

SPERONE WESTWATER
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Otto Piene
Sundew and Selected Works, 1957–2014
28 January – 12 March 2016



Otto Piene *Red Sundew 2*, 1970

New York, NY: 6 January 2016 – Sperone Westwater is pleased to present a retrospective of painting, sculpture, and installation by Otto Piene, the co-founder of the ZERO group, who died in 2014 at the age of 86. Embodying several important themes in the artist’s work across six decades, the exhibition is the first solo presentation of Piene’s work in New York since his 2010 exhibition at Sperone Westwater. Piene was featured prominently in the Guggenheim’s 2014–2015 survey exhibition “ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s–1960s,” as well as in major ZERO group exhibitions in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Istanbul. In the past two years, Piene has been the subject of four solo retrospectives in Germany and one in Iran.

Red Sundew 2, 1970, an early inflatable sculpture, is installed for the first time since its initial exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Piene’s first inflatable sculptures, the *Fleurs du Mal*, 1967–1969, initiated an influential series of projects the artist called *Sky Art*. These large-scale, outdoor inflatable sculptures took the sky itself as a backdrop and introduced a performative element into the artist’s work. The earliest *Sky Art* events later evolved into massive technological feats contextualized by their surroundings.

A selection of major red paintings in the main gallery, including *Kilauea*, 1975, spans the artist’s career. These works underscore both Piene’s fascination with the color as it relates to fire and the ZERO group’s preference for the monochrome as a testing ground for light and its manifold effects. In 1963 Piene wrote, “My greater dream

concerns the projection of light into the wide night sky, the feel of the universe, as presented in the light, pristine and unhindered—the sky is the only place that offers to humankind almost unlimited freedom.” With their performative sense of gesture, these paintings should be seen in relation to the ongoing *Sky Art* projects.

Light was Piene’s primary source of inspiration, and his series of *Rasterbilder* (screen pictures) gave this theme significant form. The series began in 1957 with Piene’s development of the technique in which he pressed oil paint through cardboard and metal screens onto paper and canvas. Using screens he made in 1957, Piene returned repeatedly to the *Rasterbilder* over a period of nearly sixty years, expanding the technique into new areas of his research. Important early raster paintings on board are juxtaposed in the gallery with later raster paintings incorporating fire from the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the early 2000s, Piene extended the technique into an innovative series of ceramic works employing special metallic glazes.

The radical *Lichtballette* (light ballets), in which Piene first projected light from electric hand lamps through his raster screens, produce an otherworldly spectral dance engaging science, nature, and technology. Among the earliest extant *Lichtballet* objects is a painted and punctured cardboard disc from 1960, once mounted on a manual turning apparatus. An eight-part *Lichtballet* installation is dominated by the *Mönchengladbach Light Wall*, 2013, reflecting Piene’s ongoing exploration of this concept. Four unique examples of Piene’s *Lichtgrafik* (light graphic) series from 1959 to 1962 capture fleeting glimpses of the *Lichtballette* in diazotype on light-sensitive paper.



Otto Piene *Die Sonne reist*, 1966, oil and fire on canvas, 26 3/4 x 37 3/8 inches (68 x 95 cm)

Die Sonne reist (The Sun Travels), 1966, a rare depiction of a red sun moving through the sky, suggests a dynamic cycle of light, fire, and energy. Along with other early works made with fire, this ZERO-period canvas contextualizes a suite of “fire gouaches” made a few months before Piene’s death. Utilizing metallic and black papers for the first time, these works are marked by an unusual luminosity, both heightened and diffuse. With their robust dimensionality, the 2014 “fire gouaches” are a bold final experiment from a restless innovator.

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Otto Piene was born in 1928 in Bad Laasphe, Germany. From 1949 to 1953, he studied painting and art education at the Academy of Art in Munich and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, and in 1957, he received a degree in philosophy from the University of Cologne. Piene moved to the United States in 1964. From 1968 to 1971, he was the first Fellow of the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies (a cross-disciplinary venture that fostered collaboration among artists, scientists, and engineers), where he ultimately became director in 1974. His work can be found in more than 100 public collections worldwide, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Nationalgalerie, Berlin; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Piene divided his time between studios in Groton, Massachusetts, and Düsseldorf until his death in 2014.

Otto Piene, Sundew and Selected Works 1957–2014 is on view from 28 January – 12 March 2016. An illustrated 96-page catalogue will be published on the occasion of the exhibition, featuring essays by Joachim Jäger, Head of the Neue Nationalgalerie, Joseph D. Ketner II, Foster Chair in Contemporary Art at Emerson College, and Michelle Kuo, Editor of *Artforum International*. An opening reception will be held on Thursday, 28 January, from 6-8pm. For more information, please contact:

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