OTTO KÜNZLI. THE EXHIBITION
JEWELLERY 1967-2012
2 July – 5 October 2014

PRESS KIT
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Lausanne, June 2014

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JEWELLERY 1967-2012
2 July – 5 October 2014

PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY 1 JULY AT 10.30 A.M.
IN THE PRESENCE OF OTTO KÜNZLI

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The mudac is hosting the first major retrospective to be dedicated to that master of contemporary jewellery, Otto Künzli. Demonstrating a wit as sharply honed as his creative skills, the Swiss artist presents more than 300 pieces that illustrate his ingenious and humorous approach to conceptual jewellery.

Otto Künzli revolutionised the art of contemporary jewellery. While respecting its primary function as bodily adornment, Künzli throughout his 45-year career as a creator has consistently broken down its codes, questioned its materials and subverted its symbols. Behind the role of mentor so respected by his pupils lies a mischievous spirit with the audacity to push the boundaries. Thus, he transforms the references of our collective imagination (from the Swiss cross to Mickey Mouse), denounces the pretentions of jewellery («Gold makes us blind,» he says) and over-turns the codes of everyday objects (picture frames are turned into necklaces) with his trademark humour and irony.

Set up in close cooperation with the artist, the retrospective is built around the major themes of his life’s work and his travels, both real and imagined. The United States and its obsession with the bottom line, Switzerland and its gold bars, the Australian bush, Japanese lacquer and vapour trails in the sky are leitmotifs that recur throughout the exhibition. In addition, one room is given over to his early work. In a departure from its usual practice, the mudac has decided to look beyond the works themselves, seeking out anecdotes or commentaries for each piece.

Otto Künzli was born in Zurich and now lives, works and teaches in Munich. It was there that, in spring 2013, Die Neue Sammlung - The International Design Museum mounted this retrospective, in association with the mudac, which will host it this summer. The exhibition will then move on to the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum.

Quotes:

“What I’d really like to have is a 40,000 Deutsche Mark Tiffany bracelet, so that I could spray it red.”

“When we were children, we used to collect bottle caps that we’d find on the football field on Sundays, and we’d pin them all to our pullovers.”

From the essay “Gerd Rothmann says / Otto Künzli says” in the German periodical “gold + silber / uhren + schmuck”, Stuttgart, 1981

Otto Künzli, Undated (probably pendants), 1993. Pendants, ceramic (raku fired)
Otto Künzli was born in Zurich in 1948. His life changed in 1965 when his brother Peter, six years his elder, died in a car accident. “That’s when I decided to follow his professional career and become a goldsmith,” he notes in ‘The Book’. “Even today, I sometimes have the feeling Peter is looking over my shoulder when I’m using one of his tools.” Peter is probably also smiling at him, proud of the brother who has become a master of conceptual jewellery.

From 1965 to 1970 Otto Künzli attended the metalwork classes of Max Fröhlich at the Schule für Gestaltung Zürich. In 1972 he married Therese Hilbert, also a goldsmith, and his most loyal critic. They moved to Germany, where Otto was taught by Hermann Jünger, professor of jewellery at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich. Following the birth of their daughter Miriam in 1976, Otto’s graduation in 1978 and given their growing network of contacts, Therese and Otto decided to stay in Munich. They have remained there ever since, except to travel to numerous exhibitions, conferences and awards ceremonies around the world. In 1991 Künzli became a professor at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich, where his skill at conveying his vision of jewellery would captivate and influence many up-and-coming young jewellers. At the end of July 2014 he is due to retire from academic life, but probably not from artistic life, where he will no doubt continue to deploy a wit as finely honed as his tools.

Künzli’s first solo exhibition took place in 1979 at the Schmuckmuseum in Pforzheim. Over the years he would be invited to stage solo exhibitions in galleries and museums in Munich, Berlin, Zurich, Basel, Amsterdam, Melbourne, Tokyo and Bristol. He has won numerous awards, including three federal design scholarships, the Herbert-Hofmann Prize, the Funaki Gallery (Melbourne) 2008 international jewellery prize and in 2010 the Swiss Grand Prix for design, which is awarded to distinguished designers for lifetime achievement and their contribution to Swiss design.
SELECTED WORKS

AUTOMATENFOTOS, photographs, 1976

“I was looking for a new direction, and in 1976 I decided to do something different. Equipped with a box filled with string, tape, stickers, wire and paper cutouts, I began to frequent a photo booth in Munich, the one in the central station. I was looking for new ideas about form, searching for a different relationship between the human body and the points, lines and surfaces that are attributed to it. I wanted to distance myself from the idea we have of the brooch as a miniature, a postage-stamp-sized reproduction of reality, a representation of imaginary, invented worlds. I was looking to create a performance, a new reality, with the body.

One day, the curtains were suddenly pulled back and outside stood the Special Forces in battle dress, their weapons trained on me. In Germany, it was the days of the Red Army Faction (RAF); planes were being hijacked, shops were being bombed. My activities at the station photo booth had attracted their attention. They thought I was making bombs.”


GOLD MACHT BLIND, bracelet, 1980

“Gold comes from rock, from inside mountains. Before its brilliance is revealed to the world, it spends millions of years in darkness. Thanks to its unchanging and therefore eternal nature, its unique yellow hue and its deep lustre, most cultures have made it a symbol of light, of sunlight and the heavens. The goldsmiths of Antiquity and the Middle Ages alike felt that they were forging a reflection of divine grace in their gold leaf.

The enlightened spirit of the Renaissance, the secularisation, monetisation and industrialised extraction of gold, the discovery of its atomic structure, even the fact that the mysteries of alchemy [the transformation of base metal into gold] were dispelled by nuclear physics, nothing could destroy the legend associated with this metal. It was only with the decline of traditional practices and craftsmanship that gold jewellery became meaningless, interchangeable, arbitrary.

In 1980, as a result of the social changes that occurred at the end of the 1970s, and some personal experiences, I stopped using it for a time. I wanted to wean myself off it, in the hope that I would be able to re-evaluate it after a period of abstinence.

To bear witness to this decision, I created a work to “say goodbye to gold”: a bracelet made of black rubber that enclosed a ball of gold, like a snake digesting a baby elephant. It was time for gold to return to the darkness.”

DIE SCHÖNHEITSGALERIE, 1984, photograph

"Neckpiece - frame. Framing is a tribute, a mark of enthusiasm, a reward. The laurel wreath slides off the head of the laureate and comes to rest on his chest. The frame hangs around the neck. The image is not framed, the frame is part of the photo. No smiles in these portraits; Marie-Antoinette had bad teeth."


KATOPTIRISCHE RINGE, rings, 1988

"These days, you’d expect this image to have been Photoshopped. But in fact it’s an original print. The hand belongs to Therese Hilbert, my wife. She is wearing an oval gold ring set with a mirror. Her hand is in the shade, bathed in a cold, blue evening light; the background is white paper. There is a small mirror on the table. It reflects the last rays of the setting sun onto Therese’s face. The image is focused on the reflection of her eye. The hand is out of focus."


BLACK MICKEY MOUSE, brooch, 1991

"With Black Mickey Mouse, I wanted to look at the nature of this racist, fascist, nationalist macho figure, this companion to the forces of order; I came to the conclusion that this gentle soul, this great friend of humanity, was deeply evil and rotten to the core."

WHO NOSE?, 2001, carte postale

"On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Galerie Ra in Amsterdam (in 2001), Paul Derrez invited a number of artists to take part in an exhibition entitled 'Maskerade'. Everyone had to create their own mask. I didn't want to get hung up on any preconceptions. Sometimes it's good to play the fool. And then to play a great lord. Why not be a tree, a herd of sheep, the Matterhorn, a wiener schnitzel, a folk festival... anything? The quantity and quality, the ugly and beautiful images of postcards had served me well in the past. No sooner said than done."


SHANZAI, 25 seals and YANPIN 25 seals, 2012

"I'm interested in the historical and contemporary treatment of seals and signatures in China and in Europe, which is a fascinating point of departure for further discussion of issues connected with signatures, authenticity, intellectual property and pirate copies. […]

Inspired by the "Copy and Paste" project and a visit to a local market in Xuzhou, where I watched a seal engraver at work, but more particularly by Shanzhai. Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch, a marvellous little book by Byung-Chul Han, I had the idea of creating these seal rings, which don't exist in China. So I asked my good friend (and co-curator of Power of Copying), Ma Wen, if he could help me commission some seals with the “Shanzhai” inscription. Seals are common in China but they are never mounted on a ring. (…)

Four masters of the art, all close friends of Ma Wen’s father, accepted his request to carve the two Chinese characters Shanzhai, for “fake” (“pirated copy” but also “mountain village”) on a variety of stones and in every imaginable stylistic variant. They also proposed that I include in my project some seals marked Yanpin (reject), an old, traditional term for “copy”, and I was only too happy to agree. The same number of Yanpin seals were therefore carved. I then had them drill a hole in every one of these 25 marvellous works of art, thus transforming them into something that doesn’t exist and cannot exist: 25 fake Chinese seal rings, and 25 Chinese copies of the same thing."

MUDAC NOTES:
OTTO KÜNZLI, CLEVER HANDS, MISCHIEVOUS SPIRIT

“Gold makes you blind”. This bracelet by Otto Künzli (1980), part of the federal jewellery collection held at the mudac, epitomises his work. Its shape fits perfectly on the arm, making it comfortable to wear. A hoop of rubber with a spherical swelling hides a sphere of gold. In a startlingly efficient way, Künzli calls into question jewellery’s habitual function of displaying power and status, and gives a different perspective on the concept of value, which here is unsuspected except by the owner of the bracelet. He sends gold, the symbol of light and sunshine, back to the darkness whence it came.

This is pure Künzli. Artist and artisan. Clever hands and a mischievous spirit. A thumb to the nose, a pirouette, a relevant and witty social comment. Exquisitely-wrought jewellery, whose meaning is immediately obvious: its title sets us on the right track, like a riddle. Stripped-down forms of simple clarity, in harmony with the function of the jewellery. A desire to cut to the heart of the matter, a fascination for ingenious technical solutions.

Considered a master of conceptual jewellery, Künzli casts an ironic glance at the assumptions and foibles of our society; he is an iconoclast. Jewellery is his chosen medium of expression, but he does not disregard its ornamental function. He plays around with the symbols and references of our collective imagination. From one piece to another, he takes us on a journey to a world where we can have “Ten centimetres of infinity” or “Eight millimetres of love”, a world where hearts, crosses, circles and blades coexist with advertising logos, where Mickey Mouse’s head is superimposed on Columbus’s egg to make a shoulder ornament entitled “1492, when Mickey Mouse was born”.

The designers he trained at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich can attest to his generosity. He passed on to them his demanding nature and his sense of humour. On two occasions – in 2000 with “Parures d’ailleurs, parures d’ici: incidences, coincidences?” and again in 2008 with “Hand to hand” – his work has been displayed alongside that of his students. Inviting Otto Künzli to take part in an exhibition means fielding his intelligent and searching questions, but also enjoying his kindness and trust.

It was a meeting we were eager to repeat. Since its opening in 2000, the mudac has continued to observe, research and collect the works of contemporary jewellers, both Swiss and international. Contemporary jewellery, occupying a space between art and design, between body and object, explores our relationship with accessories by offering new perspectives. Through this innovative approach they are transformed from superficial objects, futile or even ostentatious accoutrements; they acquire a status and presence of their own, and become the vehicle for personal expression, which may be a political comment or an amused wink.

Jewellery, whose physical association with the body dictates its diminutive size, poses a significant scenographic challenge, which the mudac has endeavoured to meet on several occasions. In recognition of the rich variety of Swiss design, in 2012 we decided to dedicate an entire space to it. A redesign now enables us to display the works in our collections with targeted exhibitions, sometimes supplemented with loans.

The tribute paid to Otto Künzli in this book and the exhibition that accompanies it is an ideal response to our desire to give contemporary jewellery an institutional visibility that it rarely enjoys. This brilliant designer, through the quality of his work and the uniqueness of his career, is the perfect answer to our wish.

Carole Guinard, head of the contemporary jewellery collection and Chantal Prod’Hom, director of the mudac Lausanne, 1 October 2012
PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Press conference Tuesday 1 July 2014 at 10.30
Opening Tuesday 1 July 2014 from 18.00
Dates & hours 2 July – 5 October 2014
July-August: Monday-Sunday 11.00 - 18.00
September-October: Tuesday-Sunday 11.00 - 18.00
Open on every bank holiday
Guided tour Thursday 3 July 2014 at 12.15
Children workshops He loves me, he loves me not...
Families aged 6-96
What makes a piece of jewellery valuable? Is it the precious metals it’s made of, or the story it tells? Discover Otto Künzli’s poetic designs and create your own piece of jewellery containing just the right amount of love.
Sunday 7 September & 21 September 2014 from 14.00 to 16.30
Price CHF 10.- per participant
Reservation essential: 021 315 25 30 or info@mudac.ch.

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Visuals www.mudac.ch/press
Login: presse2014 / images2014

Otto Künzli, Kette, 1985-1986. necklace, 48 used gold wedding rings
VISUALS

The high resolution visuals are available on www.mudac.ch/press with the login presse2014 / images2014.

Otto Künzli, Die Schönheitsgalerie / Susy, 1984
Photograph, Cibachrome PS print
Dimensions: 75 x 62.5 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, series Imago, 2010-2011, Fur, 2010
Pendant, MDF and paint
Collection of the mudac
Image © Miriam Künzli, Zurich

Otto Künzli, Oh, say!, 1991
Brooch, gold
Dimensions: 9x9x0.6cm
Collection Landes Museum, Zurich
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Shanzaï, 2012
Seal rings, steatite (soapstone). Inscription: Fake
Variable dimensions
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, The Big American Neckpiece, 1986
Neckpiece, stainless steel
Dimensions: Ø 8.5cm (single element)
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Credit suisse, 1999
Pendant, 999.9 gold
Dimensions: 4.8x2.7x0.2 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Gold macht blind, 1980
Bracelet, rubber and gold
Dimensions: Ø sphere: 1.2 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Who Nose?, 2012
Postcards
Dimension: 10.5 x 14.8 cm
Image © Therese Hilbert, Munich

Otto Künzli, Die Schönheitsgalerie / Susy, 1984
Photograph, Cibachrome PS print
Dimensions: 75 x 62.5 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

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Dimensions: Ø sphere: 1.2 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich
Otto Künzli, Kette, 1985-1986
Neckpiece, 48 used gold wedding rings
Dimensions : L. 85 cm
Collection Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Automatenfotos, 1976
Photobooth photographs
Dimensions : 12.5 x 9.7 cm / framed A4
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Black Mickey Mouse, 1991
Brooch, hardfoam, lacquer, steel
Dimensions : 9.3 x 10 x 4.5 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Ring für Zwei, 1980
Rings, stainless steel
Dimensions : 2.1 x 12.5 x 0.25 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Coziteocuilotl, 1995-1998
Pendants, gold and silver
Variable dimensions
Collection of the Swiss Confederation, mudac, Lausanne
Image © Eva Jünger, Munich

Otto Künzli, Herz, 1985
Brooch, hardfoam, lacquer, steel
Dimensions : 9.5 x 9 x 4.5
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich

Otto Künzli, Katoptrische Ringe, 1988
Rings, gold, mirror
Dimensions : 3.9 x 3.7 x 1.4 cm
Image © Otto Künzli, Munich