



Der Kreis  
Mit rechts- und linksdrehendem Viereck  
(The Circle with Right and Left-rotating Squares)  
In Emma Kunz, *New Method of Drawing*, 1953

## K U N Z S E A N C E

Hans Ulrich Obrist

The first artist I met was Hans Krüsi (1920–1995) when my parents took me to Zürich as a child and we came across him on the Bahnhofstrasse selling flowers and drawings – postcard-sized pictures with pastoral scenes and animal motifs. Krüsi was an outsider artist, untaught, obsessively documenting the natural world around him with sound recordings, and filling papers, canvases and notepads with his endless drawing activity. One of my first studio visits, years later, was in his house in Zeneggen, the same town in which I grew up. It was an extraordinary experience: there were thousands of sketches and stencils, and it was clear from his work and the way in which he lived a marginal existence that he channelled his solitude for his creativity.

These encounters with Krüsi mark the beginning of my own fascination with stencils and mark-making. I make ink stamps from my handwriting, often to make dense stamp drawings. These quick, intense bursts of energy are like actions. Krüsi always had dozens of stencils with him that he would press onto pieces of paper. He wrote the date and his address on them, and later, his address was replaced by the image of a cow. He said, 'It's an Andy Warhol time capsule with cows'. He was also fixated on making 'Cow Machines', in which he animated his drawings in a kind of homemade cinema. Inside a box he placed a painted scroll illustrated with pictures of cows, which he would rotate with two handles. The result was like a film strip of cows walking up a hill. He would perform lengthy demonstrations of these 'Cow Machines' in the studio. Krüsi was also influenced by television. He had many obsolete recording devices and cameras with which he would record hours of birdsong, and even cows. His approach and intention was not anthropocentric: he was creating an animal time capsule. He loved birds because they map urban and natural landscapes – those in his garden would migrate to the city in which I studied. Visiting his studio was like entering his own world.

Untouched by any sense of conformity, he navigated intuitively between painting, sound and architecture.

Soon after meeting Krüsi, I came across the work of Emma Kunz (1892–1963), a Swiss healer, researcher and artist. My first encounter was through her healing powder AIONA – a natural remedy we used at home for a range of health benefits. I was fascinated by the idea of the artist as a healer. Kunz's core concerns were health and wellbeing of body and mind, combined with a holistic worldview. She had gifts of telepathy and extra-sensory perception. In her forties she began practising radiesthesia – drawing on to millimetre graph paper guided by her divining pendulum. The large-scale, highly complex and geometric drawings are the result of an experimental process whose roots are not found in a purely aesthetic field, but within the context of spiritualism and healing. She produced over 400 drawings, which were never shown as 'art' in her lifetime; they remained in her home, in her workroom, and were used for her healing practice. However, she self-published two small illustrated books in 1953, expressing her wish to share her drawing techniques with a wider audience, as well as a book of poems, *Leben*, in 1930.

Kunz's extraordinary spiritual abstractions were first seen publicly a decade after her death at the Kunsthaus Aarau (1973), in a solo exhibition curated by Heini Widmer. Among other exhibitions in the 1970s, her work featured in Harald Szeemann's famous group show *The Bachelor Machines* (1975). There was also an important exhibition curated by Suzanne Pagé in 1976 at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In 1992, early on in my career, I was invited by Bice Curiger to co-curate with her and Bernard Marcadé, an exhibition at the Swiss Cultural Institute in Paris. Titled *Oh! Cet, Écho!* it placed Kunz at its centre, from where she was orbited by 45 contemporary artists, including Giovanni Anselmo, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Isa Genzken

and Mike Kelley. This second exhibition in Paris established the next chapter in Kunz's reception, underlining her far-reaching influence on other artists, and identifying the networks and connections that her drawings have with the wider world. We wanted to liberate her work from a view that linked her to Art Brut or naive art, so the exhibition was a configuration of spiritual practices and aesthetic synergies from which we could expand our understanding of Kunz. At that point, she was predominantly typecast as a medium, not as an artist, and the exhibition took her out of this enclave.

In 1942, Kunz discovered a healing rock in a Roman quarry in Würenlos. So strong was her belief in the restorative and positive energy of this stone that she stopped producing other natural remedies. She named this mineral AION A, a Greek term meaning 'without limitation'. She expressed her desire that AION A should be made accessible to all, for mankind to experience the advantages of its magnetic forces. It can be bought in pharmacies across Switzerland, packaged in a box illustrated with the logo that she drew (p. 69). In her lifetime, she continued to visit the site in order to recharge her spiritual energies 'like a battery'. Today, thanks to the founder of the Emma Kunz Zentrum, the late Anton C. Meier, the quarry is now known as the Emma Kunz Grotto and open for visitors to experience the restorative energies of the space. The fine powder can be used for therapeutic purposes, for all forms of pains and rheumatic issues, for daily health, and I myself have a daily ritual of taking AION A and Kunz's herbal essence.

It is interesting that the beneficial effects of AION A can also be seen on plants, when combined with soil. Kunz was known for her abundant herb garden and flower bed. She made experiments with marigolds in her garden, 'polarising' them by swinging her pendulum above the rows of the flowers, and succeeding in getting them to grow additional blooms, an unusual natural feat that baffled scientists (pp. 5/7/9).

I am fascinated by the artists who inspire contemporary practitioners. I have had many conversations over the years with the artist Christodoulos Panayiotou (b. 1978) about Kunz's mesmerising work, and we invited him to collaborate on the research and planning of the Serpentine exhibition and commissioned him to make new work. He has designed benches made of AION A so that visitors can sit on the stone while contemplating the works. In this way, he is transporting

the essence of the Emma Kunz Grotto from Switzerland to London.

It is difficult to approach Kunz's drawings with a purely traditional set of artistic criteria because they are not historically part of the development of abstraction. Abstract art is governed by composition and control, but for Kunz, the drawings are concerned with an aesthetic of rhythms, layers and networks; the drawings need to be understood from the point of view of energy, vibration and flux. The multiplicity that her drawings constitute is not subordinate to one principle; it does not adhere to a master plan. The drawings draw themselves, almost self-generate.

Kunz's work fluctuates; it is in vibration, holding itself between materialisation and dematerialisation. The drawings oscillate like a pendulum between the temptation to evade the surface and levitate, and submit to the laws of gravity. As a trembling phenomenon, the drawings bring us into a field of energy, of intensities. It is through this network of intensities that beauty is suddenly revealed.

The Emma Kunz exhibition follows the Serpentine Galleries' exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen* (2016) curated by Daniel Birnbaum and Emma Enderby. Af Klint (1862–1944) was not self-taught as Krüsi was; nor does she come from an alternative field of healing like Kunz. She was classically trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Stockholm. In the 1880s, af Klint founded a group of female artists called The Five, and collectively they conducted seances with the spirits who communicated with them through images. Their experiments in automaticism pre-date the Surrealists by many years.

Kunz was a spiritualist who became an artist, never having studied art, and af Klint was trained as an artist who turned into a spiritualist. As she put it: 'The pictures were painted directly through me without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict. Nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely without changing a single brush stroke.' She was influenced by art, science and religion in equal measure – from the discovery of her electromagnetic waves to the spiritual teachings of her mentor, Rudolf Steiner, who visited her studio in 1908. The link between af Klint and Kunz is that the seance and ritual is central to their work, and it is emerging again in the practice of contemporary artists utilising and critiquing technologies.

In a seance in 1904, af Klint received a commission to make paintings on the astral plane in order to represent the immortal aspect of man, which became a body of work that she titled *The Paintings of the Temple*. The way in which she worked was in a sense a collaboration. While in the public eye, she continued to make portraits, landscapes and botanical drawings that were exhibited widely; in private, she abandoned traditional methods of representation in favour of painting the invisible and hidden in nature, the spiritual realm and the occult. Even though af Klint and Kunz are distinct, painting the invisible – making the invisible visible, as Paul Klee would say – is the point of contact between them. Kunz also channelled great energy and concentration to make her work, but through her pendulum, sometimes not resting for over twenty-four hours to complete a drawing. Both created work under circumstances that liberated creative control, yet used methods that followed a logic and structure inherent to them.

After first coming across af Klint's work in the catalogue for *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (1986), an exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art curated by Maurice Tuchman, I experienced her paintings in the real, through the lens of another contemporary artist. In 1989, the American artist R.H. Quaytman co-organised a survey of her works at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. Quaytman has said that af Klint stands firmly next to, and on some levels, above Kandinsky. Although their work emanates from different contexts, Quaytman, af Klint and Kunz share affinities with ideas around temporality, the surreal, the unconscious, science and sexuality. Twenty-five years later, at the Serpentine Gallery, when we started to prepare an exhibition of Das Institut – the artist duo Kerstin Brättsch and Adele Röder – we asked them, as we always do whenever we work with artists, to tell us about their inspirations. A few days later, they came back to us with a long list, on top of which was af Klint. It was at that moment that we realised how interesting it would be to show Das Institut's cosmic abstractions at the same time as af Klint's spiritual and astral abstractions. By pairing the two shows, we could highlight the truth of something af Klint herself predicted: that one day she would be cited as a pioneer for future generations.

This leads me to a research strand with Ben Vickers, Chief Technology Officer at the Serpentine Galleries that focuses on an underground movement known as 'algo seance', and which identifies a rise in people attempting to use emerging technology as a medium for spirituality. We are interested in how artists connect with spiritualism today when there is less room for such connections. As Kenric McDowell, who leads the Artists + Machine Intelligence programme at Google Research has stated:

The algo seance is the evocation of spirit contact through technological production, which is really our materialist, technologised civilisational impulse to find consciousness everywhere. As people living in a materialist twenty-first-century culture, we've eliminated contact with spirit from our lives and are looking to technology to reflect consciousness back to us. Our tools become the mirror of a condition that exists everywhere: a mirror of nature. It's us looking into that mirror hoping to find spirit and consciousness through our fetishistic relationship with technology, hoping to find exactly what the materialist worldview has removed from our lives.<sup>1</sup>

Algo seance involves looking for meaning in lines of code, or the output of neural networks, sometimes under the influence of hallucinogens; at other times, simple breathing techniques can suffice in bringing an unseen prophecy to the surface. The ouija board makes way for a machine-learning algorithm, while the crystal ball is replaced by the black mirror of a smartphone screen. In ancient Greece, someone seeking guidance may have turned to an oracle like the one at Delphi – a point of pilgrimage for those seeking help and advice. Today, technology is fulfilling that function – artificial intelligence networks are making predictions about the future based on big data, and digital 'oracles' are determining the truth on the blockchain generated through the use of decentralised prediction markets. These oracles are trusted entities, validating claims about the real world, but in their names – 'Augur,' 'Gnosis' – they hint at a spiritual and hermetic connection that resonates with the deep past, as if to suggest that a summoning of more ancient origins might be in play through the technological progress of the present.

Artist Tabita Rezaire combines virtual reality and CGI technology with traditional African

<sup>1</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ben Vickers, *Field Notes: Algo Seance Rising Spike*, #58 Winter 2019, p. 136.

practices to explore decolonial healing through the politics of technology, race and gender. She has been invited to respond to Kunz's show as part of the accompanying Live Programmes and plans to present a collective ritual in the space of the exhibition. An intersectional preacher, health practitioner, tech-politics researcher and Kemetic/Kundalini Yoga teacher, she uniquely combines a holistic approach to digital healing through her multifaceted practices. She has said

To overcome the disconnection to ourselves, to each other, to the earth and the universe mandated by coloniality, the healing we require is not solely physical nor mental, but emotional, political, historical, technological and spiritual.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tabita Rezaire, *On Healing*, Emma Kunz: Visionary Drawings, (Serpentine Galleries London, Koenig Books: London), 2019 p.65.



