

Rolling concrete



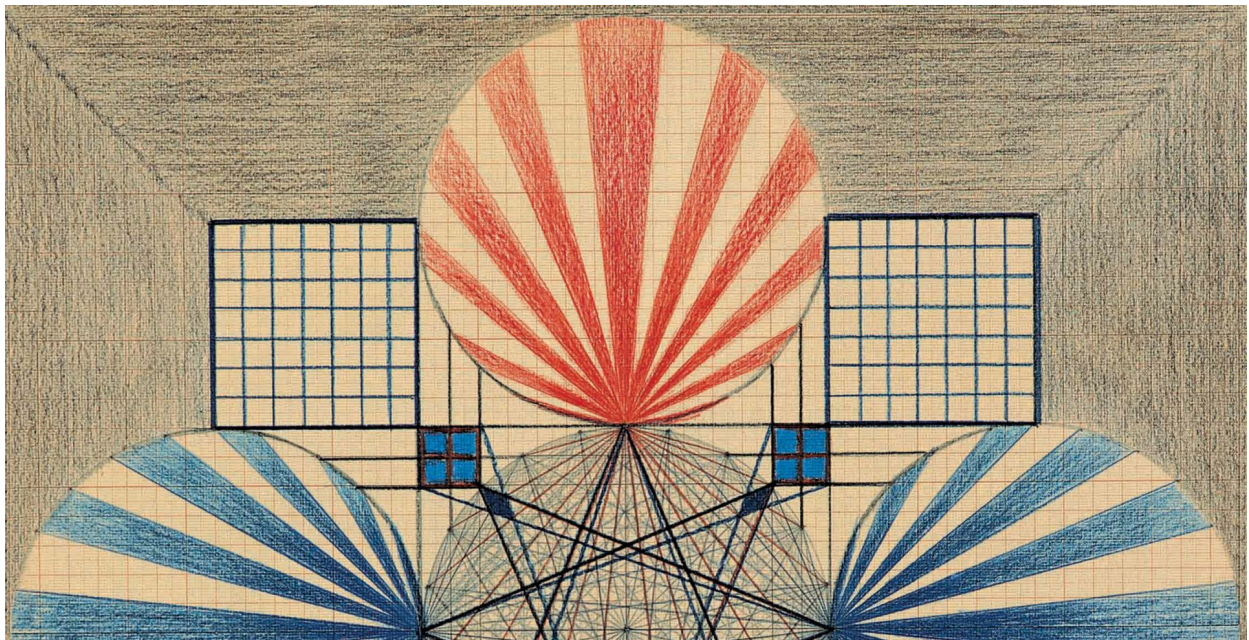
## Emma Kunz: art in the spiritual realm

The Swiss naturopath made her mandala-like drawings for use in healing rituals, but now these cosmically charged works are being drawn into the orbit of the art gallery

### Marjolaine Lévy

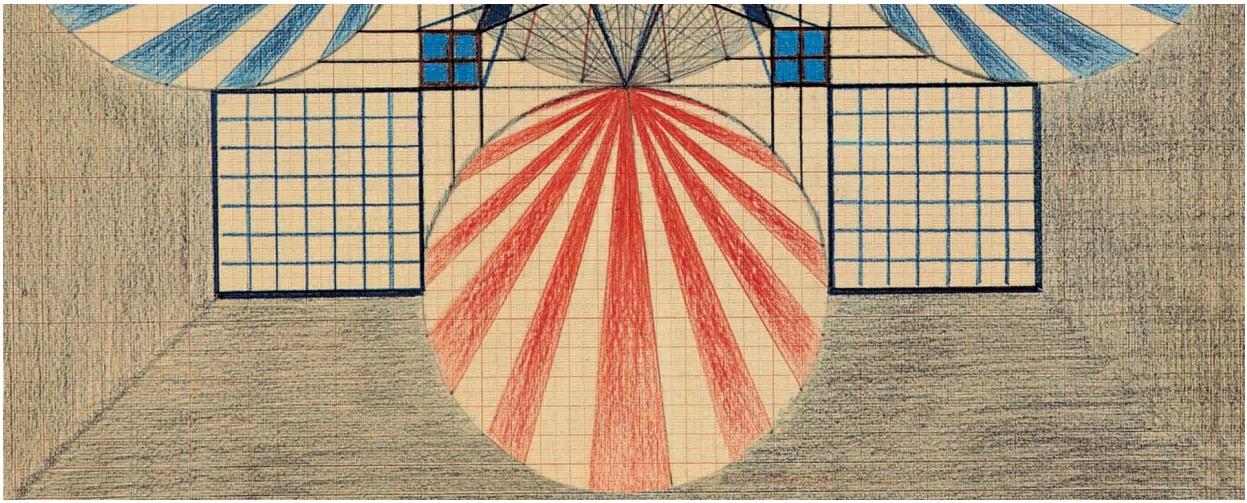
Walking into a Basel pharmacy on a recent trip to Switzerland, I was struck by the packaging of a mysterious drug, called AION A. A long way in style from classic Swiss design and the graphic orthodoxy of drug packaging devised by the art director Max Schmid in the 1950s, this yellow box was covered with a shimmering geometric design, created with colour pencils on graph paper. The legend read 'Emma Kunz: Bild No. 168'. The author of this abstraction was none other than Emma Kunz (1892-1963), a Swiss spiritualist known during her lifetime as a telepathic healer.

In 1941, Kunz discovered an unusual rock in the Roman stone quarry of Würenlos, in Switzerland's Aargau canton. This mineral turned out to be of use in treating rheumatism and inflammation. She called it AION A (aion means 'without limit' in Greek). So, it turned out that the perfectly symmetrical drawing was not the work of an artist but a naturopath born into a family of weavers, whose education hadn't included a spell at a Kunst Akademie.



This website uses cookies. Read our [cookie policy](#) for more information.

OK

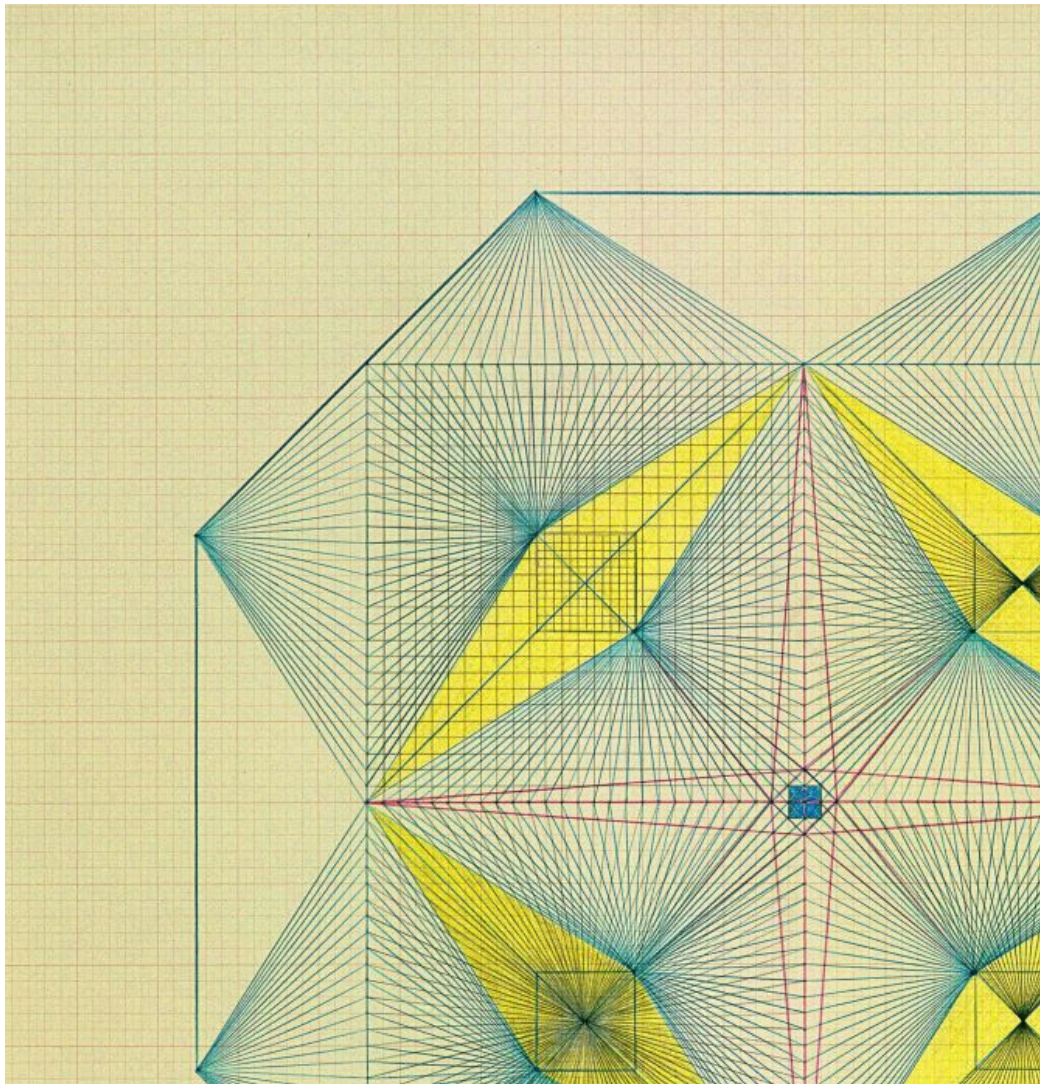


Work No. 396 by Emma Kunz, photo © Emma Kunz Zentrum

I found the same box in the shop at the Serpentine Gallery in London, where 47 drawings by Emma Kunz were on display this spring in *Emma Kunz, Visionary Drawings*, an exhibition curated by the 41-year-old Cypriot artist Christodoulos Panayiotou. Kunz's graphic works are undoubtedly visionary and ahead of their time. Kunz said herself: "My drawings are designed for the 21st century<sup>1</sup>."

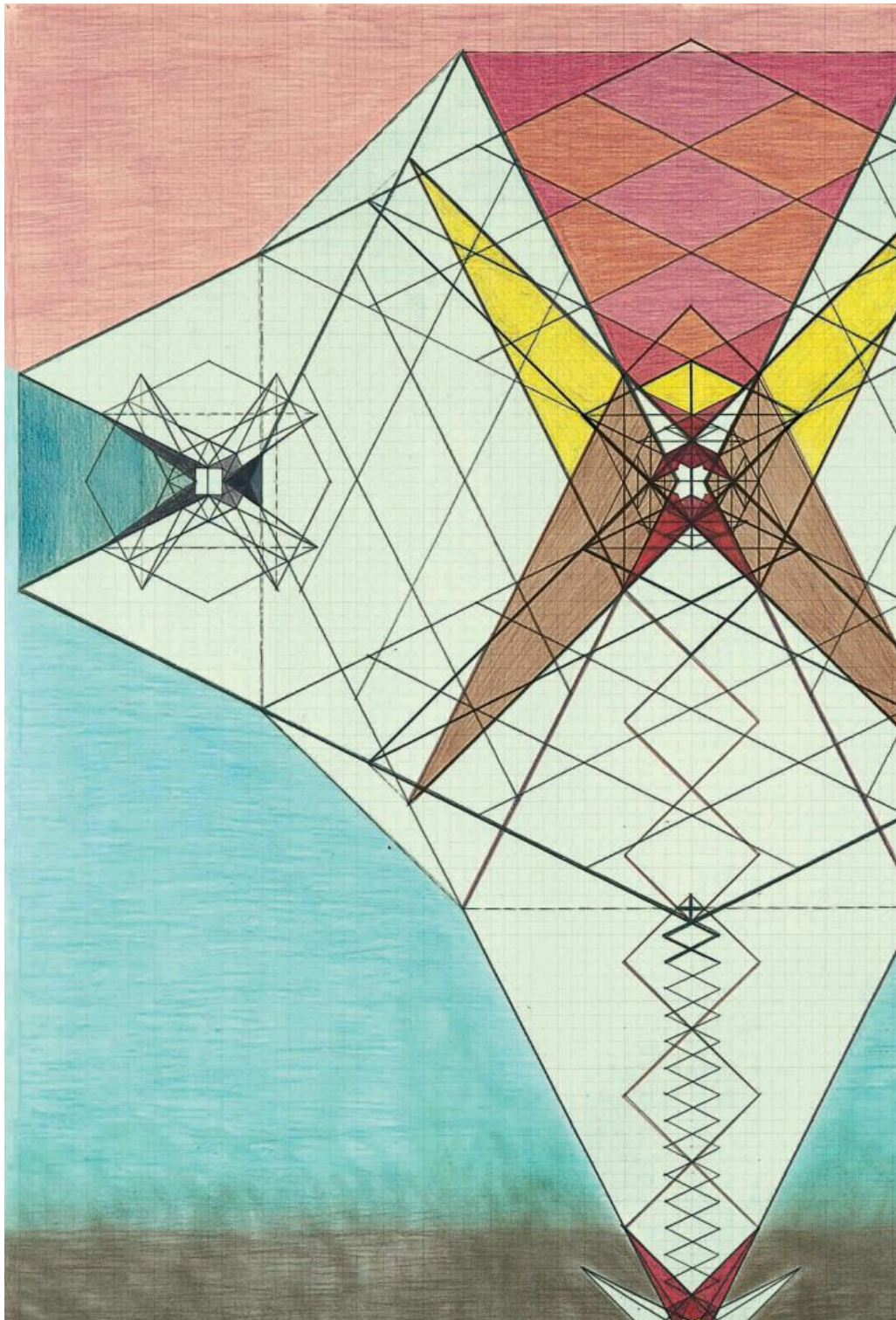
In 1938, the parents of a young boy who Emma Kunz had miraculously healed offered her colour pencils and paper as a thank you. In a little less than 30 years, Kunz made more than 500 drawings. She didn't consider them to be the result of aesthetic endeavour but rather the cornerstone of a healing process. Her method was always the same: well before she got to work with pencils, graphite and ruler, she would place large sheets of blank graph paper on a table. Adopting a drawing technique known as radiesthesia, she would then use a diving pendulum to determine the lines to be drawn and the areas to be coloured. These preparatory sessions, which in their esoteric nature recall the preliminary courses given by the Swiss expressionist Johannes Itten at the Bauhaus, might sometimes last 24 hours.





Kunz defined the complex lines, circles, crosses, pyramids and other geometric shapes that appeared on the paper grid in the manner of mandalas as “shape and form expressed as measurement, rhythm, symbol and transformation of figure and principle”. If in 1911 Kandinsky sought, as the title of his famous book states, to inject *The Spiritual in art*, Kunz puts art into the spiritual. Looking at these colourful diagrams and other parables, the theosophical work of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), considered a pioneer of abstraction, comes to mind. Geometry as a figuration of a spiritual experience may be common to both mediums, but the process of creation is not the same. Hilma af Klint said she produced her works by communicating with what she believed to be higher spirits, who drew through her. For Kunz, there were no messages from the afterlife involved in the making of her work. Instead, she saw the automatic graphic signs as emanating from the invisible forces of the universe. From this point of view, Kunz may be seen to be closer in spirit to the American artists of the Transcendental Painting Group.





By coincidence, Kunz produced her first drawing in the same year the Transcendental Painting Group (1938-1941) was born in New Mexico, bringing together the painters Emil Bisttram, Raymond Jonson, Agnes Pelton and Florence Miller Pierce. As their manifesto states, the challenge of transcendental art is “to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design, to imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual.” Their airbrushed paintings show cosmic abstractions, mixing biomorphic forms and hard-edged lines, with the ambition to “absorb the spectator”. The art of the Transcendental Painting Group, combining both great mathematical precision and the

Modernist abstraction, as forcefully articulated by the influential critic Clement Greenberg, had as its ultimate goal the self-purification of painting in search of its essence and had to remain resolutely at a distance from any spiritualism or transcendentalism. With Kunz, it is not the painting that must be treated by eliminating everything that is not specific to it, but a patient.

At the Serpentine exhibition, viewers could sit on benches made by Christodoulos Panayiotou from the AION A rock that Kunz discovered in 1941. The benches were placed in front of Kunz's drawings, the idea being that spectators would soak up the sculpted rock's healing properties while contemplating Kunz's hypnotic geometries. Did it have the intended effect? Perhaps the drawings had sufficient healing power of their own.



Emma Kunz at her working table, Waldstatt, 1958, Photo © Emma Kunz Zentrum

- 1.“Mein Bildwerk ist für das 21. Jahrhundert bestimmt.” According to several sources, including the Emma Kunz Zentrum in Würenlos, Switzerland, the quote dates from 1941.
- 2. Emil Bisttram, Transcendental Painting Group Manifesto, 1938.
- 3. *Ibidem*
- 4. Bisttram had trained in mathematics at the National Academy of Design in New York.

Related Tags:

emma-kunz   serpentine-gallery   art   marjolaine-lévy

ALSO ON INTERWOVEN - KVADRAT

4 years ago

Doppelgänger

3 years ago

Art for AI

3 years ago

Or  
en

0 Comments

 1 Login ▼

Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

Name

Show all comments

A life in glass