

# SPRÜTH MAGERS

**Otto Piene**

**Sprüth Magers, Berlin**

**February 1 – April 6, 2019**

Otto Piene counts among the pioneers of 20th century art. As co-founder of the international ZERO movement, he had a fundamental impact on how classical art forms such as painting and sculpture are perceived. His early smoke, grid and fire paintings, light ballets and light rooms enabled him to incorporate time, light, space and movement into the production of art. His interdisciplinary projects in Germany and the US and most especially his move to the United States at the end of the 1960s opened new horizons in his experimental practice. Starting in the 1970s, Piene developed a large number of projects as director of the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies (1974-1993). Working at the interface of art and technological innovation, Piene collaborated with artists, scientists, and technicians and created gigantic, but ephemeral works. Process-oriented and transient in nature, the so-called *Sky Events* pose a challenge to the traditional understanding of art in public space.

The current exhibition at Sprüth Magers focuses on an apex of Otto Piene's experimental approach at the end of the 1960s. The exhibition is dedicated to a selection of sketches, drafts, works on paper and written commentaries, as well as scores from *Inflatables* and *Sky Events*. Other works on show include the installation *Red Sundew 2*, the video work *Electronic Light Ballet* and a *Light Ghost*.

As Piene put it in an early ZERO group text in 1961, "Why don't we make art for the airspace, why don't we make exhibitions in the sky?" He went on to coin the term *Sky Art* in subsequent decades and produced inflatable structures that filled entire spaces and extended across beaches, rivers or urban landscapes. The sculptures he released into the sky were carried by specially-developed helium tubes. He also moved away from the traditional idea of modern sculpture as a monolithic form made of materials such as stone and metal and began to work with soft, elastic and malleable fabrics. His works are not to be understood as autonomous, absolute units, but as "flowing" works that only take on their final form in dialogue with site-specific factors such as light, space, audience and atmosphere.

While the *Sky Events* were initially depicted in the form of sketches, Piene choreographed larger events with drawn scores. The dramaturgy of the events' location and time was with precise visual ideas by the artist. The sketches on display illustrate the development process from the first *Windssocks* to the *Sky Events*. Preparatory meetings, active participation and wind and weather during the execution of the events are inherent to the artwork itself.

Otto Piene's experimental attitude also comes across in the video work *Electronic Light Ballet* (1968), which was created explicitly for the medium of television. The video artist TV program "The Medium is the Medium" was produced by the culture channel WGBH-TV Studio in Boston, Massachusetts. The work shows documentary excerpts from Piene's Sky Event *Flying Girl Sculpture* (1968), in which 17-year-old Susan Peters ascended into the night sky for 30 minutes with seven, helium-filled

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polyethylene tubes. The video clip was superimposed with light points live in front of television cameras and continues his mechanical and automatic light ballet of the early 1960s.

The exhibition also includes the installation *Red Sundew 2*. The bright red fabric work was created in 1970 for an exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii. The structure made of sewn-together bolts of sail cloth separates the space, with tentacle-like arms extending towards viewers from a kind of passageway in the center. These are five, interwoven *Inflatable* fabric flowers, which are supplied with air and set in gentle motion by blowers on the floor. Visitors are encouraged to experience the physical proximity of the work with its mobile, variable structure.

The opaque glass form *Light Ghost* (1966/2014) consists of four, individual glass bodies placed one above the other and tapered towards the top. The cylindrical base contains a light source that emits light impulses into the glass sculpture at intervals specified by Piene, so that the individual, hand-blown glass bodies give off different shades of red light. This grappling with the relationship between light and color points to an important consideration in the artist's works. As Otto Piene emphasized in a conversation with painter Jürgen Claus, "My *Sky Art*, that is to say, the *Inflatables*, basically evolved from light sculpture, from the preoccupation with light. [...] We live from light."

Otto Piene was born in 1928 in Laasphe, Germany and died in 2014 in Berlin. He lived and worked in Düsseldorf, Cambridge and Groton, Massachusetts. His most recent solo exhibitions include presentations at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Iran (2015); Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2014); ZKM Museum Für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe (2013); and MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge (2011). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, hosted a comprehensive retrospective of the ZERO group in 2014. Historical group exhibitions include participation in the Venice Biennale (1971 and 1967) and documenta 6, 3 and 2 (1977, 1964, 1959).

The Berlin gallery is concurrently presenting exhibitions by Astrid Klein and Andro Wekua.

For further information and press enquiries, contact Silvia Baltshun (sb@spruethmagers.com).

Public reception: January 31, 6 – 9pm

Opening hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm