

Manuscript. Text published on <http://www.lenbachhaus.de/blog/> in March 2019

*Elif Kamisli is an author and researcher interested in spirituality and its relation to artistic practices. She is currently working on a publication and exhibition project which will be opened in 2020 in Athens, Greece. She is also the exhibition manager of the Istanbul Biennial.*

## **The Symposium on the *World Receivers* Exhibition**

**Lenbachhaus, Munich**

**25–26 January 2019**

The nineteenth century was a transition period, when humanity in the West witnessed dramatic changes. The rise of industrial machines, the extolling of science and consequent questioning of religion, as well as the belief in constant progress, trapped the souls of ordinary people in a hopeless stillness. Those lost souls who did not know how to live within this greyness started to look for something more than the physical world that surrounded them, yet did not embrace them. Contrasting with the destruction they had experienced, spiritualism, with its emphasis on inner life, feelings, personal development and a cosmic unity, had a healing effect. In a moment of grey stillness, spiritualism opened up a world of colours and movement and gave hope to heavy souls.

At the end of January, Lenbachhaus hosted a group of art historians, religious scholars, artists and researchers in Munich for an exceptional symposium shaped around the *World Receivers* exhibition co-curated by Karin Althaus and Sebastian Schneider.

Featuring works by Georgiana Houghton (b. 1814; d. 1884, United Kingdom), Hilma af Klint (b. 1862; d. 1944, Sweden) and Emma Kunz (b. 1892; d. 1963, Switzerland), *World Receivers* for the first time brings together a great selection of works by these three powerful spirits. Organized by the institution that is home to the world's largest collection of the art of the Blue Rider group, the exhibition unfolds the definition of abstraction in art through its connection with spiritual practices, and explores the singular role of otherworldly beings in the creation process. Focusing on each participating artist's practice and socio-cultural texture of her time, the lectures in the symposium examined the spirit of the age when a new artistic language was flourishing. While the works on display depict what is unseen to our physical senses, they humbly propose a strong statement for a holistic approach towards the universe: Their message comes from a state of being where all the distinctions dissolve and we become one with our surroundings.

The strong impact and presence of spiritualism and Theosophy in society and in artistic practice came

to an end around the 1930s and 1940s, perhaps “because of their political associations, which were clear and well known. The Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy, for example, was indebted to various versions of Theosophy.”<sup>1</sup> It did not return, apart from exceptional cases such as the work of Mark Rothko, until the late 1960s and 1970s, this time framed by psychedelia and the interest in Eastern traditions and utopias expressed by the hippie generation. In this context, *World Receivers* presents the experimental films by John Whitney (b. 1917; d. 1995, United States) and James Whitney (b. 1921; d. 1982, United States), and Harry Smith (b. 1923; d. 1991, United States) in dialogue with the works of Houghton, af Klint and Kunz.

This mesmerizing exhibition, which can be visited at Lenbachhaus Kunstbau until 10 March 2019, offers new perspectives to its visitors regarding the contextualization of the birth of abstract art, and boldly questions the pre-defined artistic qualifications.

Organizers of the two-days event, Karin Althaus, Lars Bang Larsen, Marco Pasi and Sebastian Schneider, state that “bringing together international experts to discuss this phenomenon from historical, art-historical, feminist, and media-theoretical perspectives; the symposium pursues a methodological approach, which does not consider the genesis and rise of artistic abstraction as a purely formal innovation, but rather seeks to interpret it in terms of the contexts of its emergence.” The symposium gives a unique opportunity to extend our understanding as regards the artistic practices formed around spirituality and mediumistic activities. The entanglements unveiled in the lectures enrich our perception and offer alternative narrations about the history of European modern art.

In my text, I will try to summarize the ideas presented in this symposium hoping that it would strengthen the bonds between the creators of these timeless works and the Lenbachhaus audience.

## **25 January, Friday**

### **Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam): *The art of esoteric posthumousness***

Focusing on the term of “esoteric posthumousness”, Marco Pasi’s lecture starts with the references from recent history investigating the connection between spirituality and modern art. Sixten Ringbom’s seminal book *The Sounding Cosmos: a study in the spiritualism of Kandinsky and the genesis of abstract painting* (1970); *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* exhibition at LACMA (1986); and *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, modernism and the Arts c. 1875-1960* symposium (2013) hosted by The University of Amsterdam, are some of the reference points indicating that art historians should not neglect the strong impacts of spirituality in the formation of abstract art.

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” in *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 1986, p. 18.

Pasi defines posthumousness as “the inability or unwillingness to have one’s artistic work promoted and recognized during one’s lifetime, which projects the work into a temporal limbo of obscurity that may last decades or even forever.” Posthumousness can arise when one is unable to integrate in the art system, or uninterested to be a part of it. The works of Olga Froebe-Kapteyn (b. 1881; d. 1962), Ithell Colquhoun (b. 1906; d. 1988), and recently discovered Luigi Pericle (b. 1916; d. 2001), the books of Fernando Pessoa (b. 1888; d. 1935), and the music of Giacinto Scelsi (b. 1905; d. 1988) could be analysed under this category.

“Esoteric posthumousness” appears as a common point for Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz. The following scenarios are possible: 1) Living masters or spiritual guides impose it. 2) The idea of immature world, which cannot comprehend the messages hidden in the work of art, is present. 3) The artist negates the art system since it contains different sets of values.

Georgiana Houghton was trained as an artist, and her practice was mostly shaped by her mediumistic practice. During her lifetime, she showed her works publicly. In 1871, Houghton rented the New British Gallery on Old Bond Street in London and opened a large exhibition including more than 150 works. In her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Houghton wrote: “To make the character and design of this Exhibition understood, I must explain that in the execution of the Drawings my hand has been entirely guided by Spirits, no idea being formed in my own mind as to what was going to be produced, nor did I know, when a stroke was commenced, whether it would be carried upwards or downwards.”<sup>2</sup> Despite her efforts, Houghton’s practice couldn’t reach larger groups. According to Pasi, her posthumousness is caused by the fact that her practice didn’t fit the existing art system.

“Although educated as an academic painter and active in this profession, after 1906 Hilma af Klint distanced herself from the conventions of her time and, influenced by Spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, and Theosophy, developed a unique pictorial language that is often purely abstract. She systematically explored the immaterial contents of another, higher, world and captured these in symbolic works, resulting in far-reaching series with organic or geometric abstractions in unusual combinations of colour and form.”<sup>3</sup> Af Klint showed her paintings in Theosophical circles; however she decided in 1932, they should not be exhibited until twenty years after her death. In her case, higher beings or living masters caused the posthumousness.

Emma Kunz was a healer and her drawings, which were made under the guidance of her pendulum, were used in relation to the health of a person. Neither did she have an interest in the art system nor was she connected with spiritual communities. Similar to Hilma af Klint, Kunz also believed that her works were for future, for a time where people would have an advanced understanding of the spiritual realm.

---

<sup>2</sup> Karin Althaus, Matthias Mühlhng, Sebastian Schneider (Eds.): *World Receivers. Georgiana Houghton – Hilma af Klint – Emma Kunz with films by John Whitney, James Whitney and Harry Smith*, exh. cat. Lenbachhaus Munich 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

All of them wrote texts about their own works. Houghton published most of them, af Klint destroyed a part of her notebooks and others remained unpublished, Kunz succeeded in publishing two books explaining her technique however they were not widely distributed. While Houghton and af Klint wrote extensively on the meaning embedded in their work, Kunz preferred to leave them unexplained.

Despite differences, there is one more common point in their practice that needs to be emphasized: The works of Houghton, af Klint and Kunz were not for their age, their practice was beyond their time. They belong to a future in which spiritual progress and evolution would happen.

Due to gender inequality, their works were not evaluated fairly; however, their strong desire to project into a future life, significantly contributed to their artistic quality. Through this idea Houghton, af Klint and Kunz created a space for free experimentation, which could let them develop a new artistic language.

**Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR Center for Studies on New Religions, Turin): *When Spirits Paint: Is There a Spirit Art?***

In order to underline the power of spirit painting, Introvigne begins his presentation with two quotations from Waldemar Januszczak, marking the positive shift in his approach to spiritual art after visiting Georgiana Houghton exhibition in 2016.

Introvigne's lecture presents three different cases of spirit painting: 1) During a spiritual séance, precipitated paintings appear on canvas without the use of human hands, and mediums claim that the spirit directly produces the paintings. David Duguid (b. 1832; d. 1907), Allen Campbell (b. 1833; d. 1919) and Charles Shourds (b. 1863; d. 1926) known as the Campbell Brothers, Elizabeth (b. 1859; d. 1920), and May (Mary) Elvira (or Eunice) (b. 1862; d. 1917) known as The Bang Sisters, Gustavo Adolfo Rol (b. 1903; d. 1994), and Laura Holloway (b. 1848; d. 1930) were some of the well-known artists/mediums for the "precipitation" practice. 2) Mediums sketch portraits of the spirits who claim to be present in a spiritual séance. The novelist Victor Hugo (b. 1802; d. 1885), Wella Percy (b. 1833; d. 1900?) and Lizzie Pet Anderson (b. 1839?; d. 1896) known as The Andersons painted the portraits of deceased people through their mediumistic gift. There are also artists who are following the same methodology today. 3) Spirits guide the hands of the medium in order to produce different works of art rather than their own portraits. Thus the Brazilian trance painter José Medrado's works channelling the spirits of Renoir or Degas.

From this perspective, it is important to re-study "outsider art" which includes many interesting examples; such as the Swiss medium Hélène Smith (Catherine-Elise Müller, b. 1861; d. 1929), who painted inter alia visions of the Planet Mars and was studied by psychiatrist Théodore Flournoy (b. 1854; d. 1920); Madge Gill (b. 1882; d. 1961) and Anna Zemánková (b. 1908; d. 1986). Especially

with the support of scholars of Western esotericism, art historians have recently started to acknowledge the impacts of spirit-guided artists in the birth of European modern art. Georgiana Houghton's mediumistic works contain an unusual artistic expression for her age. Hilma af Klint's practice has an enigmatic quality which requires in-depth study.

Even though abstract imagery existed prior to Kandinsky, he can still be considered the founder of abstract art due to his writings, which gave a theoretical base to the movement. During the first part of the 20th century, there were many artists who were deeply inspired by Theosophy, and the seminal books *Thought Forms* (1905) and *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902) written by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater. František Kupka (b. 1871; d. 1957) and Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (b. 1875; d. 1911) were among these modern painters whose works were shaped in the light of Theosophy.

Today it is necessary to analyse the spiritual movements within modern art history. Houghton and af Klint were anticipatory to their times, and therefore their works need to be studied in relation to Kandinsky and Mondrian.

**Raphael Rosenberg (University of Vienna): *The Amimetic Strategy of Visualizing the Invisible and Its Relation to Twentieth Century Abstract Art***

Firstly, Rosenberg explains that creative production in mediumistic painting, which was mostly practiced by artistically untrained women, was a form of urgency and did not claim a place in the art system. Secondly, he explores the amimetic strategy and its tradition. Since middle ages, non-figurative forms were used in paintings, especially in Christianity to depict the creation scenes. Some parts of the six days of creation in Hartmann Schedel's *Chronicle of the World* (1493) were purely non-figurative. Matthäus Merian's etching *Hyle* (1617) depicts a black square while discussing the primordial matter. However, it is essential to mention that these amimetic works were not abstract as they did represent something invisible. Theophile Bra (b. 1797; d. 1863) and Victor Hennequin (b. 1816; d. 1854) were also coming from the long tradition of picturing invisible phenomena with amimetic forms.

Rosenberg argues that Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint traced the tradition of amimetic painting. In order to advocate his point, he states the differences between amimetic mediumistic painting and Abstract Art: Firstly, amimetic paintings were produced to depict invisible things (e.g. Matthäus Merian, *Hyle*, 1617), to relate the discourses on the aesthetic of effect (e.g. Mary Gartside, *Crimson (Blot)*, 1805) or they were produced by chance (e.g. V. Hugo, *Stains*, 1850s/1860s, 8 x 17 cm). Secondly, there were different relations between picture and content. While Robert Fludd's black square (1617) had an iconographic approach, Kazimir Malevich's black square (1915) had a different content and subject matter. Thirdly, these figures had diverse reasons for following amimetic strategies in their practice. For Kandinsky, Malevich and many others, abstraction represented the end of modernism. They aimed to make a painting, which was not done before. Kandinsky was not the first

person who painted non-figuratively, but he was the first to define abstract art. As the comparative study of Christina Bartosch shows, Kandinsky exhibited widely between 1908-1915, and he showed abstract works before anyone else between 1910-1911. Even if there were a strong tradition of amimetic painting prior to him, in his theoretical work, Kandinsky defines abstraction.

**Panel discussion: Marco Pasi, Massimo Introvigne and Raphael Rosenberg; moderated by Karin Althaus**

**Point 1.** Panel speakers discussed if Georgiana Houghton or Hilma af Klint had followed a tradition of non-figurative artistic expression used in religious texts since middle ages. Marco Pasi explains that we don't have any prove indicating Houghton or af Klints's studying old texts. Their artistic production was formed in a moment of trance; therefore it could be difficult to integrate them into this tradition.

**Point 2.** Massimo Introvigne presents his perspective as a sociologist regarding the term of "discovery." It should be considered that something cannot be discovered unless it is shared with others. In this context, it is inappropriate to be unclear about the discovery of abstraction since Kandinsky did its theorization.

**Point 3.** It is important to consider that there existed a gender inequality during the artists' life time. The art historians' perspective was formalist, secular and male; and from this point of view, the practice of Georgiana Houghton or Hilma af Klint was not relevant to the art system. Therefore, it is crucial that in our times we take into consideration the conditions of Western art history.

**Point 4.** It can be said that spiritualism and theosophy strengthened the position of women in male dominated societies, however they still faced serious challenges when trying to promote themselves as artists within society. Ann Braude's book titled *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989) is a reference text on the subject.

**Lea Porsager (Artist, Copenhagen): FAR OUT – CØSMIC STRIKE**

In her lecture, Porsager explains her recent work, titled *CØSMIC STRIKE* (2018), which comes to life as a result of her interest in spirituality, taking the practices of Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz and Lee Lozano as a background. *CØSMIC STRIKE* is an immersive 3D animation that generates visions from a 62 minute long Kundalini kriya undertaken by the artist in one of CERN's empty offices, a Tired Tantric Experiment. The visions are accompanied by the sound of a mantra ("Isht Sodhana Mantra Kriya") and a neutrino horn from CERN's storage facility. The work explores the neutrino, which is an enigmatic, mysterious particle that challenges some of the models currently being researched in contemporary quantum physics.

Lea Porsager defines *COSMIC STRIKE* as a superposition of hard science and loopy mysticism, which aims to invoke a repetitive, occult, and oddly interstellar scene. Starting with Quantum Mysticism, a term used for the combination of spiritual concepts with quantum matter, the artist uses Karen Barad's "Agential Realism" theory as a conceptual framework for her work.

After explaining the reference points constructing her work, the artist poses a question regarding the renegotiation of obstructed historical relationships between esotericism and physics. Her work, as a play between esoteric, quantum scientific and feminist affairs, depicts Porsager's dedication to esoteric ideas that requires full commitment. Even if channelling spiritual matters can be a risk in the art system, the artist believes that encountering otherworldly thought-forms might help us to detach from our anthropocentrism and extend our vision to encompass new responsibilities.

**Simon Grant (Curator and editor of Tate Etc. magazine, London): *Georgiana Houghton: Wonders of the Worlds***

One of the co-curators of the *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings* (2016) exhibition at the The Courtauld Institute of Art together with Marco Pasi and Lars Bang Larsen, Simon Grant in his presentation focuses on the practice of Georgiana Houghton and traces her inspirational resources through an examination of the spiritual movements and scientific developments happening in her times.

Georgiana Houghton stated in the catalogue of her 1871 exhibition that the works were: "representations of real objects growing in spirit regions, and not simply allegorical, as I had thought probable," and she described them as "a kind of transparent external network, which gives a warm glow to the whole."

Like other members of her family, Houghton was a Christian and her art also functioned as a tool to awaken Christianity in a materialist age. The resources of her visual language are unknown to us as her artistic education and any otherworldly influences remained unspoken.

Houghton was extremely active in Spiritualist circles, had an extensive network of friends and colleagues, and read widely. Grant believes that Houghton was also highly aware of the social, political, artistic and scientific ideas of the day, and it is possible that she absorbed something of these ideas into her work. Hers was a time when different theories (such as the world of Swedenborg, Franz Anton Mesmer's idea of animal magnetism, Carl von Reichenbach's idea of Odic force) were developed in order to explain invisible forces. Many important thinkers and scientists were followers of spiritualism, and therefore had a connection with Houghton. One of them was Cromwell Fleetwood Varley (b. 1828; d. 1883), who came from a family of artists and scientists. His grandson John Varley (b. 1850; d. 1899) contributed to *Thought Forms* (1905) by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater with

his watercolour drawings. In the drawings of Houghton colours are used in a highly schematic way. It is possible that she was aware of John Varley's publication *List of Colours* (1818), or Goethe's *Colour Theory*. Grant notes that Houghton chose Red, Yellow, Blue in order to depict her key messages—of the Holy Trinity—at a moment when the RYB colour wheel was a current scientific topic.

In addition to her mediumistic drawings, Houghton was also a self-taught photographer and had an advanced interest in spirit photography. It was the era of the Magic Lantern, the Panorama and the Dissolving Scenes. The kaleidoscope was invented in 1818, and became a domestic object during Houghton's adulthood. The first public aquarium in London was opened in 1853. Marbling books was popular. Shawls with the Persian teardrop motif were widely used. These were the elements enveloping her in London where she spent her life. Grant underlines that Houghton would have taken visual cues, however small, from her immediate surroundings; and worked with a diverse mix of influences, consciously or unconsciously, to create her unique style.

#### **Lars Bang Larsen (Moderna Museet, Stockholm): *Politics of Imperceptible***

In his presentation, Lars Bang Larsen investigates the liberal and egalitarian views embedded in Modern American Spiritualism in relation to 1848 revolutions in Europe, Marxist theory and critics of authoritarianism associated with fascist ideologies in the mid-20th century. His reading on Modern American Spiritualism forms through the concept of "spectrality" which was coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx* (1993). Derrida was the first philosopher who was open to the ghost in the sense that he employed the figure of the ghost to pursue an investigation – specifically of the way that Marx as a thinker of the world market haunted texts, philosophy, political discourse, and life under globalization. Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, which was the year that the movement of Modern American Spiritualism had started. Marx preserved his prejudices about spiritual movements despite its wide acceptance, and claimed that spirituality is a way to disconnect with material reality.

Modern American Spiritualism, a movement without leaders or dogma, had no generic identity. In addition to their mediumistic activities, the Modern American Spiritualists developed a progressive approach towards abolitionism, feminism, and liberal vision of religion and represented a more open position compared to the more sharp-edged ideologies in Europe. The movement provided equal opportunities to women, and Ann Braude states "Not all feminists were spiritualists, but all Spiritualists advocated women's rights." Lars Bang Larsen highlights that spiritualism's conception of femininity is a particularly compelling point because of feminism's historical continuity, and because of the feminist premise, in a wider sense, of *World Receivers*. As a matter of fact, spiritualism affected many souls in America in the second part of the 19th century. However, the anti-slavery and non-discriminative approach of Modern American Spiritualism created antagonism towards the movement in the years following Civil War. The movement was also criticized for having established ties with fascism in the

years of World War II. Taking Modern American Spiritualism as a reference, it can be said that Spiritualism was an anti-authoritarian movement—despite its internal contradictions—given the values embedded in its roots.

**Panel discussion: Simon Grant, Lars Bang Larsen and Lea Porsager; moderated by Marco Pasi**

**Point 1.** Centering on the persona of Georgiana Houghton, it is stated that interdisciplinarity is an important aspect for spiritual artists. It is common that they write and paint as part of their isolated production processes.

**Point 2.** The rise of spiritualist movements in America can be related to the multi-religious structure in American society. Despite Marx' criticism of spiritualism, his communist manifesto was first printed in English in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, a publication co-established by Victoria Woodhull, who was a spiritualist and the first woman candidate in the US-presidential elections in 1872. Woodhull an activist for women's rights and labour reform published the *Weekly* between 1870-1876, and joined the International Workingmen's Association, also known as the First International. In 1872, together with a large group of English-speaking members, Woodhull was expelled from the Association with the approval of Marx. His opposition to spiritualism declines to all egalitarian aspects in the movement.

**Point 3.** Performativity is a subject to discuss when dealing with spiritual artistic practices. Performance becomes a central element in some cases, such as mediumistic painting; but it is irrelevant to some others like Hilma af Klint.

**Daniela Stöppel (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): *The artistic Work of Elena Guro (1877-1913) as Practiced Female Aesthetics of the Dissolution of Boundaries***

Stöppel's lecture focuses on Elena Guro (b. 1877; d. 1913, St. Petersburg), a not very well known Russian artist who produced abstract drawings in the early 20th century. Trained as a painter, Guro also published three books between 1909-1914. She was married to Mikhail Matyushin, and was part of the Russian avant-garde circles. While Guro's practice remained largely unknown, Matyushin became one of the leading figures of the Russian avant-garde. He experimented extensively with colours and music, and worked on a colour theory.

Guro was naturalist, and spent most of her life in the countryside. She also practiced yoga and meditation in order to open her senses and strengthen her connection with natural elements. Her devotion to nature was reflected in her practice and she depicted natural elements such as minerals, rocks, stones, and plants in her works. She believed that through following certain techniques, the distinction between a person and her surroundings would dissolve and they would become one. Under

the effects of panpsychism, Guro lived and produced with an understanding that everything is accessible on a spiritual level. It is important to explore Guro's practice since she represents a group of female artists who made passiveness and receptibility as crucial qualities of aesthetic conception. The study of her practice introduces a new perspective into Russian avant-garde movements and the history of abstraction.

**Julia Voss (Leuphana University of Lüneburg): *Five Things to Know About Hilma af Klint***

In early 1930s, Hilma af Klint decided to destroy her notebooks after copying the important parts. The motivation behind this destructive act by an even-tempered person remains unknown. She was the editor and archivist of her own work, which consists of 26.000 pages and more than 1.300 paintings. Currently working on an extensive biography of Hilma af Klint, Voss presents five important points about the artist in her lecture.

1) Hilma af Klint painted some of the most original abstract works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and she exhibited them: She did her first abstract series between 1906 and 1908 (*Primordial Chaos, Group I* in 1906, *The Ten Largest, Group IV* in 1907 and *Evolution, Group VI* in 1908), which demonstrates the development of her practice. During these years, she developed her unique visual language including symbols and figures combined with abstraction. Af Klint became the secretary of the Swedish Woman Artists' Association and her works were shown within its group shows. In order to make her own exhibitions, she compiled her "suitcase museums", she copied her large paintings in notebooks, to show to others and convince them of her work. She visited Rudolf Steiner in Dornach in 1920 with her suitcase museum, however he again showed no interest in her work (she had shown her work to him before.). Af Klint participated in an exhibition held in connection with the World Conference of Spiritual Science in London in 1928 . However, in 1932 she decided that her works should not be exhibited for twenty years after her death.

2) Hilma af Klint traveled: Before she started *The Paintings for the Temple* (1906-1915), which eventually comprised several series and altogether 193 works, af Klint traveled to Northern Italy to study the art of the Renaissance.

3) Hilma af Klint developed her spirituality systematically: The artist started to participate in her first séances in 1879, her sister's loss strengthening her connection with the higher world. Af Klint established *The Five* in 1896, which created the spiritual base for her automatic drawings. Rosicrucianism, the writings of Helena Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner were important resources for her. Additionally, her life-long friendship with Anna Cassel had a significant role in the continuation of af Klint's practice. Her complex visual language contained different symbols such as repetitive hermaphrodite snails.

4) Hilma af Klint had a thorough scientific education: Several male members of the family were navy officers, and af Klint's scientific education started before her spiritual evolution began. The symbolism used in map making had an impact on her work. She also did illustrations of animal anatomy. Her series *Evolution, Group VI* and *The Atom Series* reflected on her interest in science and the occult.

5) Hilma af Klint designed a spiral temple and searched for a third way: Spirals started to appear in her works in 1916: It was in 1930 and 1931 that she made designs in her notebooks for a spiral-shaped and glass-roofed building. The artist was aware of the trends in academic art as well as avant-garde movements, however she never joined them or showed her works within the art system. The ultimate goal of af Klint was to exhibit all her paintings in a holistic presentation which she thought would be possible in a spiral shaped building that she depicted in her designs.

**Panel discussion: Daniela Stöppel, Julia Voss; moderated by Sebastian Schneider**

**Point 1.** For Hilma af Klint measuring the unseen went hand in hand with her lifestyle. She led a modest life; she was respectful to her environment, to all people; she was a vegetarian. As Iris Müller-Westermann, curator at the Moderna Museet, has stated figurative and non-figurative forms are both present in her works. There are also many symbols, which challenge male authority, which could be one of the reasons that her practice was underestimated for a long time. The focus on reunion in the paintings can be related to the spiritual reunion in alchemy, Hilma af Klint had knowledge about alchemy especially through her interest in theosophy. Additionally, the theories of Emanuel Swedenborg are present in her diaries from 1870s to 1890s through the notions of a soul mate or soul friend. Rosicrucianism is another reference point for her as it is seen in her notebook from 1907.

**Point 2.** Botanic motives and research on nature are also visible in the works of Elena Guro and Hilma af Klint. This connection with nature was a kind of liberating force for them. From an animistic perspective, they desired to be one with nature without dominating it. Their position as receivers could have been one of the main reasons for the start of a new visual language.

**Point 3.** When we consider the recognition of these artists, it is important to examine the actors who construct art history and these actors' relation to art market. None of these female artists' works were on the art market, and this can be recognized as one of the reasons behind their underrepresentation.

**26 January, Saturday**

**Walter Kugler (Social Sculpture Research Unit, Brookes University, Oxford): *Every Human Being Is a Clairvoyant. The Balancing Act Between the Sensual and the Supernatural Worlds***

**1. Harry Smith, John and James Whitney, Emma Kunz, Hilma af Klint, Georgiana Houghton**

As investigated by Sebastian Schneider in his text for the catalogue of *World Receivers*, Harry Smith and the brothers John and James Whitney produced films in order to reflect the richness of the spiritual world. Smith was a shaman and occultist, and he tried to connect the material with the spiritual in his films. James Whitney was a spiritualist and his work was increasingly tied to esoteric interest. Together

with his brother John, who was working in the film industry, they created electronically generated, abstract imagery.

Emma Kunz was a healer researcher who used a pendulum for her drawings. Hilma af Klint, a painter trained at the Academy in Stockholm, received messages from higher beings and meticulously recorded the words. Georgiana Houghton was also trained as an artist and medium, who produced automatic drawings led by spiritual beings, angels, and archangels.

## **2. Barnett Newman, Sigmar Polke, Joseph Beuys, Rudolf Steiner**

Barnett Newman explained his mission as a kind of interplay between spirit and matter, the sacred and the profane, the essential and the insignificant in his essay *The Sublime Now* (1947). Sigmar Polke had worked on a series entitled *Higher Beings Commanded* between 1966 and 1969. And Joseph Beuys' connection with Rudolf Steiner's ideas made a great impact on his work.

Steiner stated in a lecture in Munich in 1918 that "every human being is a clairvoyant" when he or she is able to turn off everything ever learned. We observe this ability in the practice of Hilma af Klint at three different instances; firstly, in automatic drawings, secondly, in her mediumistic style of painting, and lastly, in her anthroposophical painting technique. Indicating her decision to turn off everything she had learned, af Klint wrote in *Studies on Soul Life* (1917-1918): "In order to do a job, I have been forced to leave what was in my youth the yearning of my heart: to reproduce the outward form. In other words, I was really forced to retire from my field of work and laboriously climbed up the ladder."

Rudolf Steiner extensively wrote about the connection between occult vision and artistic creation. During his lecture in Munich on 5 May 1918, he also mentioned: "I would like to pronounce the paradoxical, but true sentence: Everybody is a clairvoyant, but theoretically you deny it where you can not deny it. If you denied it practically, it would destroy all life... Art is supposed to express what the artist is capable of putting into his design, only in that his soul experiences it in connection with the world, that his body is a microcosmic image of the whole macrocosm. If this is to be brought to consciousness, this can only happen through the visionary. [...] What lives in artistic creation brings to the consciousness of the seer, only the artist must not have the fear that so many have before the scholar. The two areas can live side by side in the human personality."

Nourished by these ideas, Steiner created a blackboard drawing depicting two circles in blue and yellow during his lectures in 1924. The colour of the centre point is in each case the opposite of the surrounding circle, and his hand writing states "God is in me, I am in God." God represents the macrocosmos while 'I' represents the human micro-cosmos. The words written on the blackboard come together with the graphic gestures and merge to form a single image.

The works of these artists carry messages from higher spirits, represent an unknown world, and explore the relationship between macro and micro cosmos in different time frames. However the theories of

Rudolf Steiner served as a significant intellectual base for discussions about spiritual art, which could "calibrate" our thoughts on the subject.

**Pascal Rousseau (Sorbonne University, Paris): *The Creative Act, The Artist as a Mediumistic Being***

Rousseau's lecture centres on the idea of a mediumistic role of the artist, which was developed by Marcel Duchamp. In 1915, Duchamp described the artist as a medium, someone who is not fully aware of what he is doing. During his participation in *The Western Round Table on Modern Art*, San Francisco Art Association (1949), he stated: "We don't emphasize enough that the work of art is independent of the artist. The work of art lives by itself and the artist, who happened to make it, is like an irresponsible medium. No artist can say at any time: I am a genius. I am going to make a masterpiece. That is not done." Later, Duchamp developed his ideas on the subject and presented them at the *The Convention of the American Federation of Arts*, Houston, Texas (1957) and published it under the title of *The Creative Act* (1957).

Duchamp's idea of the physical separation between artist and artwork was very different from modernist theories. While abstract expressionism highlighted the involvement of the artist's hand and body in the production process (such as Jackson Pollack and Georges Mathieu), Marcel Duchamp was detaching the representation of the self from the formation of the artwork. In this context, his practice could be considered the mediumistic anticipation of the death of the author.

*The Death of the Author* (1967) by Roland Barthes proposed the re-birth of the reader through an elimination of the ownership, and their use as ready-made signs. Aspen 5+6: *The Minimalism Issue* (1967) published the first English translation of *The Death of the Author*, and that particular issue included also an audio recording of Marcel Duchamp's essay *The Creative Act* read by the author. In 1969, Michel Foucault gave his lecture *What is an Author?* at the Collège de France which responded to Roland Barthes.

The spiritual tradition has been discussed during the symposium's lectures, however it becomes more interesting when the artist is positioned generally as a "medium", an intermediary who is between the higher world and the physical world. This positioning could be interpreted as the anticipation of distance between the author and work. Michel Eugène Chevreul's book *De la baguette divinatoire* (1854) claimed to be written by a chair on the island of Guadeloupe. Fernand Desmoulin had automatic drawings; Henri Rousseau painted under the influence of his dead wife. Duchamp played with the idea of distance in French theory and the tradition of artist as a medium.

The acheiropoietic image was produced under the direct influence of the spirits, without the hand of the artist. David Duguid (b. 1832; d. 1907) was one of the first spiritual painters who produced precipitated images in public séances.

While Duchamp was advocating his ideas on the mediumistic artist, Gustavo Adolfo Rol was discovering his power and making paintings by the order of spirits. Rol stated: “There exists a psychic form, a pure immaterial energy endowed with extreme power, capable of generating matter and dissolving it, by forming atoms and shattering them. (...) This psychic energy can be revealed (...) with materialised appearances, input, dematerialisations, direct or indirect writings. These facts do not have the slightest possibility of being attributed to physical causes, and completely escape the laws of the physics of this world.” In 2017, Tony Oursler, whose grandfather was a magician, opened an exhibition at Pinacoteca Agnelli, titled *Paranormal*, in dialogue with the works by Gustavo Rol. *Paranormal* was inspired by the occult world and the tradition of animistic images made by spirits. In this context, the practice of Oursler can be read as the continuation of Marcel Duchamp’s ideas on the mediumistic artist who plays with creation, authority and invention.

While reviewing mediumistic art, it is critical to include Marcel Duchamp’s position in the discussion which provides a new context with regard to the artist’s involvement in the creative processes.

**Robert Stockhammer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): *Media as Media. Some Interferences between Parapsychic Practices and Communication Technologies***

In his presentation, Stockhammer explores the concepts of “media” and “magic” with respect to their link with the spiritual in art. In the late 19th century, media was commonly used a personal agent in a particular practice. In the 1940s, its meaning became associated with mass media. Their structural affinity is in the fact that media make something visible or audible what would not be visible or audible without them in the here and now.

Stockhammer suggests that in order to describe the epistemological implications of this constellation, it is necessary to expand the context through the use of the word *magic*. From 1880 onwards, *magic* begins to play a crucial role in various disciplines: Religious studies, alchemy, theosophy, and psychoanalysis showed interest in the term *magic* as it proposed a re-unification of science and the occult.

Firstly, *magic* was not to be understood as the opposite of science, but rather as science itself. Carl Du Prel (b. 1839; d. 1899) claimed that “magic is unknown science” in his book *Magie als Naturwissenschaft (Magic as Science)* published in 1899. Secondly, *magic* was understood to be no longer the opposite of psychology. While spiritualists believed in spirits, the parapsychologists aimed to prove the very same things as paranormal phenomena. Thirdly, *magic* was no longer the opposite of

*technology*. Thomas Alva Edison was alternatively nicknamed "Phonograph's Papa" or "The Wizard of Menlo Park." As the protagonist of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Ève Future* (1886), he created an android called Hadaly, a multimedia system in every respect, by implanting two golden phonographs into her, but also by hypnotizing a 'real' (human) woman in order to somehow extract her nervous fluid.

Emma Kunz stated that her works were for future. Considering her works today, it is critical to contemplate on her resources. As one of her drawings indicates, Kunz's practice could have been affected by the leading contemporary medium of the mid-20th century, which is television. Universal test cards are designed for securing the precision of the transmission itself, *they are referring to the channel*. Stockhammer claims that Kunz's images indicate the existence and perfection of the channel itself, rather than a deeper message. In this sense, Kunz's practice could be related to a contemporary media theory, concentrated in a sentence written down just one year after her death in 1964: "The medium is the message."

**Panel discussion: Walter Kugler, Pascal Rousseau, Robert Stockhammer; moderated by Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi**

**Point 1.** It is important to re-evaluate the concept of "magic" in discussions about the connections between spirituality and art. In occultism, magic is the technique used by a medium who is totally conscious; however in spiritualism, the medium relinquishes the autonomy of the self during séances. The tension, which was caused by magic in Western history, is very important.

**Point 2.** When mediumistic practice is considered from Duchampian perspective, it is necessary to re-evaluate the role of the artist as the author of the artwork but at the same time as a complete recipient. Georgiana Houghton wrote the explanations of the messages in her works on the back of her drawings; Hilma af Klint wrote about the meaning of her works in private notebooks, however she preferred them to be open to viewers' interpretations. During their times, many women were shut in mental clinics as they claimed to hear voices of otherworldly beings. This might be considered one of the reasons behind the unshared meanings in their works.

**Point 3.** Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and Rudolf Steiner's image "God is in me, I am in God." (1924) have the same archetypal image.

**Point 4.** When Duchamp's success is analysed it is crucial to consider the institutional power; he was an artist with credibility. But Georgiana Houghton or Hilma af Klint didn't have the same institutional structure supporting their practice. Considering these historical facts, the beginning of modern art should be rewritten, and today museums should enrich their vocabulary and use new terms to respond the practices emerged with spirituality.

**Point 5.** Previous exhibitions have presented the works by Hilma af Klint and Kandinsky together. *World Receivers* chose to concentrate on one phenomenon to slowly (and in future steps) being able to diversify and sharpen definitions of abstraction in various contexts.