

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

Emma Kunz: Visionary Drawings

Muzeum Susch, Zernež
26th July–10th November

by JENNIFER MUNDY

This absorbing and intriguing exhibition, shown first at the Serpentine Gallery, London (23rd March–19th May), where this reviewer saw it, invites a reconsideration of our everyday definitions of art. At first sight, the fifty or so works by Kunz (1892–1963) look like examples of a rather upbeat geometric abstraction; and, despite a superficial resemblance to kaleidoscope patterns or Spirograph drawings, their intricate webs of pencil and crayon lines repay close observation. Kunz, however, never considered her pieces works of art or herself an artist. For her, the drawings were maps or visualisations of energy fields and she saw herself as a healer and researcher into nature.

The exhibition aims to overcome this dichotomy through an open-minded approach that suggests such distinctions hardly matter. Part of the show's appeal lies in its invitation to rethink the curatorial decisions that have led to Kunz's drawings being validated as works of art, a process that began a decade after her death and which have led, half a century later, to the current exhibition, the first in the United Kingdom. It also asks viewers to consider their position in relation to esoteric beliefs in energy fields and divinatory practices.

Kunz was born in rural Switzerland, where she spent nearly all her life. As a teenager she felt herself to be gifted with telepathy and the power of prophecy, and produced some drawings that are remarkably similar to her later work (her family were weavers and this may have predisposed her towards linear patterns). She began to practice as a healer and naturopath, making medicinal salves and tinctures from plants she grew in her garden, and offering her services for free to those who sought her out. She became a part-time housekeeper and later companion in the household of the naturalist painter Jakob Friedrich Welti until 1939, although there is no suggestion that this exposure to art influenced

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her, except perhaps to strengthen her view that her drawings did not qualify as such. With no training in art or engagement with current artistic trends, she made her first large-scale drawing in 1938, aged forty-six, using supplies of metre-wide rolls of graph paper provided by the grateful family of a child she cured. In total she made over four hundred drawings, always on graph paper and working only with pencils and crayons. None was seen outside her home in her lifetime.

21. Marigolds polarised, by Emma Kunz. 1953. Photograph. (Courtesy Emma Kunz Zentrum; exh. Muzeum Susch, Zernez).

For Kunz, the drawings constituted mystic responses to questions that she posed as she set to work. Focusing on a specific question, she would hold her jade and silver pendulum above the sheet of graph paper on a table and quickly mark with a pencil where it swung in response to her energy and the energies of her environment. Working fast and without calculation, she connected these points, presumably using a ruler, and repeated the

process, using pencils and coloured crayons. So intense was this procedure that her drawing sessions reportedly could last for up to twenty-four hours without a break.

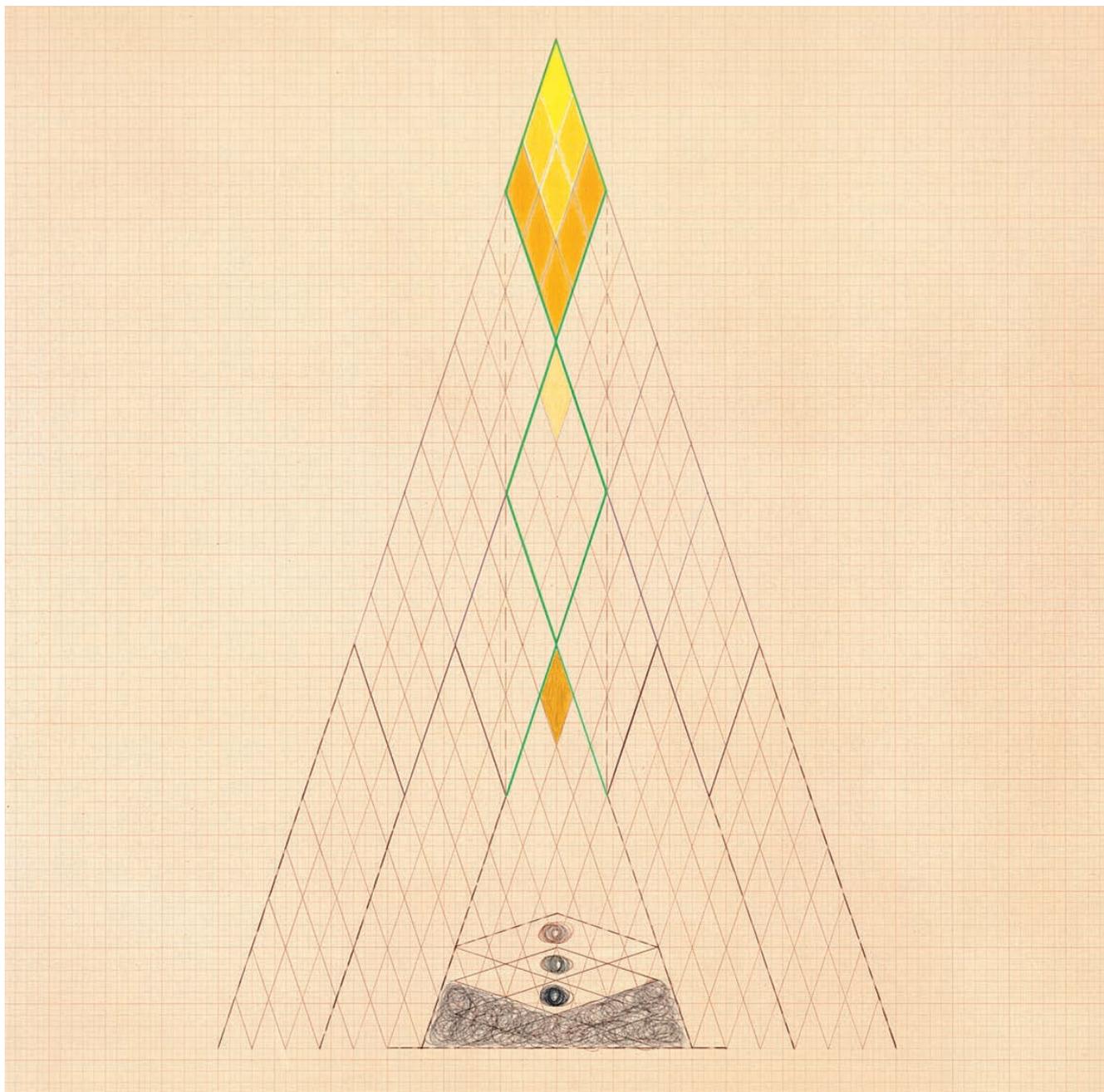
The use of a pendulum to answer questions is an ancient divinatory practice, but in adopting it Kunz may have been responding to the burgeoning interest throughout Europe in the 1930s in dowsing, with either a rod or a pendulum. This practice was rebranded '*radiesthésie*' (meaning sensitivity to rays) by Abbé Bouly in 1930, with the aim of making it more acceptable to religious and scientific communities. It became rather fashionable and there were many conferences on this subject throughout Europe, including one in Lausanne in 1934 on its medical applications chaired by the physicist Édouard Branly, better known for his work in wireless telegraphy. According to a female friend, she and Kunz practised dowsing with a pendulum around 1930, aiming to locate subterranean watercourses and healing forces within the landscape. Apparently, in 1953, Kunz also used her pendulum to attempt to affect the growth patterns of plants, creating marigolds with multiple blooms by 'polarising' their energies (Fig.21).

Interpreting these pendulum-inspired drawings is challenging, to say the least. The questions that prompted her drawings are unknown, although some at least seem to have sought predictions about the outcomes of world affairs. Kunz could talk with clients and friends for several hours about the meanings of a single drawing – each shape had a precise if multi-layered significance – but she refused to be recorded or for notes to be taken, and her understanding of what her



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drawings meant is now lost to us. The consequent risk of misreading her work is illustrated by the tale of the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann's inclusion of Kunz's *Work 104* (Fig. 23) in his 1975 exhibition *The Bachelor Machines*:¹ for Szeemann, it was a feminine riposte to Duchamp's representation of the relationship of the sexes in the *Large Glass* (1915–23),

22. Work No. 190, by Emma Kunz. Undated. Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 100 by 103 cm. (Courtesy Emma Kunz Zentrum; exh. Muzeum Susch, Zernez).

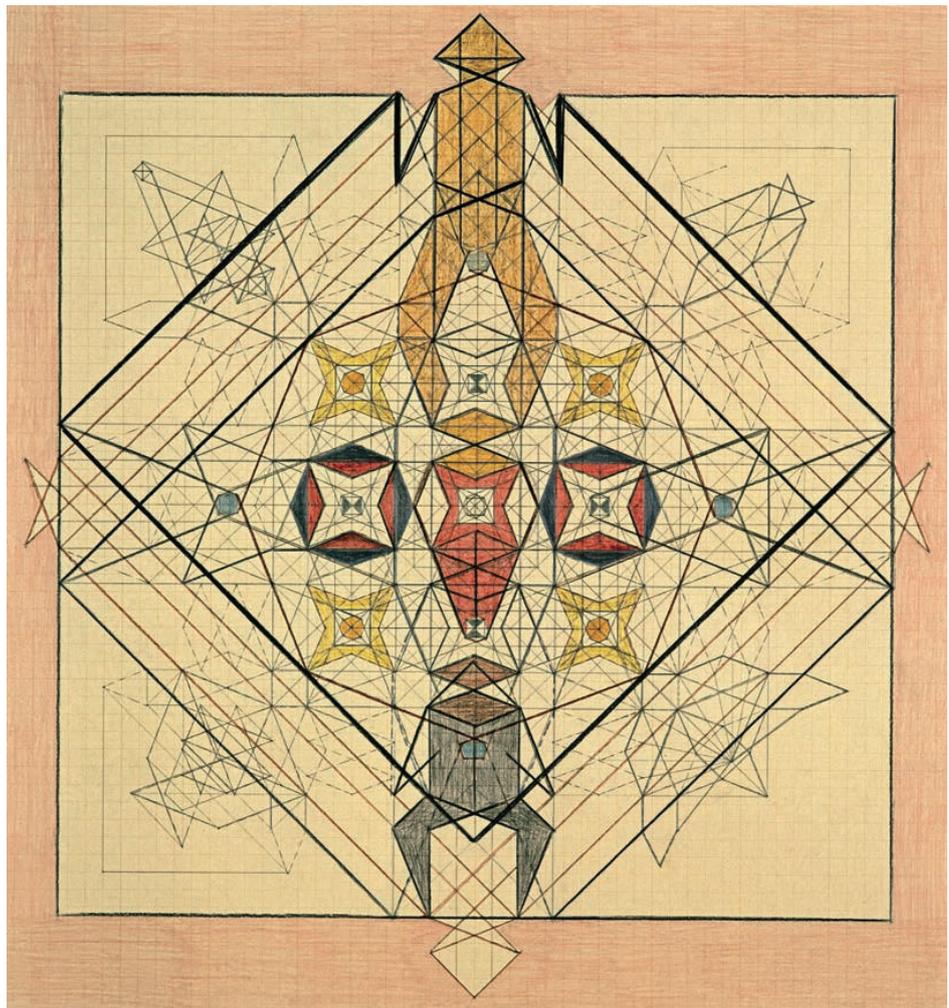
whereas Kunz reportedly saw the personages as representing not a man and a woman but China and Africa. Believing it important to share her drawing methods with the world, she self-published a very short book titled *New Method of Drawing* in 1953,² but the language of its two-page text is too esoteric to help much with prosaic questions about method and meaning.

Equally, biographical and object-based lines of enquiry offer few handholds. Her drawings are untitled as well as undated; and her work shows no stylistic progression. She worked alone and in isolation from artists, and, as far as we know, had no knowledge of the pioneers of abstraction, or, indeed, the geometric symbols and ornamentation found in other cultures.

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Her lack of training suggests that she could be seen as a naive or 'outsider' artist, but such labels sit uneasily with her therapeutic work and her use of her drawings for diagnostic purposes (when talking with a client, she would select from the store of works a drawing that she felt reflected the energy issues underlying the person's illness and set this down on the table between them as part of her practice as a healer). The unpremeditated nature of her drawing practice is arguably reminiscent of drawings by mediums, so admired by the surrealists in the interwar period. But while Kunz believed that she was in communication with energies and an intelligence beyond the appearances of the visible world – 'everything happens in accordance with a specific system of law, which I feel within me, and which never allows me to rest'³ – she did not claim to be channelling messages from a spirit world.

The interpretative context most often brought to bear to Kunz's work today, and one that has the potency to help reshape art history's account of Modernism, is that of spiritual abstraction. The shows in London in 2016 of the work of the spiritualist artists Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) and Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), for example, evidence a curatorial and popular thirst for the work of hitherto dismissed female practitioners,⁴ as well as a renewed tolerance for belief



23. *Work 104*, by Emma Kunz. Undated. Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 59 by 56 cm. (Courtesy Emma Kunz Zentrum; exh. Muzeum Susch, Zernež).

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systems that previously would have been considered irrational and as such beyond the pale.

Such belief systems are neither new nor rare in modern art. They underpinned the work of many major male twentieth-century artists in ways that have been generally forgotten or quietly marginalised as beyond the competence of art historians or curators to discuss. But with spirituality a buzzword today and the current re-examination of the exclusionary biases of art's histories, particularly around women artists, the show's organisers willingly highlight Kunz's role as a healer. In her catalogue essay, for example, Bice Curiger points to a parallel with Joseph Beuys as shaman and suggests links between the inclusion of Kunz's drawings

in exhibitions in the 1970s and the counter-culture beliefs of the period.

In this context, Kunz's discovery in 1942 of what she saw as the healing and regenerative powers of a rock found in an old Roman quarry is important. She named the mineral AION A, meaning 'without limitation', and began to promote its use in powder form for the relief of pain and for daily health. To this day the powder is sold in Swiss pharmacies. The artist Christos Panayiotou, who helped conceive the exhibition, designed gallery benches made using the stone from this particular quarry so that visitors would have the opportunity to experience its energy.

This quiet but effective gesture seems a valuable and necessary reminder of Kunz's belief system as

a valid and arguably principal route into understanding her work. It also fits well with the Serpentine's ongoing General Ecology project, a 'cross-disciplinary investigation into complexity, the environment, the rights of nature, as well as consciousness and communication across vegetable, human and animal species'.⁵ But, in its open embrace of the irrational aspects of Kunz's work, the show raises some questions. Is something lost, as well as gained, in positioning Kunz as an artist rather than, as she believed, a researcher? Should her beliefs and her practice as a healer simply be presented as colourful background, or be scrutinised critically and situated carefully in an historical context of esoteric practices? What, exactly, was, or is, the value of her 'research'? Interpretations of Kunz's work will perhaps always be as varied as her audiences but what has been missing to date is an assessment of her beliefs. Kunz's very last drawing was of diamond patterns within triangles, of which she wrote, 'With this last picture I have opened the seventh chamber of the pyramid. My researches are now finished' (Fig.22).⁶ This rare and tantalising comment by Kunz suggests that there is perhaps still more to be learned about the context of her spiritual beliefs and the value of her drawings as something other than art.

1 H. Szeemann and J. Clair, eds: exh. cat. *The Bachelor Machines*, Bern (Kunsthalle), Venice (Biennale), Brussels (Palais des Beaux-Arts), Düsseldorf (Städtische Kunsthalle), Paris (Musée de l'Homme), Malmö (Konsthall) and Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum), 1975–76.

2 The text's alternative title was *The Miracle of Creating Revelation: Design and Form as Measure, Rhythm, Symbol and Transformation of Number and Principle*.

3 Emma Kunz, quoted on p.11 of the catalogue: *Emma Kunz: Visionary Drawings*. Edited by Melissa Blanchflower and Natalia Grabowska. 124 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Serpentine Galleries, London, 2019), £23. ISBN 978-1-908617-54-5.

4 See. E. Vegelin van Claerbergen and B. Wright, eds: exh. cat. *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, London (Courtauld Gallery) 2016; and E. Enderby and M. Blanchflower, eds: *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen*, London (Serpentine Gallery) 2016. The most recent exhibition of Hilma Af Klint's work, held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, was reviewed by Martha Barratt in this Magazine, 161 (2019), pp.320–23.

5 For more information on General Ecology, see <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/general-ecology>, last accessed 24th June 2018.

6 Blanchflower and Grabowska, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.109.