

# Feu sacré.

## 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bernische Kunstgesellschaft BKG

September 20 2013 to January 5 2014

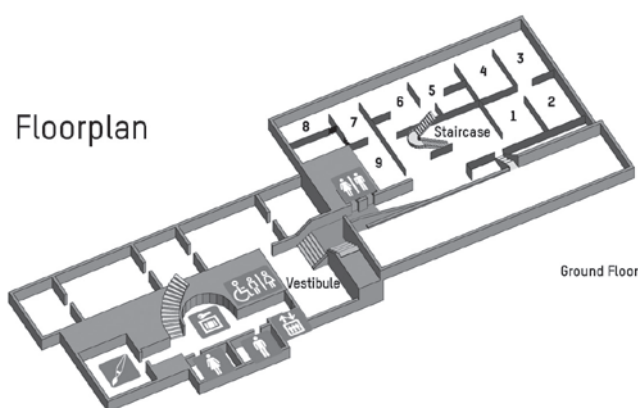
The Bernische Kunstgesellschaft BKG (Bern Art Society) played a decisive role in the foundation of the Kunstmuseum Bern, which opened its doors to the public in 1879. Thus, on the occasion of the BKG's bicentennial, the Kunstmuseum Bern is dedicating an exhibition to this illustrious art society by showing works of winners of the Aeschlimann Corti Scholarship (AC), which is awarded by the BKG to young Bernese artists since 1942. 104 artists were selected for the exhibition, each represented by an artwork that they executed at the time they received the scholarship. In this way the bicentennial exhibition ultimately offers a comprehensive overview of 70 years of artistic creation in the Canton of Bern.

The Bernische Kunstgesellschaft BKG was founded on February 22 1813. At the time it was still called the Bernische Künstlergesellschaft, that is, the Bern artists' society. On joining the society each member had to pay a membership admission fee and contribute a sheet for the so-called «Künstlerbuch» (Artists' book). The artists among the members donated a work of their own, the art enthusiasts a work they had purchased. Johann Emanuel Wyss's 1817 watercolor of the BKG's coat of arms made up the title page of the artists' book. In the show it is representative for the remarkable collection of 1,199 artworks that were acquired through the efforts of the BKG. Today they are part of the Kunstmuseum Bern Collection. When the Kunstmuseum Bern was founded in 1879 the artworks accrued by the BKG were the cornerstone. The BKG was, in many areas, pioneer and initiator. From 1818 it organized exhibitions until the cantonal artists' society took over in 1854. And in 1871 it founded the independent art academy in Bern. Additionally the BKG supported the GSAMBA (today: visarte.bern) in establishing the Kunsthalle Bern in 1918. For the centenary celebrations of the Kunstmuseum Bern, the BKG established the Bern Foundation for Photography, Film and Video (Bernische Stiftung für Fotografie, Film und Video, FFV) in 1981.

The BKG fosters a long tradition of supporting art since 1942. Thereby the most highly endowed private art prize in Switzerland, the Louise Aeschlimann and Margareta Corti (AC) Scholarship, plays a leading role. The scholarship is based on a legacy left by Louise Aeschlimann (1843–1910) in 1910. She had been a teacher and bequeathed to the BKG CHF 2,000 «for the support of poor but honest and assiduous talents». However, the Louise Aeschlimann-Stiftung was only first set up on November 1 in 1941 when the foundation's assets had grown to the amount of CHF 26,000 through further bequests. As a result, initially a scholarship of CHF 1,000 could be awarded annually. Due to the BKG's untiring and determined efforts to find additional funding, it was able to annually pay out, since 1957, CHF 7,000 and, since 1987, CHF 25,000. With the significantly large bequest of Margareta Corti (1899–1989), the total sum of CHF 40,000 was available for scholarships in 1992. Margareta Corti had been a lifelong employee of the municipality of Biel. In 1996 the two foundations were

merged to form the Aeschlimann-Corti (AC) Scholarships. Since 1996 the total sum of the annual pay outs was CHF 50,000, and, since 2005, CHF 70,000 could be distributed yearly among the award winners. The total amount is the sum of the yield from the foundation's capital stock and contributions from private benefactors and public funds. Artists under the age of 40 who live in the Canton of Bern are eligible to apply for AC Scholarships. The exhibition that takes place in conjunction with the scholarship awards is alternately mounted at four different venues from year to year: at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Kunsthaus Langenthal, the Kunstmuseum Thun and the CentrePasquArt Biel. Up to the present, all in all 226 scholarships have been awarded to 67 female artists and 130 male artists, 33 of whom have won two of the grants.

The exhibition catalog contains information about the scholarship holders. Otherwise you can find the same in the issues of *Lokaltermin Atelier I + II* of the BKG (available at our museum shop).



<b>Staircase hall:</b>	<b>1942-1951</b>
<b>Room 1:</b>	<b>1953-1962</b>
<b>Room 2 and 3:</b>	<b>1963-1972</b>
<b>Room 3 and 4:</b>	<b>1973-1982</b>
<b>Room 4 and 5:</b>	<b>1983-1992</b>
<b>Room 6 and 7:</b>	<b>1993-2002</b>
<b>Room 7, 8 and 9:</b>	<b>2003-2012</b>
<b>Vestibule:</b>	<b>Works from the BKG Collection</b>

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Partner of the Kunstmuseum Bern

## Staircase hall: 1942–1951

The 1941 deed of the Louise Aeschlimann Foundation states that painters, sculptures and printmakers were to be supported by annual scholarships regardless of gender. This funding was intended to promote artistic talent and enable study and further training and education both within Switzerland and beyond its borders. In 1942, the first year after the deed came into effect, there was no call for scholarship applications. Instead, the members of the foundation's management council brought forward suggestions. Very soon they agreed on awarding the first scholarship of CHF 1,000 to Max von Mühlener. The artist was requested to submit a «plan» of how he would invest the funding. But he ended up never traveling to Valais and taking advantage of the scholarship. Von Mühlener had opened up his own painting school in 1940 and it was soon to become a renowned Swiss institution. Later, around 20 Aeschlimann scholarship holders of both sexes would visit courses at his school.

Already in 1943, the AC's second year, a call for scholarship applications was sent out to its members. These artists were asked to apply and hand in works of art. In his office, the president of the foundation's management committee met up with six artists who had brought along examples of their work. Afterwards, the foundation's management committee visited the studios of the artists and, in an elimination process, chose the first female scholarship holder: Elsa Stauffer. The War hindered her from international travel, so she went to Zurich where she could pursue her artistic work without being disturbed.

Also in the following years, the respective juries adhered to judging the artists by strongly foregrounding artistic character and ability. Jury members ignored art trends in making their decisions and concentrated rather on artists who resolutely and rigorously pursued their goals. Each of the candidates had to justify why they thought they deserved a scholarship. After World War II it was finally possible to travel internationally too for further training and education within the framework of the scholarship. In 1946 the management committee decided that the shortlisted works of art were to be shown in a weekend exhibition, making them known to the wider public too. This gesture brought the scholarship awards a lot more publicity and renown. By 1947, five to nine artists of both genders annually applied for the scholarship. The committee did not want to support the same artists again and again. Additionally it was decided that, in the future, scholarship holders were to present the artworks executed while staying abroad to the foundation's management committee on their return. In this way the foundation had a more viable means of affirming the success of the scholarships and the opportunities they opened up for artists.

The first ten years were under the auspices of artists in the field of drawing, printing, painting and sculpture in the classical sense. On the other hand, as Fred Zaugg sums up this period of sponsorship, the juries singled out artists who introduced new elements and facets into art while pursuing highly individual forms of expression.

## Room 1: 1953 to 1962

As it still does today, the jury employed a process of elimination to select the winners among the applicants. If several of them were seen as deserving candidates for a scholarship at the end, the jury often offered those artists who were then not awarded the scholarship an alternative form of support by purchasing several of their artworks. In the records, judgments such as «failed due to being totally inadequate» are harsh. In 1952 the jury did not award a scholarship to the applicants with the following argument: «after discussing the case we find that these candidates too do not meet the requirements, especially in consideration of their age, being 29.» The scholarship money was therefore saved for next year's award so that two scholarships of CHF 1,000 could be conferred in 1953.

If we want to understand the award procedures we must consider the context of the times and not project later developments onto earlier art. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by the break from traditional middle-class values to more tolerant and individually tailored lifestyles. Two remarkable figures personify the dynamism at the time between tradition and breaking with the past: Max von Mühlener typifies the former and Arnold Rüdinger the latter. Both impacted the Bern art scene considerably: Max von Mühlener was the moderately modern director of the trend-setting Bern art school and Arnold Rüdinger the curator who brought the «Nouvelles Tendances» (New Tendencies) to the Kunsthalle. Combined with transregional influences, a machinery was set in motion that swept

everyone and every thing with it. The «Commerce» restaurant was affected, and many art bars, galleries and art journals were born in hitherto-unheard-of numbers and print runs, as Annelise Zwez points out in her contribution to the catalog. The submissions of the artists mirror the scope of art in these years: figurative styles, the influence of art informel, tachism and new large-format American painting. The most important criterium for the jury was a highly individual approach.

It was important to increase the still-limited funds of the foundation. Emilio Albisetti, the president at the time, therefore began a fundraising campaign enabling more generous scholarship awards. The CHF 1,000 per year scholarship money could be increased to CHF 4,000 from 1955 onwards, and during the following years there were even periods when the foundation could pay out CHF 7,000. Up to seven artists were distinguished by the award annually.

## Rooms 2 and 3: 1963 to 1972

During the 1960s the artists of Bern were witnesses to epochal developments. Harald Szeemann realized the exhibition *Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969 at the Kunsthalle Bern. Already since 1945 under Szeemann's predecessors Arnold Rüdinger and Franz Meyer, the Kunsthalle Bern had advanced to one of the leading international centers of the avant-garde. However, Bern's artists were not at the spearhead during these heroic years of modernism. The reason for this was perhaps that they had grown into somewhat pampered connoisseurs of modern trends due to the prominence of the avant-garde in the region since 1945. This is also the probable explanation for reception being narrowed down to pop art among the leading Bern artists in the turbulent 1960s, despite the excellent and vibrant up-to-datedness of the art scene in the region otherwise. And it helps us understand why Markus Raetz and Bendicht Fivian were quite alone in departing from traditional notions of the image in painting.

We discover the names of leading figures in cultural and artistic developments on taking a closer look at the jury responsible for awarding the scholarships from 1963 to 1972: Director of the Kunsthalle Bern Harald Szeemann as well as the curators Hans Christoph von Tavel and Sandor Kuthy at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the surrealist Meret Oppenheim, the sculptor in iron Bernhard Luginbühl, and Director of the Federal Cultural Office Max Altorfer. The jury additionally comprised leading artists such as Max von Mühlener, Mariann Grunder, Franz Fedier and Peter Stein, all of whom responded to postwar abstraction in their work. If we examine the award-winning artworks it is clear that the jury unanimously followed a consistent logic in making its decisions.

The jury members were able to resolve the different positions they represented by means of a remarkable compromise: they were open to new trends on the condition that the artists displayed their talent in their work as well as a high degree of artistic prowess. Seen from this angle it is understandable why a city that was so open to the avant-garde in art did not become a center for avant-garde art production at the same time. A large part of the art produced by the winners of the scholarship between 1963 and 1972 was in the traditional media of oilpainting and watercolor, drawings and prints, and was either abstract or realistic. Another segment comprised works that had taken up pop art. Without exception all the submitted artworks that won scholarships were technically brilliant to say the least. Seen in this light we cannot speak of an overt break with tradition. But, to paraphrase Matthias Frehner's description in the catalog, the art of this time is nevertheless infused with the spirit of change. Frehner sees the stance of the artists in breaking with the past as sober and low-key and not as loud and flamboyant rebellion.

From 1957 onwards, the BKG made efforts to obtain the sponsorship of the nearby cities and districts of Biel, Langenthal, Burgdorf and Thun so it could maintain the existing scholarship amounts until 1970 or even slightly increase them. In 1971 scholarships of CHF 11,000 could be granted after the Canton of Bern and the Burgergemeinde Bern der Stadt Bern joined the boat and generously subsidized the funding too. In 1972, the BKG held an art auction under the motto of «Bern artists support Bern artists». The success of this action enabled them to increase the scholarships to CHF 20,000 from 1973 onwards.

## Rooms 3 and 4: 1973 to 1982

The atmosphere of the Bern art scene shimmers through the artworks produced at the time. It is noticeable in the works that the artists were anchored in the contemporary world—and not just imitating other art or reliant on it—because their work impresses on account of its relevance to the epoch in which was made.

It is indeed remarkable that the various juries from 1973 to 1982 were so open-minded toward the topical nature of the submitted artworks. In 1969, the very latest developments in contemporary art came to Bern in the legendary exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*. Curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern, the exhibition made the city a focal point for international contemporary art. And, in 1972, documenta 5 in Kassel underscored an ambience of change and of doing away with past barriers in regard to semblance or materials—and of opening up unlimited possibilities, experimentation, conceptuality, environment, «individual mythologies».

In 1974 Bern's central railway station was complete after 17 years of construction work. Johannes Gachnang was successor to Carlo Huber at the Kunsthalle Bern in the same year and was the director there until 1982. He persistently mounted exhibitions featuring internationally forward-looking approaches—just like his competitor the gallerist Toni Gerber. Thus already very early, the Bern art scene was confronted with the latest developments, such as the expressive and gestural painting of A. R. Penck (1975), Georg Baselitz (1976) or Markus Lüpertz (1977). Gachnang had set a new course, like Ulrich Loock was to likewise do for painting at a later date. Painting was not dead, and in fact enjoyed an unbroken continuity in Bern. The Aeschlimann Scholarship too continued in its support of painting, as Konrad Tobler points out in his essay for the exhibition catalog. Additionally, the art scene had a protagonist who was involved in the group of the *Härdlütli*, namely Carlo Lischetti. This group engaged in Bern's municipal politics, representing the prevailing political climate of the 1970s and when the utopian notions of 1968 evolved into restlessness. In 1977 RAF terrorism peaked in the *Deutscher Herbst* (German autumn), reaching a dark climax that also left its mark on Switzerland and the political and cultural situation there. In 1978 the Canton of Jura was founded. A year later the Kunstmuseum Bern mounted the large Niklaus Manuel retrospective. In 1981 *Aktion Abbruch* (Demolition action) took place from April 6 to May 3. It was a farewell to the extension that had been built in the 1930s and which was replaced by the building Atelier 5 (Studio 5). This event evolved into a big happening in which many young artists participated.

In 1980 there were prolonged riots among the younger generation in many Swiss cities, including Bern. In 1981 the Autonomous Youth Center opened its doors to the young people at the Reithalle. But as early as 1982 the building was cleared again by the police. Alongside Wilfrid Moser and Peter Stein, the younger generation was generously represented at the Venice Biennale in 1980. Luciano Castelli, Martin Disler and Markus Raetz were among the younger artists. In this period several Bern artists formed the SILO artists' group. All of them were aged around 30. The Aeschlimann award winners George Steinmann, Jürg Moser and Heinz Mollet were among the members. SILO was not understood as a school because the views of the various members were too disparate. Rather it was conceived as a kind of art laboratory for art discussions and research. In 1981, the group presented itself to the public at the Kunsthalle and, in 1983, had a large exhibition at the Kunsthau Zürich, which marked both its zenith and its end. The contemporary Bern art scene had now obliterated its former regional character altogether. And henceforth the SILO artists each focused on exploring individual paths.

## Rooms 4 and 5: 1983 to 1992

Looking back, Alice Henkes portrays the 1980s in her catalog contribution as a somewhat blurred epoch characterized by fuzzy and flickering video images, loud colors and the sounds of synthesizers. It was an «anything-goes» period in which artificiality was simultaneously criticized and ironically charged, with terribly serious self-interrogation going hand-in-hand with tongue-in-cheek wit.

But when does a cultural period perceivably begin? Cultural developments do not proceed in tact with the seasons of the year, and it is difficult to pinpoint a beginning and an end for a constant flux. Fact is that the spirit of art in the 1980s was actually born a decade earlier.

In 1972 documenta 5 sent out an important signal. Under the cue of «individual mythologies» it grouped together artistic productions that confronted minimal art's demand for objectivity in the United States with a conscious commitment to subjectivity. Thus documenta 5, curated by Harald Szeemann, was one of the most internationally influential exhibitions to take place after World War II. It gave the signal for acceptance of growing plurality in art, of a stronger focus on the subject, but also of a respectful albeit rebellious referential interplay between high and

popular culture. By dismissing the idea of constant progress, artists developed a fascination for the past; they began to look back to earlier arthistorical approaches prior to abstraction and conceptual art. Early in the 1980s terms such as «wild» or «violently emotional painting» became the accepted vocabulary to describe recent art addressing political and personal issues in expressive painting modes. Video art was investigated further and further as well as the options it opened up, while performative and interactive artworks strived to find a more direct and stronger way of connecting to the public and their audience.

The sceptical and playful spirit of the 1980s created, in Bern and beyond, fertile ground for art experimentation and investigation. This is mirrored in the list of artists who were granted the Aeschlimann Scholarship between 1983 and 1991. In 1992 it was awarded for the first time together with the Margareta Corti Scholarship, and the regulations for the scholarships were altered. An age limit of 40 was set and the awards were divided up into scholarships and funding grants. And it was applied generally that an artist can only be awarded a scholarship once. The funding grants, however, are not subject to this stipulation.

## Rooms 6 and 7: 1993 to 2002

In 1992, documenta 9 in Kassel set the tone in many ways for art production and understanding in the years from 1993 to 2002. In his major exhibition, the then artistic director Jan Hoet made two trends palpably visible while also giving them a considerable boost: on the one hand, he mounted a large number of «multimedia artworks» and, on the other, chose exhibition sites that were attractive for a broad spectrum of the public. Multimedia art was not entirely new in contemporary art discourses. However, an exhibition featuring such a considerable number of works of this kind certainly was. Hoet pointed out the variety and possibilities opened up by multimedia art. Additionally Hoet sought to integrate art into everyday life to a greater degree. His way of achieving this was, for the very first time, to use the whole innercity Kassel area as a stage for art, and he had temporary steel pavilions erected to produce additional exhibition space. The notorious threshold that traditionally held the wider public from coming into contact with art was thus no longer a considerable step—art was literally everywhere. Documenta 9 became a major art event with a vibrant supporting program, which presented new forms of media and experiences to visitors. In one go two new terrains for art were opened up for the following years: multimedia art and art in everyday contexts.

Such trends found their way to Bern too. Operating together since 1995, the artists' group «Kiosk» became active in Lorrainequartier, a district of Bern. They sought to attract the attention of the broader public by confronting people with art on their way to and from work or shopping—while caught in their daily routines. In the eyes of the «Kiosk» group of artists the individual artwork was considered subordinate to art's sensorial impact on viewers.

As Annick Haldemann points out in the catalog, a favorite means of expression among Bern artists in the 1990s was employing new media in a diversity of ways. A previously unheard-of rich fund of new techniques came into use in art. A broad spectrum of multimedia art could be admired in the AC exhibitions from 1993 to 2002—as it can be at the present retrospective too.

Since 1992 the awards for scholarships are presented in rotation at four art institutions in the Canton of Bern: at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Kunsthau Langenthal, the Kunstmuseum Thun and the Kunsthau CentrePasquArt Biel. This provides the best exhibiting conditions for the artists. At the close of the 1990s, organization of the jury work became increasingly difficult. This is because up to 100 applications were handed in annually and artists had the option of submitting up to three works each. A presentation of the 200–300 artworks was no longer possible in the available exhibition space, let alone sufficient space for the jury members to be able to judge them fairly. Therefore a selection process in two phases was considered. It was only in 2004 that the corresponding regulations were introduced and such a procedure could be implemented.

## Rooms 7, 8 and 9: 2003 to 2012

Two major exhibitions at the beginning of the new millennium demonstrate palpably that in Bern too there was renewed interest in a large scope of political and social issues. Taking place every five years, the documenta in Kassel claims to point the way in contemporary art and addressing crucial current issues, a claim it shares with the Venice Biennale. In 2001 Harald Szeemann mounted his second Venice Biennale after already being

the artistic director in 1999. A year later the documenta appointed its first non-European artistic director, Okwui Enwezor from Nigeria. Coincidentally, both the major exhibitions were engaged with plateaus or platforms as their basic idea. Kathleen Bühler describes in her catalog contribution how Harald Szeemann strived toward making a statement on the fundamental characteristics of art based on his belief of the binding quality of humanity. And how his younger colleague saw the goal of contemporary art as creating «critical spaces» in which an «ethically and intellectually involved reflection on rethinking historical processes» could take place in order to reconsider the contradictory legacy of modern times and put it into perspective. Enwezor thought to not only make a contribution toward asking how and to what degree the art scene was impacted by globalization. He likewise sought to address how art could also be a player in face of the recent historical, political and social challenges facing the world. In contrast to the preceding decades, the AC Scholarship winners now too engaged in indepth scrutiny of global issues in their art. This was not only due to art funding broadening its scope to enable studio sojourns outside of the usual Western nations too. It was likewise linked to stronger international networking made possible through the internet. And not least, it was a reflection of the concerns of the very influential major exhibitions.

At this time the grant amount was increased again. Thanks to the generous support of additional private sponsors, since 2005 the AC Scholarship program is able to award a total of CHF 70,000, making it the most generous private grant in Switzerland. The number of applications increased again so that the twophase model that was introduced in 2004 became a necessity. The first step then—and still is—is for the jury to shortlist a selection of artists based on documents handed in by the applicants. Subsequently the shortlisted artists are invited to participate in the second phase of the selection process. The second phase involves the jury judging the original works of the invited candidates. In 2013 the BKG, in keeping with the opportunities offered by new technology, made it possible to apply online. Artists wishing to apply can now hand in their documents electronically at the portal [www.kunstgesellschaft.ch](http://www.kunstgesellschaft.ch).

### Vestibule: A small selection from the BKG Collection

The collection of the BKG is deposited at the Kunstmuseum Bern for safe-keeping. It is still the property of the Bernische Kunstgesellschaft. It was accrued in various ways. One of its first paintings, a picture of a farmer's wife executed by Niklaus König, was given to the BKG as a lottery prize at the Zürcher Kunstausstellung of 1814. However, it was sold because there was nowhere to keep the artwork. The painting by the Genevan artist François Diday *eine Alphütte im bernischen Hochgebirge* (a hut in the Bernese Alps, 1840) was purchased by share certificates and was the start of the BKG's painting collection. For this picture too the BKG had no adequate place of its own to keep it and bade the city for the painting to be hung at Erlacherhof. Today it is again among the BKG holdings deposited at the Kunstmuseum Bern making up a substantial part of the collection.

The BKG mounted art exhibitions in 1818, 1824, 1830, 1836, 1838 and 1840 in Bern at various venues. The organization was costly and time consuming. At the time these exhibitions provided the only opportunity for the general public to see art because there were no museums as yet. Since 1840 the revived Schweizer Kunstverein, on the initiative of the BKG, took on the chore of regularly organizing a national art exhibition. In this way the BKG reduced its workload and responsibilities so that it could concentrate more on expanding the collection with works from such nationally relevant exhibitions. The exhibitions brought contemporary art into the limelight and additionally fostered the newly revived art market. Art lotteries were introduced in which, by buying tickets, the purchaser—the BKG or another interested party—could win an artwork. In this way many artworks could be accrued by the BKG and became known to the public at large. The BKG regularly bought paintings from the exhibitions and added to its constantly expanding collection. In 1905, the BKG purchased its first painting by Cuno Amiet, *Mutter und Kind* (Mother and Child), and, in 1906, the first by Giovanni Giacometti, *Im Schein des Abendrots* (In the Glow of the Setting Sun).

The Schweizer Kunstverein continued its exhibiting activities well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although later the shows played an increasingly marginal role. The BKG accrued artworks on a regular basis by independent purchases or through bequests, providing an outstanding overview of Swiss painting from 1840 to the present. Over the years, the BKG bought 151 paintings for the Kunstmuseum Bern's holdings. The earliest painting among them is Joseph Werner's *Selbstbildnis mit Palette* (Self-portrait with a Palette) from 1654. It was acquired by the BKG in 1882. The most

recent painting is of flowers (*ohne Titel [Kapuzinerli]/Untitled* [Little Nasturtiums]), which was executed by the Bernese artist Hans Stalder in 1998 and purchased by the BKG at his studio in the year it was painted (another artwork by Hans Stalder that was acquired at the same time is on show in Room 6). All in all, a treasure trove of 1199 artworks has come together—comprising 150 paintings, 40 sculptures and objects, and otherwise works on paper—making up the BKG's holdings, which are now part of the Kunstmuseum Bern Collection. It is a substantial cornerstone for the collection's accentuation of contemporary Swiss art and its various manifestations.

## INFORMATION

### Curator

Annick Haldemann

### Admission fee

CHF 14.00/reduced CHF 10.00

### Private guided tours, school classes

Tel.: 031 328 09 11, [vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch](mailto:vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch)

### Opening times

Tuesdays: 10:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m.

Wednesday to Sunday: 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.

## CATALOG (in German / French)

**Feu sacré. Zum 200-jährigen Jubiläum der Bernischen Kunstgesellschaft BKG.** Eds. Kunstmuseum Bern, Matthias Frehner and Annick Haldemann. With essays by Kathleen Bühler, Matthias Frehner, Annick Haldemann, Alice Henkes, Daniel Spanke, Konrad Tobler, Fred Zaugg and Annelise Zwez. 216 pages, German and French. Jovis Verlag. ISBN: 978-3-86859-254-2. CHF 39.00

## The exhibition is placed under the patronage of:

Bernhard Pulver, Regierungsrat, Erziehungsdirektor des Kantons Bern  
Alexander Tschäppät, Stadtpräsident von Bern

## The exhibition has been kindly supported by:

Alex Wassmer



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