

Press Text

“Break out of the art world, fill the vacuum” (Otto Piene)

(english version)

On “Nights of Héliogabalus”(poems by Fernando Arrabal, lithographs by Otto Piene, text by Ante Glibota, sculptures by Andreas Blank and Stefan Rinck) at the Schlachthaus.fresh&fine art gallery in Berlin.

Otto Piene concluded his artistic work in June 2014 with a brilliant collaboration, the lithographic portfolio “Nights of Héliogabalus”. Shortly before his death, the painter and light and Sky Art artist was inspired by poems written for him by the French-Spanish poet Fernando Arrabal. This resulted in a final masterpiece, the apex of his work.

Schlachthaus.fresh&fine art in Berlin Charlottenburg is presenting, for the first time, this surprising final sleight of hand in a work rich in experiments and ideas.

Otto Piene got to know Arrabal on a more personal level in 2013 in Paris, and may have seen in his bizarre, word-drunk work – which could have sprung from the night visions of a Goya – a provocative counter-pole to his own bright visions. Time and again, of course, these were explicit peace signs, such as the broad rainbow for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich.

“Héliogabalus”, who became Roman emperor two thousand years ago after a revolt, had already inspired Artauld’s “Theatre of Cruelty”. In the lunatic acts of this unruly and debauched anarchist on the throne, Piene and Arrabal glimpsed “the other dimension in the mirror”. This dimension – which is also perpetually omnipresent – can suddenly expose the ambivalent nature of all human actions and judgements. Furthermore, the title of the opening poems of the cycle and the lithographic series is: “To Clean the Mirrors”.

Arrabal’s surreal neologisms and Piene’s visionary imagery clash heavily, suddenly giving rise to absurd constellations of word connotations and images. The surprise strikes sparks – sparks of joy, too – which, as sisters of laughter, curb fear and banish horror.

Piene has woven (in true Piene style) a bright ray of hope into his final work too, leaving it to us – with as good as a cheery wink in his eye – as his final greeting: let’s “break out of art. Fill the gaps!”

The Parisian historian and author Ante Glibota, who has published extensively on Arrabal and Piene, facilitated the cooperation between these two artists and recorded it in a seminal text as a witness to the artistic work.

At the time, Arrabal wrote ten poems for Piene with titles such as “Abyss of Hell”, “The Anchor of Vertigo”, “Ocean Passage”, and “The Island that Fell into a Star”. Piene responded to these poems spontaneously and directly, without any kind of preliminary work. The work was printed, under the direct supervision of the artist, in Stephane Guilbaud’s renowned lithographic press at the Gare de Lyon. Arrabal himself then contributed the arabesque lettering for the title page. The result was a brilliant, bibliophilic portfolio of large-format unbound pages.

Initially as a ZERO artist in Germany, and then as a Sky Art artist in the expansive landscapes of America, Piene called upon artists not to abandon the sky – the atmospheric shell of the earth and the mythical seat of the gods – to the fire and destructive power of the weapons of war, but to conquer it spiritually with the power of the imagination: “We, as serious artists, must confront reality, wake up, break out of the art world, fill the vacuum.” (Sky Art Manifesto)

Piene’s imagery began with drawings of people plummeting from the sky. As an anti-aircraft auxiliary, he had seen the misery of the Second World War, the sinister side of the world. By contrast, as a ZERO artist, he produced luminous ballets of light, illuminated raster images, dynamic smoke designs and fire images. These were literally full of the “joy of beautiful divine sparks”. As a Sky Art artist, Piene sent stars, flowers, and mythical figures on ascending helium ribbons into the sky. These works took on a collective power at international Sky Art conferences.

These perpetually new constellations of artistic collaboration also made Piene very receptive to the liberating impulses – emanating from the absurd in Fernando Arrabal’s work – which break open hardened ideological structures with the power of the word. Arrabal is a virtuoso master of this pitch – and this was another new challenge for Piene at the time: the paradisiacal and the grotesque – indeed, the demonic – stand face to face, fight with one another, interpenetrate in open ambivalence. The head of the Medusa, whose gaze turns the viewer to stone, winks at us; sharks are crucified sacrilegiously in poisoned green water; red, blood-smearred arms extend out of the water: are they praying beseechingly, or are they appealing for revolution and resistance?

Otto Piene died in Berlin a few weeks after completing these highly explosive images. He turned this collaboration with Arrabal into a life-giving elixir of the immeasurably grotesque, coruscant cheerfulness, love for all living things, and the profound longing for peace – an epochal work.

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