyo (2020), Gropius Bau, Berlin (2015), and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2014), as well as the Venice Biennale (1971, 1967) and Documenta 6, 3 and 2 (1977, 1964, 1959).

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