Atelier Amden
Working with Artists
Roman Kurzmeyer, 2015

Where am I? — we often ask ourselves when standing in an installation. Brian O'Doherty's *Taking a Line for a Walk* (2012) at Atelier Amden raised the same question. Drawing the gaze from outside to inside through one of the building's three doors was a yellow rope, spanned so as to connect the three rooms with each other and finally leading outdoors again through a window on the upper floor. It was an installation that both sharpened our own perceptions and at the same time confronted visitors with the here and now: a small farm building used for generations as hayloft and cowshed, with views of the mountains, lake and plains of Kerenzerberg, Lake Walensee and the Linthebene. Wooden farm buildings shape the image of this sparsely populated, mountainous region of Lower Amden to this day. Visitors who wish to reach this former barn have to make the last part of their pilgrimage on foot, along a mountain path. And with that, the exhibition in this remarkable Alpine setting becomes a part of the landscape itself that the visitor takes in.[1] In a recent text on the significance of installations in the context of contemporary art, Brian O'Doherty, author of *Inside the White Cube* (1978) and a first-generation Conceptual Artist, spoke of how because of the way people project themselves, their local culture and their individual backgrounds into every exhibition, not even the white cube is the same everywhere.[2] While I was installing O'Doherty's *Taking a Line for a Walk,* spanning the end of the rope around a rock outdoors and pulling it taut, I realised that his significance as an artist and theoretician lies, to some extent, in the fact that he does not narrate the emergence and transcendence of the white cube in terms of curatorial history, but relates it instead to artists themselves and to the constantly changing way in which their work has been received throughout the twentieth century, right up to the present day.

The story of the Atelier Amden, which I shall outline here, includes another, earlier story that is known to very few of the visitors to our exhibitions. The project stems from my research into some experiments of relevance to the history of art and culture conducted in the community of Amden in the early twentieth century, the findings of which I published in my 1999 book *Viereck und Kosmos*. One of these experiments was the utopian colony of Grappenhof, founded there by the "prophet" Josua Klein (1867–1945), a native of Merano in South Tyrol who had made his fortune as a businessman and psychotherapist in the United States, the other the events that took place in the artists' colony that formed in 1912 around the Bernese painter Otto Meyer-Amden (1885–1933).[3] The study takes its title, *Viereck und Kosmos,* from a letter written by Meyer-Amden to his friend, the artist Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), in which he formulates some of his thoughts about his paintings and what they meant to him. In his characteristic blend of awkwardness and precision, he writes about "the pictorial form itself, which seeks to comply with the cosmos

1 All the exhibitions are documented at www.atelier-amden.ch.

2 Brian O'Doherty, "Installation," in Shamita Sharmacharja (ed.), A Manual for the 21st Century Art Institution, London: Koenig Books / Whitechapel Gallery, 2009, pp. 26–30.

3 Roman Kurzmeyer, Viereck und Kosmos – Künstler, Lebensreformer, Okkultisten, Spiritisten in Amden 1901–1912: Max Nopper, Josua Klein, Fidus, Otto Meyer-Amden, Zürich / Wien / New York: Edition Voldemeer / Springer, 1999.

and the square."[4] Meyer-Amden lived in Amden from 1912 to 1928 and was joined there by his artist friends Albert Pfister (1884–1978), Willi Baumeister (1889–1955) and Hermann Huber (1888–1967) for an extended period in 1912. Klein and his family left that same year. Unlike the vegetarian colony of Monte Verità founded around the same time above Ascona, the temple settlement that Klein had planned for Amden never became the hub of an alternative social, political and artistic movement, even if it did briefly capture the imagination of many progressives.[5] In this remote and secluded setting, Meyer-Amden created an oeuvre whose significance, with hindsight, lies in its consistent focus on the processual and the fundamental. At the time of the Grappenhof colony, and while Meyer-Amden was living in the village, the mountain community was a place of social and subsequently artistic experimentation.

When, after years of research in various archives and libraries, I was ready to start writing about the Grappenhof colony, I did not begin by approaching the concept verbally. Instead, I first drew two intersecting lines on a sheet of paper. To this day, that drawing still succinctly visualizes for me what it was about the events in early twentieth-century Amden that interested me, specifically the fact that in 1903, this little village became the point of intersection for many different lives. This cross, illustrating a geographical, temporal and historical reality, is conceptually the exact opposite of the concept of utopia. Utopia is an imagined ideal state, a dreamland, an Erewhon, a nowhere or at any rate a state that exceeds achievable expectations. The lines I had drawn, by contrast, corresponded to real life stories and aspirations and the point of intersection was a real moment — an unstable one, but a true one nevertheless. The yearning for a better future that many in the Grappenhof colony embraced was to make history, mainly due to the meeting of two very different charismatic individuals. The encounter between the free-religious itinerant preacher Josua Klein from Merano and the Jugendstil artist Fidus (1868–1948) from Berlin spawned plans that even by the standards of the times seemed absurd, but that nevertheless fired the imaginations of many and set the Amden colony apart from the many other experimental communities of the time. As my research showed, and as outlined in the narrative of *Viereck und Kosmos,* these intersecting lives form a cross in the darker sense of the word as well. The events not only exemplify the eclecticism that was rife at the turn of the century, but also the individuation process that began in the industrialized countries of Europe in the nineteenth century and has continued to the present.

The exhibition *Viereck und Kosmos* opened on 27 June 1999, coinciding with the publication of my book on the progressive colony and the subsequent arrival of the artists in Meyer-Amden's circle. There were no plans for a continuation of the project initially. The exhibition involved a number of venues: The temple plans by Fidus, some of which Klein had intended to build in Amden in the early years of the twentieth century, went on show in the nearby Kunsthaus Glarus, which also presented works by Meyer-Amden as well as drawings and paintings created in Amden by his artist friends, displayed in an architecturally structured exhibition designed by Vaclav Pozarek. The curatorial intent of the show, however, was also to provide an insight into the actual terrain on which the Amden colony was founded. With this in mind, documents about the colony were exhibited in the former home of one of its co-founders, Max Nopper, and the artists Anya Gallaccio, Katharina Grosse and Anselm Stalder were

4 "Bildform selbst, die dem Kosmos und dem Viereck gerecht werden will." From an undated letter written by Otto Meyer-Amden to Oskar Schlemmer, in Carlo Huber, Otto Meyer-Amden, Wabern: Büchler, 1968, p. 117.

5 On the history of the progressive Lebensreform ("Life Reform") movement in the German-speaking world, see Kai Buchholz et al. (eds.), Die Lebensreform: Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900, 2 vols., exh. cat., Institut Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt: Häusser, 2001.

invited to create in-situ works on the said terrain. After trawling the archives for descriptions of long-forgotten events, reconstructing and documenting the colony's history, I collated an exhibition of historical artworks and accounts that explored the appeal that this place held for progressives and artists and addressed this basic impulse from a contemporary viewpoint.

The tour of Amden began in lower-lying Grappen, where a small theosophical room designed by the settlers held documents outlining the history of the colony. It then continued down to the Eich and along the steep and rocky descent through the woods to the Zand, where the contemporary artworks were installed. The barns and cowsheds that had been rented for the exhibition were to be left in the same structural condition that they would have been in when the artists first saw them. The rooms were not prepared for the exhibition; they were neither cleaned nor were any of the tools, implements or fodder removed. The farmer continued to use his premises during the exhibition just as he did every summer. Only two works are still in Amden; the others now exist only in the form of designs, photographs and descriptions, and in the memories of all those who visited the show and saw this array of works in a specific landscape. The exhibition *Viereck und Kosmos* marked the beginning of a project that would develop into a series, in which artists from all over the world would be invited to this small community overlooking Lake Walensee in the Swiss mountains—not so much to participate in an exhibition as to create a new work.

Atelier Amden is more than just an exhibition venue. As the name suggests, it is first and foremost a place of production. The intention behind it is to give artists the opportunity of creating and presenting new works in a topographically distinctive landscape of significance to the history of art, and of culture generally. In 2001, the works created in Amden by Polish artist Paweł Althamer and British artist Anya Gallaccio related to the specific cultural background of the locale. After that, however, the events at the Grappenhof colony and the circle of Otto Meyer-Amden became increasingly secondary. For most of the artists who have exhibited here since, that history has played only a marginal role in the composition of their works. The development of experimental artworks on the site of the former artists' colony and in the immediate vicinity of Meyer-Amden's workplace has rather revitalized an existing place of remembrance.[6] One question that has not been answered, however, is the extent to which the issues raised by the artists can, in the long term, alter perceptions of the place, its history and the art previously created here, and how they will become embedded in the collective cultural memory. Just as exhibitions in the world's foremost international museums are inextricably linked with their location in major cities, so, too, the small exhibitions under discussion here are very much a part of the mountainous landscape, the topography of the Amden valley, the vegetation, climate and distinctive natural environment that everyone encounters in Amden. Visiting an exhibition at Atelier Amden is closely bound up with the experience of the natural world and the art object in a setting not normally associated with art. The brief, and not too strenuous, walk through this predominantly agricultural landscape leads through meadows and woodland and along the rocky shores of Lake Walensee to the exhibition venue itself. Once there, visitors soon note that, as in a conventional museum, they have "complete control over the time of contemplation," thus affirming their autonomy as observers, who often view

6 Cf. Aleida Assmann, Cultural Memory And Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

works in solitude.[7] The exhibitions are accessible at all times for as long as they are there. There are no wardens, and visitors can decide for themselves when they want to look at any of the works. These conditions are a specific feature of my project from the curatorial point of view.

The significance of the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, lies in the fact that its founder, American artist Donald Judd (1928–1994), stipulated that the site used for the art project he had been developing since the 1970s — including the choice of works, their presentation and the overall architectural and landscape setting — should bear witness to the aesthetics of a specific historical period and thus serve as a benchmark for the reception of artworks of the same period presented in many other venues under constantly changing conditions.[8] The permanent collections in various museums fulfil a similar role. Are these not, after all, places where difference and the quest for identity are made possible? Amden takes the opposite tack. One of the questions implicitly addressed to the artists is whether the presence and exigency of their works can add another chapter to the history of this mountain community as a place of artistic and social experimentation. To ensure there are no misunderstandings, it should be stressed that Atelier Amden is neither a critique of, nor an alternative to the white cube. Within the protected space of the museum it is possible to undertake experiments for which there is often little scope elsewhere. The white cube is still the perfect format for the formal, aesthetic perception of art. What particularly interests me in my work with artists at Atelier Amden is the proximity to the design process that results from working and exhibiting in conditions that are unfamiliar, with no access road, no electricity, no workshop, no technicians, no neutral exhibition spaces, no supervision, no security and only a modest contribution to their production costs. The artists work outside the usual parameters of the art system's long-established processes. The form of each project is influenced not only by the specific potential for its reception, but also by the conditions of its production, which determine the artist's scope of action. It is interesting to note how all professional exhibition venues are limited in their own way — and how strongly our image of art is shaped by those specific conditions.

The New York-based Swiss artist, Bruno Jakob, known for his *Invisible Paintings*, spent a whole week in Amden in 2002, including the afternoon of 8 September, when he worked in front of an invited audience. In and around the building he created drawings, videos and paintings as well as in-situ works such as a barn wall "painted" with water from New York, and kinetic objects installed in openings in the wall to visualize the draughts in the barn. Jakob also created a work that nobody but himself has ever seen: a rocky outcrop above Lake Walensee "painted" with morning dew from a nearby meadow. The sound of water tumbling down a ravine, which can be heard but not seen from the barn, was visually echoed by the gentle flow of clear water from the interior of the building over its outside wall. Drawings and a sketchbook attest to his many other ideas, some of which the artist actually implemented, while others remained on paper. In his paintings, Jakob addresses the instrumental properties of the artwork and augments his own freedom of artistic expression by transferring visual control to the observer. The textile images created by Genevan artist Mai-Thu Perret, who also exhibits these works in museum settings, could be seen fluttering in the wind in Amden in 2007. Ordinarily, the high gloss of the monochrome lacquered panels by Adrian Schiess would reflect the light streaming in from the windows and even visitors themselves;

7 Boris Groys, "Medienkunst im Museum," in —, Topologie der Kunst, München/Wien: Hanser, 2003, pp. 59–60.

8 Cf. www.chinati.org.

but here they were soon covered in a layer of dust, cobwebs, grass and leaves. Small animals left footprints in the fine film of dust coating them. At the request of the artist, however, the exhibition was left in place for a whole year, from May 2005 to May 2006. In addition to the panels themselves, which were placed on branches from the surrounding woodlands, the exhibition also included landscape drawings created in Amden during a snowstorm, albeit in a hotel room. According to Spiess, "images happen" on the reflecting surfaces of his panels. This statement took on a whole new meaning in Amden, where his works were exposed to wind and weather. Another window onto the past is provided by the painter Fritz Pauli (1891–1968), who lived in Amden from 1931 to 1935, and who in 1932 extended his farmhouse to include an open-air studio inspired by Edvard Munch (1863–1944), the Norwegian painter whom he greatly admired. Dieter Schwarz reminds us that Meyer-Amden was also a *plein-air* painter and that he had a somewhat ambivalent attitude to the atmosphere of the place. In a letter to his friend Hermann Huber dated 3 April 1913, the artist wrote: "Today I painted a picture out of the door of the house: mist. It arrived just as I wanted to paint a certain area of the visible ground, and just as I set about painting the mist afterwards, it seemed to start clearing to give a view of the Churfirsten peaks, and was gone. But then it came back again somewhat, and kept on disappearing at intervals. And I painted it quickly, because it is easy to paint. Generally I have issues with the weather, but only because I want to be able to paint large, saleable pictures."[9]

There has been a lot of construction in Switzerland in the last ten or fifteen years. In 2006, the ETH Studio Basel – Institut Stadt der Gegenwart published an analysis and vision of Switzerland as a single city.[10] Even the tiniest plots along the shores of Lake Zurich are currently being developed. The process of urbanization continues apace, even in Amden, and is welcomed by the authorities because it attracts new taxpayers. Thus the village has lost its identity as a farming community. At the beginning of my project, I decided to leave the barns just the way I found them; not for sentimental reasons (or were they?) but to ensure that all the artists could work under the same elementary conditions of an agricultural setting far removed from the art world. The overriding aim, however, was to underline the uniqueness of each of the works on display. Should I perhaps describe it as a laboratory situation? Michael Nedo, who edited the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), published a biographical collage charting Wittgenstein's life in relation to the various places where the philosopher lived and thought. Nedo's book *There Where You Are Not* also includes photographs by Guy Moreton documenting the path to the wooden house that Wittgenstein built for himself near the Norwegian village of Skjolden. Some people—thinking, perhaps, of the philosopher as the architect of the famous Palais Stonborough (1925–1928) in Vienna—undertake the long and arduous trek to Skjolden only to find nothing but the weathered foundations of the building.[11] Jan Estep has published an illustrated hiking map of this remote place in the wilderness on the shores of Lake Eidsvatnet.[12] That map occasionally springs to mind whenever the exhibitions in Amden

9 Otto Meyer-Amden, cited by Dieter Schwarz, "'Die Landschaft ist ich will nicht sagen schön, sondern auf mich gestimmt was mehr ist.': Die Amdener Landschaften von Otto Meyer-Amden," in Juerg Albrecht/Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft (ed.), Horizonte – Beiträge zu Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft: 50 Jahre Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001, pp.191–198; most recent: Dieter Schwarz (ed.), Otto Meyer Amden: Das Frühwerk 1903–1914, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2015.

10 Roger Diener et al., Die Schweiz – Ein städtebauliches Portrait, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005.

11 Michael Nedo/Guy Moreton/Alec Finlay, There Where You Are Not: Wittgenstein's Wandering, London: Black Dog, 2005.

12 Jan Estep, Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein: Lake Eidsvatnet, Skjolden, Sogn, Norway, Minneapolis: Jan Estep, 2007.

are being dismantled. After all, the works themselves leave barely a trace in and around the building that has been made available for their production and presentation over the years. The barns and stalls could be used once again for their original purpose at any moment. But that is not going to happen. The owner has handed over the farm to his son, who in 2012 built a big new barn right next to his home, thus putting an end to traditional pastoral practices that have endured for centuries in Amden. Now, hay fodder is stored centrally and livestock herds generally remain in one place, except during the summer months. When I launched this exhibition project in 1999, all of the barns in the Zand were still in use. Today, farmers can manage without them. This poses the question of how the existing agricultural infrastructure and the landscape itself will be transformed.

The museum in the Modernist era, right through to the late twentieth century, wrote German art critic Hans Belting, was "a refuge for images that had lost their place in the world and had exchanged it for a place in art. But now even this secondary connection with a place," he continued, "has been dissolved by moving and ephemeral visual media."[13] Since the age of its mechanical reproduction dawned, art has been increasingly received through secondary media. In the 1950s, together with his friend Buckminster Fuller, the art historian Alexander Dorner developed a model museum aimed at visualizing the history of art from the Palaeolithic to the twentieth century with educational material for the edification of visitors.[14] The lightweight construction method proposed by Fuller corresponded to his notion of a museum format which, unlike the classical art museum, would have nothing whatsoever in common with a quasi-religious building, since the museum of the future would be dedicated exclusively to the service of mediation and would work with reproductions. Like most art historians, André Malraux chose book form for the *Musée Imaginaire* he published in 1947. Aby Warburg was also aware that he could not pursue his method of comparative visual communication without the possibilities offered by mechanical reproduction.[15] Since then, art's perception and appreciation have continued to be guided by photographic documentation, not only in the field of art history but also in the mediation of contemporary and emerging art. This also applies to Atelier Amden. The original in situ becomes the prototype, as it were, which is seen and experienced by only a few interested visitors. Its success within the art system, however, is determined by photographic reproduction, which in turn takes on the function of the original. Today it is views of installations posted online that reach a wider audience. The works themselves lose their materiality through this transformation, however, becoming mere images of themselves. The glass showcase of works by the sculptor Julio Gonzalez (1876–1942) presented by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in the entrance area of the Fridericianum at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in Kassel—on exactly the same spot where they had been displayed at *documenta II* in 1959—was like a faint echo of Belting's thesis. Alongside the vitrine, the curator presented a small photograph showing that first exhibition of the sculptures on a table without any protective glass and with visitors lingering nearby. The 1999 work *blessed* by Anya Gallaccio, for which the artist hung clusters of red apples on an old apple tree in Amden, has been circulated in the form of images digitally altered by the artist herself to include mountains

13 —— Hans Belting, "Der Ort der Bilder II: Ein anthropologischer Versuch," in —, Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft, München: Wilhelm Fink, 2001, p. 61.

14 —— Alexander Dorner, The Way Beyond "Art": The Work of Herbert Bayer, Problems of Contemporary Art 3, New York: Wittenborn Schultz, 1947.

15 Cf. Uwe Fleckner, "Ohne Worte: Aby Warburgs Bildkomparatistik zwischen wissenschaftlichem Atlas und kunstpublizistischem Experiment," in Uwe Fleckner et al. (eds.), Aby Warburg: Bilderreihen und Ausstellungen, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 2.2, chap. 2, Berlin: Akademie, 2012, pp. 1–18.

on the horizon that certainly exist but cannot be seen from the place where the photographs were taken. Photographic reproduction allows artworks to be removed from their physical location and manipulated within the context of the representational mode selected, causing them to lose what Belting calls their "local identity."[16]

Perhaps the words of British artist Giorgio Sadotti, more than this text, best sum up what Atelier Amden, together with the artists who exhibit there, have endeavoured to achieve over the years through their special combination of experimental production and aesthetic reception. Sadotti's work consists of a white card printed in an edition of 1000, half of which are now held by the curator and the other half by the artist. In an unannounced action on 6 December 2008, Sadotti nailed one of these little cards to the door of the hayloft in the empty barn in Amden with the printed handwritten comment: "THIS IS MORE THAN YOU KNOW."[17]

16 Belting 2001 (see note 13).

17 A first version of this text is to be found in Melanie Franke (ed.), Erzählen und Wissen: Narrative Strategien in der zeitgenössischen Kunst, Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2013, pp. 260–276.

Katalin Deér – Gaden im Zand, 2010 – Photos: Katalin Deér