

Press release

Zurich, 27 November 2014

**Kunsthhaus Zürich presents an exhibition on the theme of water**

**'Monolithic Water', the latest exhibition in the 'Picture Ballot!' series, examines how human beings in general and artists in particular tackle the theme of water and the water cycle, which both influences and is influenced by human action. The presentation, which runs from 28 November 2014 to 1 March 2015, brings together positions that, however fundamentally dissimilar they may appear, are closely linked by their chosen theme: paintings, photographs, prints, videos and installations by James Ensor, Morris Louis, Roni Horn, Olafur Eliasson, Klara Hobza, Pamela Rosenkranz, Clare Kenny, Superflex and others open up a broad range of historical and thematic perspectives.**

'Nous sommes tous sortis de la mer' – 'We all emerged from the sea' – proclaimed James Ensor in 1922. His statement traces its lineage back to creation myths in which water is the origin of all things. In his writings, Ensor (1860–1949) repeatedly declares the sea to be the source of artistic creativity. For the Belgian, who spent most of his life by the North Sea, contemplation of the open water was both inspiration and training for the eye. In 'Beach at Ostend' (around 1915), sand, sea and sky are divided into horizontal zones of colour that almost coalesce.

The exhibition presents water as symbol, the quest for form and the struggle for supremacy between human being and nature, from seafaring and diving to natural disasters.

THE WELL AS IMAGE OF CREATIVITY

While for Ensor the sea is the source of artistic inspiration, Dennis Oppenheim employs water as a metaphor for artistic creativity itself, establishing a parallel between language and flowing water. A work by Oppenheim from the Kunsthhaus collection that has not been shown for more than thirty years has been restored for the exhibition and can now, thanks to research, be displayed as it was originally presented: the two metal towers of 'Twin Wells' (1976/77), which dominate the exhibition space, echo with the voice of the artist speaking of a well that has run dry. At intervals, steam rises from one of the towers – symbolizing, as it were, the contrast between fertile imagination and continual creativity on the one hand, and inner barrenness and crisis on the other. For Dennis Oppenheim, springs and wells are a metaphor for the struggle to find the right words and images. The video 'I'm Failing' (1971) shows a detail of a mouth

speaking under water, the words it utters lost in an incomprehensible outpouring of bubbles. Dying of thirst and drowning; speaking and falling silent; creative activity and mental blocks: Oppenheim deploys the symbolism of water to condense complex psychological states into suggestive images.

### STARING INTO THE POND: FROM NARCISSUS TO THE THAMES

Suggesting the title of the exhibition and therefore central to the connections between the works is the photo series 'Still Water (The River Thames, for Example)' (1999) by Roni Horn, based on her observation of water and its mutability. In this multi-part work she photographs the ever-changing river, accompanying the images with a flood of literary, personal and everyday associations in the form of footnotes. Here, she formulates the idea that water has a monolithic quality: it exists in indivisible continuity with all other waters, but manifests itself in varying states in different places and in the human body. The search for a way to represent the unfathomable reflectivity of water places Roni Horn (b. 1955) in the long tradition of depictions of water in art. The play of colour, reflected light and shimmering surfaces – of the sea in particular – have always fascinated artists and tested their artistic talents. The humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), considered by many the inventor of art history, even identifies the reflection of nature in the water's surface with the story of Narcissus as the founding myth of painting, asking: 'What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?'

### SHIFTING HORIZONS: FROM SOLID TO LIQUID

In Genesis, the separation of sky and waters involves the creation of the horizon, the most distant visible point that provides orientation to both painters and observers. This motif is often taken up in photography, the medium of the focal point and vanishing point par excellence. The series of seascapes by Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) and Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948), with their subtle variations on the unchanging, seem to revolve around an archetypal image. In the works of Morris Louis (1912–1962), paint as material asserts its independence. The American colour field artist exploits the fluid properties of acrylic paint, allowing it to flow in abstract streams of colour on unprimed canvases. The coloured stripes of 'Parting of Waters' (1961), the visible droplets and the linearity of the image structure convey a sense of flow. The Biblical and physical separation of solid and liquid to which the title alludes captures Louis's painterly technique precisely.

#### FROM SOURCE TO CHANNEL: WATER AS RESOURCE

Dotted around the gallery are puddles in which the rainbow spectrum of a petrol film can be seen. Created in 2014, these objects by Clare Kenny (b. 1976) are based on enlarged photographs of water droplets frozen into glass plates. The artist contemplates the small manifestations of water in everyday life, while the oil-polluted water questions the global and ecological consequences of human actions. The same theme emerges from the video 'Flooded McDonald's' (2009) by the artists' collective Superflex, which is being screened in the basement. Water slowly seeps into a branch of the fast-food chain and floods the deserted restaurant until the entire stock and all the food are floating in a brown soup. Pamela Rosenkranz's Evian bottle filled with a muddy substance (2011) deconstructs the brand's promise of pure water from natural springs and casts a critical eye at the way human beings use resources. Nature and culture, the domestication of natural forces and their destructive potential collide in nightmarish fashion.

#### EXPEDITIONS

Romanticized or feared, the sea was long imagined as a dark abyss inhabited by monsters. It was not until the turn of the 20th century that true expeditions ventured beneath its surface. Through her eagerness to explore one of the last uncharted regions in the map of Europe – the land beneath the rivers – and her vivid imagination, Klara Hobza (b. 1975) revives the spirit of the great explorers. In Basel in 2014, she recovered from the riverbed a boulder that evokes rugged sub-aquatic landscapes. Drawings and a sculpture act as records of this action. Hobza's stele-mounted 'Underwater Peak' and the photos of 'The Island Series' (1997) by the Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967), depicting rocky outcrops rising from the ocean, confront each other in the exhibition space, both of them finds from expeditions. These encyclopaedic photo series of Eliasson's native land are less known than his large atmospheric installations. He travels around the island in his own specially equipped vehicle, a 'panorama car', gathering these impressions and natural spectacles in which, however abandoned the landscape, a human perspective is inscribed.

#### WORKS FROM 1915 TO THE PRESENT DAY

This year's 'Picture Ballot! Monolithic Water', for which the members of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft chose James Ensor's painting of the sea, is curated by the art historian Claire Hoffmann. She engages with works from the Kunsthaus collection and confronts them with pieces by contemporary artists. Taking around 15 positions from the last 100 years, the exhibition reveals how the phenomenon of the water surface has inspired artists in a variety of genres.

These findings are described and discussed in greater detail in the public guided tours conducted by the curator herself. The Kunsthaus will be happy to arrange private guided tours on request.

A lavishly illustrated publication in German (48 pages, 45 illustrations in colour and black and white, with an essay by the curator) accompanies the exhibition. It is available at the Kunsthaus-Shop for CHF 15.

Supported by Albers & Co.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, [www.kunsthaus.ch](http://www.kunsthaus.ch). Opening hours: Fri-Sun/Tues 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. For public holiday opening see [www.kunsthaus.ch](http://www.kunsthaus.ch). Admission to the exhibition including the collection: CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions and groups). Children and young people up to the age of 16 free of charge. Admission free on Wednesdays.

Public guided tours: Wed 3 December / 28 January / 25 February, 6.30 p.m.

Advance sales: Zurich Tourism: hotel room reservations and ticket sales: Tourist Service in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, [information@zuerich.com](mailto:information@zuerich.com), [www.zuerich.com](http://www.zuerich.com). SBB RailAway combination ticket, with discount on travel and admission: at stations and by phoning Rail Service 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min. by land line), [www.sbb.ch/kunsthaus-zuerich](http://www.sbb.ch/kunsthaus-zuerich). Magasins Fnac: sales points in Switzerland: Rive, Balexert, Lausanne, Fribourg, Pathé Kino Basel, [www.fnac.ch](http://www.fnac.ch); France: Carrefour, Géant, Magasins U, 0 892 68 36 22 (EUR 0.34/min), [www.fnac.com](http://www.fnac.com); Belgium: [www.fnac.be](http://www.fnac.be).

### NOTE AND CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Visual material can be downloaded from the website [www.kunsthaus.ch](http://www.kunsthaus.ch) under Information > Press. Contact: Kunsthaus Zürich, Press & Public Relations Kristin Steiner, [kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch](mailto:kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch), tel.: +41 (0)44 253 84 13