



UNIVERSITÄT
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Call for Applications | International Summer School

**The Myth and Knowledge of Materials:
On the Transformation of Matter across Art History, Sigmar Polke,
and the Present**

Cologne (DE)/Tilburg (NL), September 21–27, 2026

Department of Art History, University of Cologne, and the Anna Polke Foundation, Cologne

Concept: Prof. Dr. Christian Spies (University of Cologne), Dr. Kathrin Barutzki with Elsa Wellmann-Gilcher (Anna Polke Foundation)

A multi-day interdisciplinary exchange will explore the complex uses and transformation of matter in Sigmar Polke's work. Situated within current discourses and in dialogue with artistic positions both before and after Polke, the program examines the material and conceptual dimensions of matter. Rather than treating material as a purely functional support, it is understood as an autonomous carrier of meaning and knowledge, as well as an active agent. Materials are inscribed with myths, narratives, and codes that are themselves subject to historical change, while also operating within symbolic, religious, economic, and social contexts.

Polke's diverse and experimental use of materials—ranging from silk, cinnabar, and gold leaf to toxic chemicals and silver compounds, industrial decorative fabrics—serves as a starting point for reexamining both the material and conceptual dimensions of his work. In dialogue with historical precedents and contemporary positions, the program investigates underlying material practices, concepts, and aesthetics, addressing questions of production and reception across historical periods. Particular attention is given to the significance of the exhibition site and commission context for the interpretation of site-specific material use in art scholarship. The project aims to move beyond traditional art-historical concepts of matter and to develop and incorporate new, interdisciplinary approaches that address the transformative and active potential of materials in art.

There are three focal areas: (1) tracing and reflecting on the traditions in which artistic materials have been situated for centuries, and through which they have been symbolically charged and repeatedly reactivated in different contexts; (2) analyzing materials in their specific states and processual properties, incorporating perspectives from conservation science; and (3) examining the activating potential of matter—as both a carrier of knowledge and an aesthetic element—that engages the viewer in the work and evokes emotions, for example in reflection or by deconstructing the work itself through transparency.

Program

The Summer School is divided into two phases. The first takes place in Cologne (DE) and includes research in the archive and library of the Anna Polke Foundation, as well as excursions to Museum Ludwig (Cologne), Museum Abteiberg (Mönchengladbach), and the Ruhr Museum (Essen), among others. The second phase takes place in Tilburg (NL), where the exhibition *Sigmar Polke. The Knowledge of Colors* (De Pont Museum, September 19, 2026–February 28, 2027) offers participants the opportunity to engage directly with Polke's artworks. The show is a joint exhibition by De Pont Museum and Anna Polke Foundation. Current research questions related to the outlined themes are explored through participant contributions (e.g., presentations, poster sessions, guided readings, or artistic projects), along with close reading sessions, group discussions, and examinations of original works. Experts from various fields, such as art history, exhibition practice, education, and conservation science, will contribute to the discussion by offering insights into their respective areas of expertise.

Application

The call is open to advanced master's students and doctoral candidates in art history, art education, curatorial studies, conservation science, cultural studies, artistic research, philosophy, comparative literature, aesthetics, and related disciplines.

Please submit your application materials (German/English) by **May 10, 2026**, to: mail@anna-polke-stiftung.com.

- **CV** (max. 1 page)
 - **Project outline** (max. 1 page)
- Proposed contributions should engage thematically and/or methodologically with the central topics of the Summer School and may adopt transdisciplinary or experimental approaches. Projects focusing on modern and contemporary art—including work on Sigmar Polke—are welcome, as are those with a broader historical scope.

The Summer School will be conducted in English and German. International applications, including proposals in English, are expressly encouraged.

If accepted, participants will receive partial support for travel (flights and train) and accommodation.

For further information, please contact Dr. Kathrin Barutzki at barutzki@anna-polke-stiftung.com.

The Summer School is part of *Sigmar Polke: Athanor NOW* (sigmar-polke-athanor-now.com) and is additionally supported by Cologne Summer Schools.