VISIONARY
- On Hilma af Klint and the Spirit of Her Time -

Friday October 12th 2018
A Symposium Arranged by
Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation
Together With Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Front cover: Group X, No. 1, Altarpiece (Grupp X, nr 1, Altarbild), 1915 from Altarpieces (Altarbilder)
Oil and metal leaf on canvas, 237.5 x 179.5 cm
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A SYMPOSIUM ARRANGED BY
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Around the turn of the 20th century there appeared in Europe and in the USA new spiritual and social movements such as Theosophy and later Anthroposophy that richly contributed to pioneers of modernism and abstract art.

Champions of modernism in art such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, as well as Hilla Rebay and Frank Lloyd Wright were all influenced by these new modes of thoughts. These ideas were a potent mix of Eastern philosophies, Christian mysticism, and spiritism coupled with the latest developments in science, such as electromagnetism and the theory of relativity. The wish to make the invisible visible is seen in all of these artists’ work.

In 1906 the Swedish artist and spiritualist Hilma af Klint began painting her first abstract series *Primordial Chaos* featuring blue, green and yellow geometrical shapes and spirals. Af Klint was herself a follower of Theosophy and Rudolph Steiner. Her main work, *Paintings for the Temple*, all in various degrees of abstraction, express what she calls the higher truth: unity beyond duality and the material world and mankind's spiritual evolution.

What was the zeitgeist like that inspired such eruption of abstraction in art, across Russia, Europe and the USA? This symposium wishes to take a closer look at the character of the turn of the 20th century in order to better understand the artist Hilma af Klint, who up until recently was known only in small circles. It is also of interest to understand the quality of our own time - how do we perceive af Klint today? The triumphant appearance of her works of art over a hundred years after they were made is a testament to the persevering and revelatory power of her work, but also tells us something about the quality of the current moment where women artists like af Klint are being fully recognised and added to the art historical canon.

This symposium aims to discuss the impact of Theosophical and other esoteric ideas as well as new scientific discoveries upon early abstract art in the USA and Europe, with particular interest in how these influences played out in the visionary work of Hilma af Klint, and how they continue to shape our understanding of her achievements. It is the last of a series of seminars on Hilma af Klint organised by the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation since 2013 and part of the Foundation's ongoing effort to further the dissemination of scholarly knowledge within the Humanities and Social Sciences.
Program

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2:00 Welcome Kurt Almqvist, President, Axel and Margaret Ax:son
Johnson Foundation and Tracey Bashkoff, Senior Curator, Collections and
Exhibitions at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

2:10 Introduction to Symposium Moderator Patricia Berman

2:20 Daniel Birnbaum The Incredible Legacy of Hilma af Klint

2:40 Julia Voss 5 Things One Should Know About The Life of Hilma af Klint

3:00 Tracey Bashkoff Parallel Visionaries: Hilla Rebay and Hilma af Klint

3:20 Discussion led by Patricia Berman

3:40 COFFEE BREAK

4:10 Isaac Lubelsky New York 1875 - The Birth of Theosophy

4:30 Linda Dalrymple Henderson Visions of Space and Matter:
Hilma af Klint in Her Occult/Scientific Context

4:50 Marco Pasi Afterthought Forms: The Changing Role of Esotericism
between Modern and Contemporary Art

5:10 R. H. Quaytman +x, Chapter 34

5:30 Discussion led by Patricia Berman

6:00 Closing remarks
Group IV, The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood (Grupp IV, De tio största, nr 7, Mannåldern), 1907 from untitled series. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 235 cm
BIO: Kurt Almqvist is the President of Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for public benefit since 1999. He is the founder of *Axess Magasin* (2002) and of Axess Television (2006) which is part of the Foundation’s programme *Forum Axess*, which started in 1999, as well as editor of the Foundation’s seminars and books.
Hilma af Klint. The Ten Largest, No. 1, Childhood, Group IV, (Grupp IV, De tio största, nr 1, Barndom) 1907. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 322 x 239 cm.
ABSTRACT: Hilla von Rebay and Hilma af Klint, both strong-willed artists, were dedicated to their beliefs in the potential of art to hold spiritual value. A generation apart and unacquainted with each other, each engaged in the teachings of Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, and Rudolph Steiner to her own degree, and was informed by a similar set of particularly modern intellectual movements.

Hilma af Klint created The Paintings for the Temple as testament to the higher spirits with whom she communed and as missives of the beliefs she received, which she felt destined to convey to the world. She envisioned her life's work filling a round building, where visitors would progress upward along a spiraling path, on a spiritual journey defined by her paintings. Hilla Rebay dedicated herself to non-objective painting – nonrepresentational art with no links to the observable world – as both an aesthetic style and a manifestation of a spirituality. As art advisor to Solomon R. Guggenheim, Rebay integrated her beliefs into the formation of Guggenheim's collection and the conception of its eventual home, the Frank Lloyd Wright designed Guggenheim Museum, a “Temple to the Spirit.”

Knowing the extent to which Rebay's and af Klint's aesthetic and spiritual ideals were aligned, growing as they did from the same social currents, their stories have compelling points of intersection in their positions at the forefront of abstraction in the early twentieth century.

BIO: Tracey Bashkoff is Director of Collections and Senior Curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. She joined the Guggenheim in 1993 and has contributed to over 20 special exhibitions covering a range of 20th-century subjects. Most recently, she curated Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future and R. H. Quaytman: + x, Chapter 34, both of which are currently on view at the Guggenheim. She has previously organized a number of exhibitions, including Agnes Martin (2016), Art of Another Kind: International Abstraction and the Guggenheim (2012) and The Great Upheaval: Modern Art from the Guggenheim Collection, 1910–1918 (2011). In 2008–9, she co-organized the international retrospective Kandinsky. In addition to her work on exhibitions, Bashkoff oversees the care and management of the Guggenheim's collection.
Untitled, 1920 from On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees (Vid betraktande av blommor och träd)
Watercolor on paper, 17.9 x 25 cm
BIO: Patricia Gray Berman is the Theodora L. and Stanley H. Feldberg Professor of Art at Wellesley College, where she teaches the art and visual culture of the late 19th-, 20th-, and 21st centuries, as well as Propaganda Studies. An art historian specializing in the art of the turn of the twentieth century, she is particularly interested in national identity formation, issues of gender and sexuality, and in the problems of public space. Her books include studies of the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, the Belgian artist James Ensor, and Danish painting in the nineteenth century. Curatorial work has included "Edvard Munch and the Experimental Self" (2017), "Munch, Warhol, and the Multiple Print" (2013); “Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America, A Centennial Retrospective 1912-2012” (2011); "In Munch’s Laboratory: The Path to the Aula" (2011), “Edvard Munch and the Modern Life of the Soul” (2006); "Edvard Munch and Women: Image and Myth" (1997); and "Modern Hieroglyphs: Gestural Drawing and the European Vanguard, 1900-1918" (1995). Her current work examines the material cultures of racial science.
No. 2a, The Current Standpoint of the Mahatmas (Nr 2a, Mahatmnas nuvarande ståndpunkt), 1920 from Series II (Serie II) Oil on canvas, 36.5 x 27 cm
Daniel Birnbaum

The Incredible Legacy of Hilma af Klint

*BIO: Daniel Birnbaum has been the Director of Moderna Museet since autumn 2010. Between the years 2000-2010 he was the Rector of Städelschule in Frankfurt and Director of the Kunsthalle Portikus. He is contributing editor of Artforum in New York and has curated a number of large exhibitions, including "Airs de Paris" at Centre Pompidou in Paris (in co-operation with Christine Macel) in 2007. He was the Director of the 2009 Venice Biennale.
Group I, Primordial Chaos, No. 16 (Grupp 1, Urkaos, nr 16), 1906-1907 from The WU/Rose Series (Serie WU/Rosen) Oil on canvas, 53 x 37 cm
ABSTRACT: Like so many other of the pioneers of abstract painting in the early twentieth century—Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian—Hilma af Klint was deeply grounded in the context of her time, including both occult and scientific ideas. Yet the history of early twentieth-century art has been written with very little knowledge of the international context of occultism and science as popularly known in this period. It was not Einstein, whose ideas became known to the public only in 1919 after an eclipse expedition confirmed one of the postulates of Relativity Theory, but rather late Victorian ether physics that dominated conceptions of matter and space in the early years of the twentieth century. Discoveries such as X-rays and radioactivity as well as the space-filling ether itself offered new paradigms of matter as transparent and dematerializing into the ether or being born from the ether—suggesting analogies to conceptions of the interpenetration of matter and spirit in Theosophy, for example. Another highly popular notion at this moment, the possible existence of a fourth dimension of space holding a truer reality, was likewise embraced by the Theosophists C. W. Leadbeater and Rudolf Steiner. Indeed, Steiner, so crucial for Hilma af Klint, lectured internationally on the work of Charles Howard Hinton with the four-dimensional hypercube as a practical model for developing higher consciousness. This lecture explores the paintings of Hilma af Klint in the context of ether physics and the Theosophical response to it as well as to the popular fourth dimension of space.

No.1 (Nr1) from The Atom Series (Serie Atom), 1917. Watercolor on paper, 27 x 25 cm
ABSTRACT: New York City attracted quite a few spiritual seekers, occultist movements and arcane orders during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It seems that the most prominent and influential of those was the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907).

What were the characteristics of the New York spiritualist milieu during the 1870’s? How can they explain the American attraction to the Theosophical message? How did Blavatsky and Olcott promote their Society in its early years in New York? This paper will try to shed some light on these issues, and deal with the relatively short period of time, in which the Theosophical Society was operating from New York City, between 1875, the year of its foundation, until 1879, when its two founders sailed to India and made it the center for their future Theosophical activities. Olcott was a New York attorney and a retired Colonel who served in the civil war, and was later one of the three-member commission appointed by the US congress to investigate President Lincoln’s assassination. He was interested in spiritualism, like many Americans in his time, who believed in the existence of the Other World and wished to communicate with ghosts. This interest was the base of his friendship with Blavatsky, whom he first met in 1874, when both attended the Eddy family farm in Vermont, to witness with their own eyes the supernatural phenomena and communications with spirits that have supposedly occurred there. Olcott spent three months at the farm, during which, as he reported in a series of articles in the New York Sun and the Daily Graphic, he witnessed daily contacts with the world beyond. His first meeting with Blavatsky struck him deeply. Her piercing gaze and her compulsive smoking habit impressed him. In his memoir he described their first encounter: “I said: ‘Permettez moi, Madame,’ and gave her a light for her cigarette; our acquaintance began in smoke, but it stirred up a great and permanent fire.”

Though dramatic, his description was accurate enough. The encounter engendered the creation of the Theosophical Society, which was destined to have a distinctive influence over Western spiritualism, and generated the modern cultural practice, which the current research refers to as the New Age movement. As Wouter Hanegraaff describes, the New Age movement represents the historically innovative phenomenon of a secular type of religion based upon a radically private symbolism. It seems that the Theosophical Society, as I will show, played a pioneering role in creating this phenomenon.

Blavatsky was born in 1831. In 1848 she married Nikifor Blavatsky, the deputy military governor of Erevan in Armenia. The marriage lasted only three months,
after which Blavatsky ran away from her husband and wandered for many years before arriving in America. After a long stay in Egypt, she claimed to have spent more than seven years in Tibet, during which time spiritual teachers, whom she called Mahatmas or Masters, instructed her. These Masters were, according to Blavatsky, members of a body called the Great Brotherhood, consisting of a succession of spiritual teachers who had influenced human history. From time to time, they approached evolved individuals, such as Blavatsky herself, who aspired to be their apprentices. They instructed her to create the Theosophical Society and advised her to go to America and visit Vermont in order to meet Olcott, "whose Karma linked him to her as the co-agent to set this social wave in motion."

In October 1874 Blavatsky returned from Vermont to New York, and Olcott joined her in November. Her apartment at 46 Irving Place soon became a lively meeting-place that attracted various more-or-less dubious spiritual types. The two friends, imbued with a sense of mission, attempted to launch a spiritual society, which they did on 7 September 1875, with the presence of 17 guests who came to Blavatsky's apartment. That gathering led to the foundation of the Theosophical Society, and to the election of Olcott as its President. Blavatsky was elected Corresponding Secretary and William Quan Judge (1851-1896), a junior advocate in Olcott's law office, was chosen to be the secretary of the Society. Once the Theosophical Society was founded, Blavatsky and Olcott rented two suites of rooms at 433 West 34th Street, one above the other. Their premises hosted further gatherings of occultists, and served as their main working space.

Blavatsky wrote for New York newspapers the whole time she lived in the United States, winning a reputation for herself and the Society. However, her writing abilities matured in her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, a 1200-page work, published in 1877. This book raised a large interest and was read by influential figures, among them Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931), who joined the Theosophical Society after reading it, on 4 April 1878.

One of the main issues in *Isis Unveiled* was the question of the birthplace of Western esotericism and magic. Unlike her predecessors, who usually comprehended Egypt as the source of magic, Blavatsky claimed that India was the cradle of esoteric lore. This perception made her and Olcott decide to move to India in 1879, a short time after she became a US citizen. Olcott activated his old political connections and won an official appointment for the journey, signed by President Rutherford Birchard Hayes (1822-1893), alongside a State Department appointment as an official emissary of the US Administration. Armed with these documents, the pair constituted an official American delegation empowered to look into the possibility of expanding the commercial interests of the United States in Asia. Olcott and Blavatsky's departure from New York ended the first chapter in the history of the Theosophical Society, a history that would witness several quite astonishing chapters in future years.
BIO: Isaac Lubelsky studied at the School of History, Tel Aviv University, where he received his Ph.D in 2005, under the supervision of Prof. Davis S. Katz. His postdoctoral research was conducted at the Stephen Roth Institute for the study of Antisemitism and Racism, Tel Aviv University, supervised by Prof. Dina Porat. His diverse research and teaching fields cover the history of Theosophy, modern colonialism, the modern encounter between East and West, New Religions, and the study of modern racism and genocide. He has taught at several Israeli universities (Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ben Gurion, and the Open University) and is the academic coordinator of genocide studies and India studies at the Israeli Open University. His recent book, Celestial India (Equinox, 2012) is a comprehensive study of the history of ideas that evolved as the consequence of East/West encounters during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and deals extensively with the early history of the Theosophical Society and its contribution to the change of India's image in Western eyes and to the birth of India's nationalist movement. His recent article, “Allan Octavian Hume and the Foundation of the Indian National Congress”, will be published later this year in Tim Rudbog and Eric Sand (Eds.), Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

3 Ibid, 20-22.
Group V, The Seven-Pointed Star, No. 1n (Grupp V, Sjustjärnan, nr 1), 1908 from The WUS/Seven-Pointed Star Series (Serie WUS/Sjustjärnan) Tempera, gouache and graphite on paper mounted on canvas, 62.5 x 76 cm
Abstract: Starting from the 1970s, there has been a considerable amount of research on the relationship between theosophy, or more generally esotericism, and modern art. Although there may still be differences of opinion as to the extent of the influence of theosophy on the origins of abstraction or in the development of the early 20th-century avant-gardes, it would be naïve for an art historian today to deny that such an influence existed at all.

The fact that esoteric ideas coming from movements such as theosophy and anthroposophy influenced modern art so significantly depends very probably on several factors. One of them has to do with a shared impulse towards radicalism and innovation. It seems clear that the radicalism of new forms of artistic expression such as abstraction had something to do with the radical, often countercultural visions of esotericism, or to the particular kinds of subjective experiences that modern esoteric movements facilitated, and which could be visually rendered through images of “thought-forms” or some such representation of non-objective reality. These aspects seem to have played a decisive role for women artists such as Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, who developed forms of “abstraction” even before abstraction was conceptualised and appropriated by the artistic avant-gardes. Experiences of alienated agency and creative dissociation, which were available in the context of spiritualism and later of Theosophy, were essential for Houghton and af Klint in order to break away from more conservative and canonical forms of art that were still predominant in their times.

When considered in this light, we can begin to understand the underlying reasons for the pervasiveness and ubiquity of esotericism in modern art. What has been less studied, however, is the role that esoteric ideas, images and experiences are still playing today in contemporary art. Not much research has been done on the influence of theosophy on post-WW2 art. This is probably due to a number of factors: on the one hand there might be the idea that, whereas theosophy was a very innovative and dynamic movement at the turn of the 20th century, it lost much of its momentum, and therefore of its influence, during the period between the two world wars. On the other hand, this may be related to a perception of contemporary art as essentially secular and uninterested in spirituality. There are good reasons to believe that both assumptions are not correct, or need at least serious qualifications. In fact, not only is it quite easy to find contemporary artists deeply interested in spirituality, especially in its “alternative” forms, but it is also possible to find more specific references to theosophy. One can actually notice even a recent regain of interest in theosop-
hy from contemporary artists, which is certainly a striking phenomenon in itself. Another interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that many of these artists, such as Goshka Macuga, Lea Porsager, and Christine Ödlund, are women, just like Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint before them.

What can we gain from a comparison between the role of esotericism, and more particularly Theosophy, at the turn of the 20th century and at the turn of the 21st century? Such a comparison may show how this role is not fixed or univocal, but may take on different forms and functions, which, to a large extent, depend on the changing statuses of both art and esotericism in contemporary societies.

As a preliminary illustration of this point, I would refer to the way in which the theosophical material is handled by contemporary artists. Here we notice that painting, which was so important in the reception of theosophical ideas during the early history of the movement, has been mostly replaced by other media, such as installations and performances, which are typical of the new languages of contemporary art. As I said above, for many artists in the early 20th-century theosophy acted as a very powerful stimulus to develop innovative artistic forms such as abstraction. This does not seem to be the case in contemporary art. Installations and performances may be seen as new media with respect to more traditional forms of art, but they have been legitimised and institutionalised by the art establishment throughout the 20th century and cannot be seen as revolutionary or innovative today. Contemporary artists using them, even when they make reference to theosophy or other forms of alternative spirituality, are not doing something comparable to what early painters of abstraction such as Hilma af Klint were doing at the turn of the 20th century.

They are rather inscribing themselves into what has become a solid, recognised tradition of artistic expression. If we want to find a meaning for the use of theosophy in contemporary art, we need to find it somewhere else. This is in my view the desire to re-enact a story that is perceived as extremely significant, which is precisely the story of earlier influences of theosophy on modern art. There is therefore in contemporary art a historical consciousness that tries to reactivate certain meaningful moments of the past as an implicit criticism of the present. This seems to be evident not only for the work of individual artists such as Porsager and Ödlund, but also, and perhaps even more, in the work of art curators such as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who are creating theosophically-inspired frameworks for some of their exhibitions. While this confirms the relevance of esoteric ideas for understanding certain aspects of modern and contemporary art, it also points to a reduction of radical energy, where abstract forms take on the shape of an afterthought.
BIO: Marco Pasi is Associate Professor (UD1) in History of Hermetic Philosophy and related currents. He holds a Laurea degree in Philosophy from the University of Milan, and a DEA and a PhD in Religious studies from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne, Paris). He has focused his research mainly on the relationship between modern esotericism and politics, modern esotericism and art, the history of the idea of magic, and on methodological issues related to the study of western esotericism. He is the editor in chief of the *Aries Book* Series (Brill), founding member of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), co-chair of the Western Esotericism Group at the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Since 2014 he is the General Secretary of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR).
Hilma af Klint. The Ten Largest, No. 3, Youth, Group IV, (Grupp IV, Ungdom, Nummer 3) 1907. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 321 x 240 cm.
BIO: R. H. Quaytman is a painter based in New York and Connecticut, whose work is currently the subject of a solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Previously, the artist has had solo exhibitions at the Secession, Vienna (2017), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2017), and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2015), among other institutions. Quaytman is the recipient of a Rome Prize fellowship from the American Academy in Rome and the 2015 Wolfgang Hang Prize. The artist’s writing has appeared in monographs, exhibition catalogues, and periodicals, including Artforum and October.
Group IX/SUW, The Swan, No. 17 (Grupp IX/SUW, Svanen, nr 17), 1915 from The SUW/UW Series (Serie SUW/UW) Oil on canvas, 150.5 x 151 cm
**JULIA VOSS**

5 THINGS ONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE LIFE OF HILMA AF KLINT

*ABSTRACT:* Ever since Hilma af Klint’s work was rediscovered in 1986 the audience was confronted with a mystery. Who was this Swedish artist who painted large abstract paintings in Stockholm already in 1906? How did she do it? What was her background and what inspired her? Paradoxically, in contrast to her great work the world she lived in has been constructed as rather limited. Until recently for example it was believed that she did not leave Sweden until late age when she traveled to Rudolf Steiner’s spiritual center called Goetheanum in Switzerland. It was said that she wanted to keep her avantgarde work secret during life time and only exhibited her academic oeuvre. It was also said that she stayed within a small circle of female friends who shared her interest in spiritual matters. In short, Hilma af Klint has been portrayed as a withdrawn person with little or no interest in the contemporary. In consequence she was seen as detached from the art world.

Based on new research my talk will show that all these claims turn out to be false. Hilma af Klint, coming from a family of navy officers, travelled regularly and as far as Italy. She continuously fought for possibilities to exhibit her spiritual avantgarde work and did so in 1928 in London. For the longest time she did not intend to keep her paintings secret. It was in 1931, when she was almost 70 years old, that she designed a spiral shaped temple for her work and afterwards decided her pictures and notebooks should not be published until 20 years after her death. Throughout her career, from the academy until late age, she studied art history. Moreover, she was in exchange with many fellow artists of her time.

My talk will present a new and surprising image of Hilma af Klint. I will present the 5 most important facts about her biography and will show that the artist intended nothing less than to revolutionize the art world and society.

**BIO:** Julia Voss, born in 1974, studied German Literature, Philosophy and Art History in Freiburg, London and Berlin. She did her Ph.D. in Art History on *Darwin’s Pictures. View of Evolutionary Theory – 1837 to 1874* (Yale University Press, 2010). She was the Deputy Head of the cultural section of the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the head of the arts department for ten years. She is currently fellow at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg - The Göttingen Institute of Advanced Studies with a project on Hilma af Klint. She is Honorary Professor of Art History at Leuphana University in Lüneburg.
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