



Emma Kunz Cosmos

A Visionary in Dialogue with Contemporary Art

2 March - 24 May 2021
Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland

The fascination with Emma Kunz (1892 - 1963) has never been greater than it is today. This is apparent in the works of the fifteen international artists who engage in a dialogue with her in the exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus. Much that the researcher, healer and artist from Aargau anticipated with her holistic way of thinking is now taken for granted in contemporary art. *Emma Kunz Cosmos* shows sixty works by the pioneer, including numerous unknown drawings.

'My images are intended for the 21st century,' Emma Kunz is once said to have predicted. The augury of the researcher, naturopath and artist from Brittnau in the Canton of Aargau seems to be coming true: Emma Kunz's drawings, presented to the public for the first time in the Aargauer Kunsthaus in 1973, have been shown in such places as Venice, Munich, London, Tel Aviv and Hong Kong over the past few years, and are celebrated by an international audience. Many artists are also interested in Emma Kunz. Both inside and outside of Switzerland, they see her as a formative figure. They engage with Kunz's drawings, made with pendulum, compass and ruler, or with her work as a researcher; they refer to her healing and clairvoyant abilities or to her holistic approach in understanding humanity, nature and art as a continuum. Living a secluded life far removed from the art scene, eighty years ago she exemplified an expanded concept of art, rejected the idea of art versus non-art and instead opened it up to a wide range of aspects - research, medicine, nature study and the supernatural, the magical, the visionary.

Holistic thinking and dealing with the invisible are enjoying a boom in contemporary art. Art and science are coming ever closer together. The human-centred image of the world that predominates in western thought appears somewhat passé, and a preoccupation with natural forces is seen as one of several possible new perspectives. The question of art's ability to heal - not least as part of Joseph Beuys's legacy - is no longer raised only in an art-therapeutic context, but also in a social one. In a pandemic that is defining all areas of life, this question could not be more topical. Natural healing long ago cast off its divisive reputation: we keep body and mind fit with holistic concepts of food and living, with

*Aargauer Kunsthaus
Aargauerplatz, CH-5001 Aarau
T +41 (0)62 835 23 30
F +41 (0)62 835 23 29
kunsthau@ag.ch
www.aargauerkunsthau.ch

meditation and yoga, and esotericism has shed its dusty image. We can therefore conclude: the twenty-first century is ready for Emma Kunz. The exhibition *Emma Kunz Cosmos* in the Aargauer Kunsthaus takes both, fascination and attention, as its theme. The dialogue with works of contemporary art creates a convergence and a contextualisation that go beyond Kunz's visual creations and shed a new light on the work of this personality as a whole.

The work of Emma Kunz forms the conceptual core of this group exhibition. With selected drawings, whose existence was unknown until recently, the knowledge about Emma Kunz's graphic work is completed. Furthermore, the analysis of unprocessed source material allow us to take a more complex view of the artist than the prevailing one, around which so many myths have grown. Interviews with eyewitnesses, photographic material from the estate, press reports and historic film material have been prepared to point out how the reception and resonance of Kunz's works in the art world has changed in the decades since their first public presentation in the Aargauer Kunsthaus in 1973. Fifteen national and international, contemporary artists are presenting their works in an enhanced confrontation with the influence of Emma Kunz. Many of these works have been created especially for the exhibition in Aarau. They encompass a great variety of media and clearly reach beyond the formal visual and aesthetic level of the drawings. The frame of reference contains specific themes from Emma Kunz's field of activity as well as her personality and working method. The networks of lines in Emma Kunz's drawings symbolise the cosmos that the exhibition opens up from a resolutely contemporary perspective.

The artists and their works

Emma Kunz (1892 in Brittnau/CH - 1963 in Waldstatt/CH) was born into humble conditions in Brittnau in the Canton of Aargau. She never had any artistic training or higher education of any kind. She worked in a knitting mill and later, in the summer months, as housekeeper to the painter Jakob Friedrich Welti (1871-1952) in Lungern and Engelberg. In Brittnau Emma Kunz lived with two of her sisters, unmarried as she was. Emma Kunz is said to have become aware of her special clairvoyant and radiaesthetic [radiation-reading] abilities at an early age. She began to heal her first patients and to work with the divining pendulum that she would use in her drawings from 1938 onwards. Until a few years before her death she produced some 500 characteristic drawings on graph paper, which she used as a tool for her healing activity. She also worked with numerology, researched in the field of herbalism and achieved a legendary series of healing successes. At this time she began to ask her acquaintances to call her 'Penta'. In 1942 Emma Kunz is said to have discovered Aion A, the healing rock that is still available from Swiss pharmacies, in a quarry in Würenlos that had been used since Roman times - and is known today as the Emma Kunz Grotto. She is said to have used this substance to heal Anton C. Meier - the son of the owner of the quarry - of polio. Meier later became the administrator of Emma

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Kunz's estate, and built the Emma Kunz Centre on this spot. It also includes the Grotto, which Emma Kunz valued as a 'place of strength'. The Centre opened in 1986; until today it remains home to the main collection of drawings, and looks after the mining and distribution of Aion A. In 1951 Kunz moved to Waldstatt in Appenzell, not least because as a naturopath she had come under pressure by the cantonal authorities. She continued to work intensely in her self-built home; in 1953 she published two books about her drawings, and in the same year attracted attention with an experiment for which she 'polarised' marigolds with her pendulum. As a result, the 'mother blossom' was joined by a number of 'daughter blossoms', a phenomenon of which she had photographs taken. Emma Kunz died in 1963 at the age of 71, probably from cancer. Apart from the publications mentioned above, no written explanations by Kunz have been handed down to us. The knowledge to which the reception of her work refers comes primarily from reports by eye witnesses collected by Harald Szeemann and Heiny Widmer, her first and most important advocates, ten years after her death.

Agnieszka Brzeżańska (b. 1972 in Gdańsk/PL, lives in Warsaw) is interested in the mystical as it is found in everyday life. In her paintings, photographs and films she explores allusions to physics, astronomy, theosophy and mathematics. Emma Kunz is a recurring reference in her work. In Aarau, alongside a series of existing works, she is showing new paintings that visualise the birth horoscopes of people important to her.

Dora Budor (b. 1984 in Zagreb/CO, lives in New York/USA) creates reactive machines whose shapes - in indirect relation to Emma Kunz's drawings - are guided by invisible forces. Budor is equally inspired by science fiction and its staging in cinema and the overwhelming hybridisation of nature by human beings. The exhibited work comes from the *Origin* series and resembles a cross between a nature-studies display, a laboratory incubator and an industrial test chamber. In its inner enclosure it periodically emits dust and pigments whose colours and movement recall the atmosphere of William Turner's historical paintings.

Sirah Foighel Brutmann & Eitan Efrat (both b. 1983 in Tel Aviv/IL, live in Brussels/BE) propose poetic re-evaluations of historiography in their collaborative work. They create spatial and temporal experiences that refer to film and architecture, and develop their own audiovisual languages, which do not generally follow linear narratives. Taking as their starting-point the film *The Magic Mountain*, on which the artist duo collaborated with the British author and fier Daniel Mann, they further explore material about the Emma Kunz Grotto in Würenlos and Kunz's marigold experiments.

Athene Galiciadis (b. 1978 in Altstätten/CH, lives in Zürich) is passionate about translating old traditions and craft techniques into contemporary art. To achieve this she uses a great variety of materials, from wood to Plexiglas, to develop a geometrical formal language of her own. In 2018 she published *An Acrylic Glass Pyramid and Three Pendulums Attached to a Triangle on a Table*, for which she engaged with Emma Kunz's method of drawing and converted it into a digital procedure. Based on this publication Galiciadis is making a new installation (*Traces*, 2021) for the Aarau exhibition, in which linear forms are inscribed in the plaster on the wall like artifacts of an unknown time and culture.

Florian Graf (b. 1980 in Basel/CH, lives in Basel) has - since 2016 and under the label *FG Artists Service Group* - offered various services including some of a spiritual and psychological nature. In this way he reflects upon the curious roles of artists in our society. In his latest work these offerings, captured in around eighty visualised concepts, mirror the practice of Emma Kunz against the background of an extended concept of art as we understand it today.

Joachim Koester (b. 1962 in Copenhagen/DK, lives in Copenhagen and New York/USA) investigates - starting from events in mysticism and the occult as well as surreal moments in our cultural and social history - the ways in which our shared histories are established. He weaves facts and fictions, reality and myth together into his conceptually-based works. In *Tarantism* (2007) he explores the Southern Italian folk dance, the Tarantella. Its origins are based on the idea that the bite of a tarantula prompts a compulsive need to dance. The film screening is complemented by photographs in which Koester documents praying mantises, which are supposedly able to connect with the mind of the person observing them.

Goshka Macuga's (b. 1967 in Warsaw/PL, lives in London/GB) attention is particularly drawn to influential women such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, to whom the sculpture entitled *Madame Blavatsky* (2007) is dedicated. In her installations, filled with historical and theoretical references, Macuga addresses the question of what an alternative historiography might look like. Apparently solid knowledge becomes unstable. She is interested in Emma Kunz as a visionary who has received little acknowledgment during her lifetime, a fact to which Macuga refers in her newly created work.

Shana Moulton (b. 1976 in Oakhurst/USA, lives in New York and California) investigates the interaction of consumer culture with the diverse manifestations of spirituality in the 20th and 21st centuries. She works with the aesthetic of products from the fields of 'wellness', health and cosmetics. In her videos and installations she places herself in the role of her alter ego Cynthia, who moves in an over-aestheticised world of self-optimisation. In her video work *Restless Legs Saga* (2012), the protagonist suffers from Restless Legs Syndrome, and seeks a remedy in pharmaceutical advertising, finding it in the healing mineral Aion A, discovered by Emma Kunz.

Rivane Neuenschwander (b. 1967 in Belo Horizonte/BR, lives in São Paulo) involves the public in spontaneous, participatory experiments, seeking to encourage a collective consciousness of social phenomena. At the same time she explores the consequences of chance, control and collaboration within specific thematic areas such as language, geography and social interaction. In the large group of works entitled *The Name of Fear* she takes drawings in which children have depicted their anxieties and turns them into protective, 'healing' capes. For Aarau, she has worked with local schools to create a new chapter in this complex of works.

Mai-Thu Perret (b. 1976 in Geneva/CH, lives in Geneva) combines feminist politics with literary texts and crafts with a 20th-century avant-garde aesthetic. Her work is multidisciplinary and installation- and performance-based. Her central concepts include social utopias, fiction and reality, as well as authenticity and autonomy. Perret frequently engages with

historical artistic figures, just as she does with the creative work of Emma Kunz. For this exhibition, she is making a new neon work, in which she refers to a drawing by Emma Kunz.

Lea Porsager (b. 1981 in Frederikssund/DK, lives in Copenhagen) is showing the immersive 3D animation and installation *COSMIC STRIKE* (2018). In it, she explores the intersections between quantum theory and spiritual paradigms - a surprising combination. Her artistic practice is strongly influenced by scientific concepts involving energies, spiritual cosmologies, occult practices and feminism. She uses media such as film, sculpture, photography and text in her works.

Tabita Rezaire (b. 1989 in Paris/FR, lives in Cayenne/FG) brings media art, activism and technology policy together with the theories of Kundalini yoga. Her holistic practice is devoted to the concept and activity of healing at the meeting-point between digital technology and spirituality. Rezaire describes her works as attempts at 'de-colonial healing', with which she attempts to break through colonial and hegemonic western logic, particularly in the digital world.

Mathilde Rosier's (b. 1973 in Paris/FR, lives in Burgundy) works take a vital interest in ancient rites and rituals, exploring their physical and psychical experience. She combines painting, film, dance and theatre to create situations that cannot be conveyed through language. For her most recent works, she transfers this activity to the relationship between humanity and nature, and presents paintings and drawings in which mystical representations of animals and nature are presented as agents within a parallel reality.

Lauryn Youden (b. 1989 in Vancouver/CA, lives in Berlin/DE) captures traces of her performance ceremonies in her objects and texts. In them, she engages with modern western medicine as well as the practices of alternative healing. Her staging of these healing practices provides a feminist-influenced vision of the history of medicine. In the courtyard of the Aargauer Kunsthaus, she is making an installation that connects with the 'place of strength' that is the Emma Kunz Grotto.

Curator

Yasmin Afschar, Curator, Aargauer Kunsthaus

Curatorial Assistance

Sabrina Negroni, Curatorial Intern, Aargauer Kunsthaus
Bettina Mühlebach, Assistant Curator, Aargauer Kunsthaus

Publication

To coincide with the exhibition *Emma Kunz Cosmos* there will be a comprehensive publication (D/E), contextualising the extended subject area as well as the exhibited works. Introductory essays address the history of the reception of Emma Kunz in the context of the times (by Yasmin Afschar) as well as spirituality and esotericism as a phenomenon in contemporary art (by Lars Bang Larsen). The essay by Elise Lammer suggests a contemporary and at the same time fictional approach towards Emma Kunz. Interviews with the contemporary artists reflect the backgrounds to the works on display.

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The book will be published in early March 2021 by Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, Zürich, and designed by Atlas Studio. Edited by Yasmin Afschar, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau. CHF 49.- / CHF 42.- for members of Aargau Art Society

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Media Preview

Friday, 26.2., 10.30 am - 4 pm

Individual visits of the exhibition for media professionals, by appointment only. Curator Yasmin Afschar will be available for questions and interviews.

Information and registration: christina.omlin@ag.ch

Due to the current situation, there will be no media conference.

Events

Events may change due to the current situation. Kindly consult our website www.aargauerkunsthaus.ch for updates before your visit. All events are upon registration, admission restricted.

Emma Kunz today - Special Programme for Finissage

Saturday 22.5.

A day based entirely around the idea of Emma Kunz's topicality in contemporary art - with performances, tours of the exhibition with the artists and a podium discussion with the most important experts

Details about the events named above as well as the complete accompanying programme will be communicated on our website and in the Newsletter.

Aargauer Kunsthaus opening times

Tuesday - Sunday 10.00 am - 5.00 pm, Thursday 10.00 am - 8.00 pm
Closed Monday

Holiday opening times

Open 10.00 am - 5.00 pm: Maundy Thursday 1.4., Good Friday 2.4., Easter Sunday 4.4., Easter Monday 5.4., Labour Day 1.5., Ascent 13.5., Whitsun 23.5., Whit Monday 24.5.

Pictorial material

Pictures are available for download on our website www.aargauerkunsthau.ch
> **Media.** Please respect picture credits.

For further information:

Yasmin Afschar, Curator, Aargauer Kunsthaus

Tel. +41 (0)62 835 57 52, E-Mail: yasmin.afschar@ag.ch

Christina Omlin, Communication Aargauer Kunsthaus

Tel. +41 (0)62 835 44 79, E-Mail: christina.omlin@ag.ch