

Amden am Walensee.
Life and Art in an Experimental Mountain
Community in the Early Twentieth Century
Roman Kurzmeyer, 2001

In 1912, the painter Otto Meyer (1885–1933), who had grown up in Bern, returned to Switzerland from Stuttgart, where he had been a master student in the class of Adolf Hölzel (1853–1934) before working as a freelance artist in a small suburb of Stuttgart.¹ When a fellow artist, Hermann Huber (1888–1967), became aware of Meyer's precarious financial situation, he invited him to join him at the farmhouse he had recently moved into at Amden am Walensee. The two artists shared the house for a year until Huber moved into another house in Amden and Meyer became the sole resident. Not only did he remain there until 1928, he even added the name of the village to his own surname. Besides Huber and Meyer-Amden, this mountain village also became home to the painters Willi Baumeister (1889–1955) from Germany and Albert Pfister (1884–1978) from Switzerland. Among Meyer-Amden's visitors was the Swiss artist and teacher Johannes Itten (1888–1967), and the German painters Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) and Johannes Mohlzahl (1892–1965), who spent 1913–14 in Switzerland. In fact, it had been Pfister who first mentioned to Huber that there were various unoccupied houses in Amden, which in those days was part of the Grappenhof *Lebensreform* ("Life Reform") colony. The settlers had been drawn to Grappenhof by the "prophet" Josua Klein (1867–1945), who in 1903 bought a number of farms there in order to establish a place of pilgrimage not only for those in search of God but also for spiritists and occultists.

Baumeister returned to Stuttgart in 1913 following a disagreement with Meyer-Amden and did not visit Amden again until the 1920s. When he learned of Meyer-Amden's death in 1933, he wrote of him in his diary as follows: "Similarity with self-portraits by Van Gogh. Very shabby clothes. Not just his beard, his whole demeanour was odd, also because he hardly spoke. It puzzled me that he was at ease in our circle of friends, because — whereas he was usually serious — we were often quite high-spirited (perfectly harmless) when we met up in a studio, on walks, in cafés, or when we went swimming. Taking every opportunity to be witty, which he greatly enjoyed; later on he even used to join in, making up word games. [...] What few ever attain is that zone of real originality. But he attained it. His aim was that everything he painted or drew would be easy to grasp yet deep. And that his ideas and forms would be 'densely' associative." Oskar Schlemmer, who had corresponded regularly with Meyer-Amden, also spoke highly of him. Having also studied with Hölzel in Stuttgart, Schlemmer first visited the mountain village in 1919 and returned there in 1922, 1924 and 1927. He was teaching at the Bauhaus in Weimar at the time and stayed on as a teacher when it moved to Dessau in 1925. Meyer-Amden, who lived a quiet, but not unworldly life in Amden, was always the most important conversation partner for the much more outgoing Bauhaus teacher. On 15 January 1936, the third anniversary of Meyer-Amden's death, Schlemmer remembered him in his diary: "Now I don't have anyone in whom I can confide my artistic and human secrets, knowing that I will be correctly understood and answered." Some years previously, on a trip to Ticino in the

1 Kai Buchholz et al. (eds), *Die Lebensreform: Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900*. 2 vols., exh. cat., Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt 2001, Band 2, pp. 99–96.

summer of 1927, he had tried in vain to persuade the art-historian Sigfried Giedion, the artist László Moholy-Nagy and the collector Eduard von der Heydt to take an active interest in Meyer-Amden's work. On 18 August of that year Schlemmer wrote to Meyer-Amden as follows: "It seems that the people of Ascona — with their old fogeys, saints, nature apostles and painters — are used to all sorts of things, so that nothing and no-one particularly stands out." And later on in the same letter he adds: "I think you would appreciate this situation." The following year Meyer-Amden gave up his studio in the mountain village and with it his life as a freelance artist and took up a teaching post in Zurich. The arrival of Otto Meyer and his friends and fellow artists Albert Pfister, Willi Baumeister, and Hermann Huber in Amden in 1912 coincided with the departure of Josua Klein and his family. Klein and Max Nopper had founded the Grappenhof *Lebensreform* community in 1902, and since then it had attracted various visitors, including the founders of Monte Verità. Nopper had previously been a captain in the Württemberg Army, but in 1901 together with his family took up residence at Grappen, a property situated below the village of Amden at about 600 metres above sea level. Having returned to Europe in 1901 after an extended stay in the United States, Klein spent three weeks of the summer of 1902 exploring Amden. A private benefactor then provided him with 400,000 Swiss francs to set up his community, which Klein regarded as payment for his having ostensibly helped to cure the mentally ill Prussian Crown Princess, Luise of Tuscany. On his return to Amden in 1903, Klein acquired various properties at some considerable expense. In June and July of 1903 he made thirteen such purchases for a total of 321,850 Swiss francs, and thereupon became the owner of ten residential properties, twenty-three farm buildings and various meadows, fields, and areas of forest. His portfolio also included the Villa Seewarte in the neighbouring lakeshore parish of Weesen. Klein now embarked on building and renovation projects in Grappen and the surrounding area, including the building of a large barn and a community building for the Grappenhof colony lower down in Grappen, and before long was the largest landowner in the village. He travelled to Berlin and commissioned the Jugendstil artist Fidus to design temples to be built at the new settlement. Fidus made a flying visit to Amden and decided to accept the commission. In the autumn of 1903, therefore, he sold up in Berlin and moved to Switzerland. He and his family took up residence in the new building in Grappen, where he started work on plans for the studio building that Klein had promised him and on the stained-glass window *Die Sonnenwanderer* ("Sun Wanderer"), which was to be installed in the meeting room of the new community building. He also made plans for three sacred buildings: a *Tempel der Erde* (Earth Temple), a *Tempel der Eisernen Krone* (Temple of the Iron Crown) and a *Tempel der Tat* (Temple of Action), which he himself described as "temples of undogmatic belief." In November 1903 Klein presented a petition to the authorities requesting that Fidus and his family be granted Swiss citizenship. He also indicated that in return for his request, he would make a donation of one million Swiss francs and construct a chapel to the Virgin Mary designed by Fidus. The parish council approved the application for citizenship, although it was never ratified in a court of law, since Klein was unable to make the promised donation. In early 1904, Klein applied to the parish council for a concession for an electric railway, which was to run from Weesen via Amden to a mountain terminus on Mt. Speer, nearly 2000 metres up. The estimated costs for the 13.7-km-long narrow-gauge railway, which included the track, tunnels, installations, buildings, rolling stock, equipment and a hydroelectric power station, amounted to around five million Swiss francs. Its commercial feasibility was never questioned as to Klein's mind, it was a scheme for the

common good that he would finance. The colony's financial situation was visibly deteriorating, however, and both Fidus and the nationalistic writer Gertrud Prellwitz (one of Klein's first followers) left Grappenhof in anger following a dispute. In 1905, with the community running out of money and the new sponsors not honouring their pledges of support, Klein had no choice but to sell most of the property he owned in Amden. By early 1905, the experimental community had collapsed and in March of that year Klein also sold the Villa Seewarte in Weesen, which was to have been used as an artists' retreat. While Nopper together with his family and some other followers remained in Amden, Klein himself and his family emigrated to the United States. One of the few first-hand accounts of the Grappenhof colony was published by the Zurich journalist Irma Goeringer in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1904, a shorter version of which appeared in the *St. Galler Tagblatt*. Also in 1904, the *Neue Wiener Tagblatt* published an article on the same subject by Max Lesser. Unlike Goeringer, Lesser had not seen Grappenhof with his own eyes. Goeringer's positive, even enthusiastic report on Josua Klein and the aims of his colony in Amden, moreover, was the only account that was not written and published retrospectively, but rather when her encounter with the idealist was still fresh in her mind. Goeringer described Klein as a "man with such an intellect that he has not only absorbed the learning of his own century, but to a certain extent has also made it his own, a man for whom great goodness is an imperative not of the will but of nature and who strives to attain his goal with resolute energy." Goeringer came to this conclusion following conversations not only with Klein's followers and the man himself, but also with outsiders living in the village of Amden. "If I have understood it correctly," she concluded, "the life's work of Josua Klein and of all those who support his cause is this: firstly, to see the self clearly, that is to say, for each person to delve into himself until he has understood his own, innermost imperatives; and for each person to address and work through the laws of all cultures and all knowledge in order to discover the laws according to which he must live and act, and then to arrange his own life accordingly, even if this means throwing over all the conditions and customs of his existence hitherto." In Klein's view, the individual who had come to know himself was duty bound to help others. Anyone suffering ill health or unable to come to terms with his lot, therefore, was welcome to come to Grappenhof for a rest cure. In Goeringer's opinion, Klein did not have a doctrine as such, except perhaps his conviction that each person should come to understand his own individuality. The quality and nature of every human achievement could be measured, in his view, by the willingness with which it was executed and how necessary it was. This, however, had consequences for communal life in Grappenhof: "Aside from one farmhand and a kitchen help, the large family of kindred spirits in Grappenhof has no servants. Each person who lives there finds a household task that he is glad to do. This becomes his role and he continues to carry out this task until, for the sake of variety, he and someone else exchange tasks. Thus, the son of a German chief physician has turned out to be a cook, a young artist has proved to be a skilled chambermaid, and Captain Nopper has become a reliable farmer and an astute manager of practical affairs." Goeringer's report is the only account that chronicles Klein's intention to invite renowned artists to Amden to decorate the planned temples. In addition to this, he had "redesigned his villa by the lake as a retreat for painters, sculptors, and poets in need of complete relaxation or who wanted to concentrate on their art in this isolated spot, without having to deny themselves comfort and luxury. Not that Josua Klein has any intention of accepting any pecuniary compensation from such guests. He prefers the favour to be returned in a practical or ideal manner, not in the form of

silver or gold.”

Max Lesser in Berlin, whose main interest was in Klein’s personality, touched on the settlement only in passing. As far as he was concerned, Klein’s message remained something of a mystery. “It seems that in actual fact he does not feel nearly so spiritualistic, so sublimely other-worldly, for as he says of himself (or as his interpreters say after listening to his profound ramblings), while he is indeed the risen Christ, he is also another, since being born of woman, he has Satan in him. The land that Josua Klein has bought up lies fallow; the community has more than enough to do seeing to its so-to-speak all-consuming economic management.”

Irma Goeringer and Max Lesser judged the Grappenhof settlement according to completely different criteria. The journalist from Zurich clearly had no difficulty accepting the fact that an experiment like the community in Amden would have primarily ideational aims, and hence would always be in need of external support. Lesser, meanwhile, like the German land reformer Adolf Damaschke and other pragmatists in the *Lebensreform* movement, took precisely the opposite view. Since the movement’s aim was in fact social reform, which could arise solely from exemplary self-reform, only projects that were at least self-sufficient were worthy of recognition by other members of the movement. Whatever the case, everything that is known of the history of Grappenhof supports the assumption that Klein never had any intention of turning his settlement into an economically viable enterprise or of working the land with that aim.

In Damaschke’s opinion, the participation of Paul Schirrmeister, who had previously spent three years successfully managing Eden, a “vegetarian fruit-growing colony” near Oranienburg, counts as a gauge of the seriousness of Klein’s experiment. Damaschke knew both Schirrmeister and Fidus from Berlin, where all three had been on the board of the Deutsche Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft (German Garden-City Association) in 1902. The following year, Schirrmeister persuaded Fidus to accept the invitation to design the temples for Grappenhof and to move to Klein’s colony in Amden. Damaschke regarded Schirrmeister’s sudden departure from Amden (probably on 3 July 1904) as a clear portent of the imminent failure of the experiment. In Oranienburg, Schirrmeister had worked with people who wanted to produce their own fruit and vegetables on their own land and to enjoy life in the country with their families. The members of the colony worked at their various occupations during the day, and tended their gardens in the evening. Decisions that affected all the families living there were taken communally. In Amden, however, Damaschke encountered people living together in houses that they did not own, surrounded by fertile land that no-one was farming properly. People only took on the tasks that happened to appeal to them; the sole duty that they all fulfilled was to attend the prolix instructional talks given by Klein. The prevailing view at Grappenhof was that the aim of every human life should be to achieve self-knowledge and self-fulfilment; yet all the decisions affecting the community were taken by a retired army officer who styled himself a farmer, a scion of landowning gentry (with the demeanour to match) with Christological and therapeutic aspirations.

Recalling that time, Nopper wrote that some members of the community had been attracted by what looked like the chance to enjoy the riches on offer there; others came because they hoped that Amden might in fact be the Kingdom of God on Earth. Nopper himself, along with other core members of the community, had tried to explain to them that the only legitimate reason for staying at Grappenhof was the intention to follow the path that Christ had walked as Jesus: a narrow, steep, thorny, arduous path where they would face

countless trials. This picture is very much in keeping with Fidus's account of his time as an architect in Amden, where he wanted to build in stone, only to be faced with Klein's increasingly vehement insistence that he should work on the inner temple. Nopper later suggested that the presence of freeloaders, fraudsters, and traitors among the many visitors to Grappenhof had been expected and even welcomed, since they would present the members of the colony's inner circle with additional trials and temptations, ultimately providing them with their only real chance to fully bear witness to their striving for perfection. There are echoes here of one of the premises of salvation history, namely that Jesus would not have been able to atone for humanity's sins without Judas. Nopper even goes so far as to assert that the failure of the community was planned from the outset.

The sequence of events in Klein's circle is typical not only of early twentieth-century eclecticism, but also of the process of individuation that was already emerging in the industrialized nations of Europe at that time, and that still colours our own time. The diversity of the various utopias articulated in the course of the twentieth century (some of which came very close to being realised) is a sign of the disintegration, rather than the renewal, of grand ideas and all-embracing social aims. This contradiction is particularly striking in the case of the *Lebensreform* movement, since the champions of "Life Reform" believed that a better, altruistic world could be created only if people accepted the necessity of individual reform. In 1939, when Klein was admitted to a psychiatric clinic in Vienna (the ultimate social disgrace at that time), he did not regard the failure of his public efforts as failure at the personal level.

The year before Hermann Huber moved to Amden, he had been to Jerusalem to help Pater Willibrord Verkade of the Archabbey of Beuron paint some murals in the chapter house of the Benedictine Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion. The Dutch artist-monk Jan Verkade, who later changed his name to Willibrord, had been a close friend of Paul Gauguin and a member of the Nabis group before entering the Beuron monastery in 1894—a step that he hoped would supply new inspiration for his painting and that is perhaps comparable with Gauguin's decision to turn his back on European civilization. Huber returned to Switzerland from Jerusalem in June 1910 and spent the following year in Amden with his friend Otto Meyer, during which time he was still very much influenced by what he had experienced working with Pater Willibrord. Meyer-Amden's own art (like that of Fidus, who had lived in Amden a decade earlier) was rooted in Symbolism. Both artists depicted the transfiguration of youth, the sun and nature; Fidus gave these ideas formulaic expression in his *Lichtgebet* ("Light Prayer"), which quickly became a cult-image for followers of the *Lebensreform* movement, and Meyer-Amden portrayed the same ideas in his drawings of nude boys. The difference between the two is apparent in the artistic quality of their work. Whereas Fidus was working on his own pictorial programme, Meyer-Amden spent his life avidly experimenting with pictorial form. Amden had now become a centre of artistic experimentation and was no longer, as in the days of Klein's settlement, a centre for social innovation. Meyer-Amden's pictures of boys perfectly exemplify this. Although his friends Paul Bodmer, Hermann Huber, and especially Eugen Zeller all produced portraits of children, these were mostly early works, whereas Meyer-Amden returned repeatedly to portraits of boys and girls throughout his life. Writing to Huber in 1918, he commented on this as follows: "Aside from very old men and women, I have learnt most from boys. You were still almost a boy when I first met you. I was drawn to your unconscious. And while you were maintaining that beautiful kind of unconsciousness, it was my desire to bring you to an awareness of some things that I was aware of, very gently." Like the

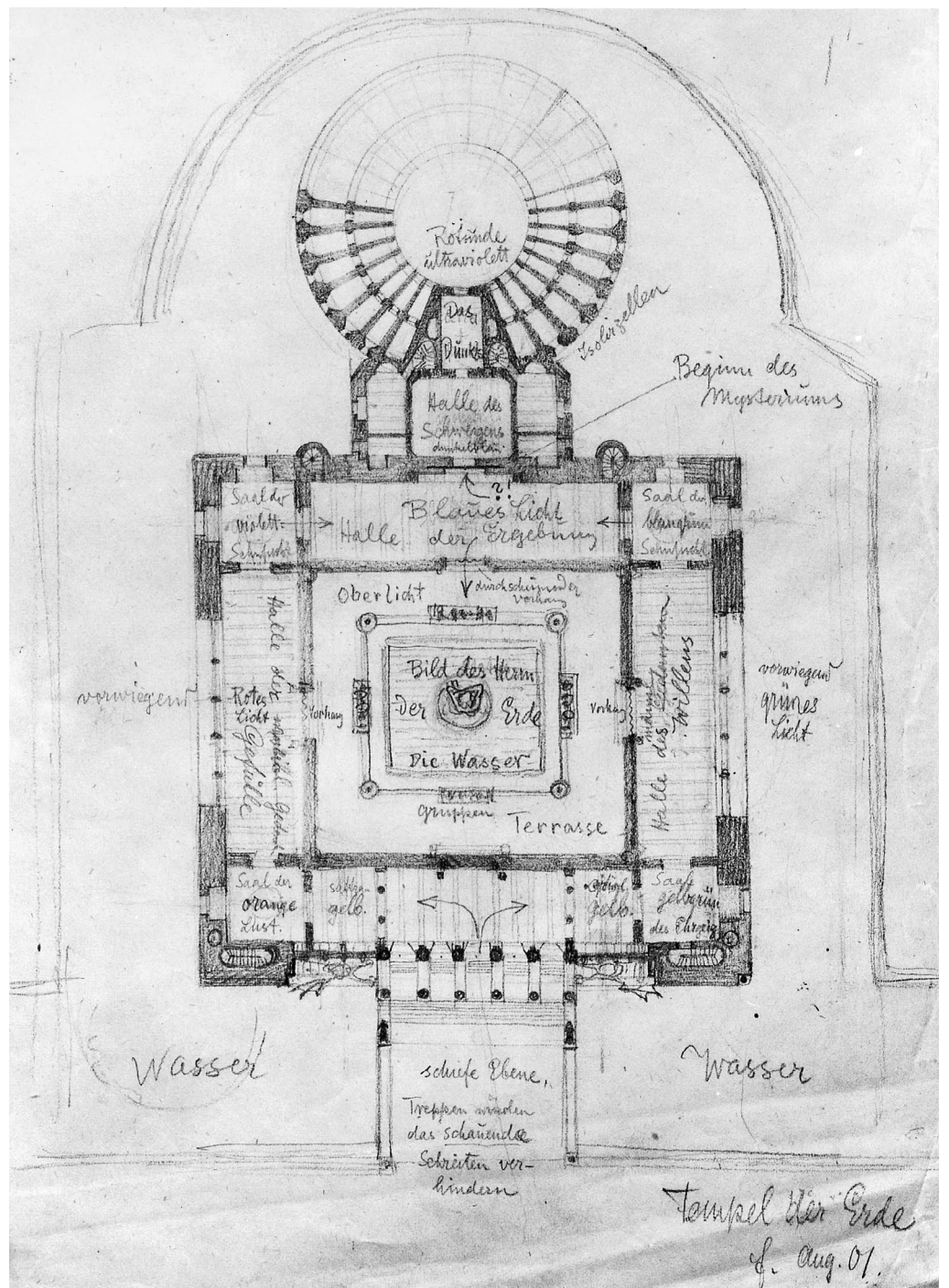
meditation sheets that Meyer-Amden made immediately after he moved to Amden, his drawings of boys are studies of the spiritual in art. And the art historian Reinhold Hohl has rightly suggested that for Otto Meyer-Amden, the child manifested “the mystical, ‘true’ vision of life before it took physical form in the biological body (and was compelled to become either male or female, but never both): original nature in the form of angels.”



The meadows of the Bächli and Eich in Amden and the Grappenhof community centre erected by the followers of Josua Klein in 1903, Photo private archive.



The artist Willi Baumeister (1889–1955) in Haus Schwanden in Amden, 1913, at left: *Haus mit Bäumen in Amden* (House with Trees in Amden), March 1913, oil on canvas 63.3×49.5 cm, Photo Archiv Baumeister, Stuttgart.



Fidus, *Grundriss zum Tempel der Erde* (Floor Plan of the Temple of the Earth), 1901, pencil on paper, 27.2×19.7 cm, Image Berlinische Galerie, Berlin.



Otto Meyer-Amden, *Amdener Landschaft*, 1913, oil on paper, 27.5 × 19.2 cm, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, purchased in 2000 with a grant from Canton Zurich, Image 2015, Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Zürich, Jean-Pierre Kuhn.



Otto Meyer-Amden, *Amdener Landschaft*, 1913, oil on paper, 33.5 × 25.2 cm, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, on permanent loan from the Galerieverein, Freunde des Kunstmuseums Winterthur, 2005, Image 2015 Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Zürich, Jean-Pierre Kuhn.