Seeing is Believing
On Hilma af Klint’s Importance Today

AN INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ARRANGED BY
AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION
TOGETHER WITH THE SERPENTINE GALLERIES
AT THE GOETHE-INSTITUT ON MAY 9TH 2016
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 234 cm.
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Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation has the pleasure to bring together an international panel of speakers including Professor Briony Fer (UCL), Professor Branden W. Joseph (Columbia University), Professor David Lomas (University of Manchester), Hans Ulrich Obrist (Artistic Director, Serpentine Galleries) and Daniel Birnbaum (Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm) for a seminar on the Swedish pioneering artist Hilma af Klint. This event is being held on the occasion of the last week of the exhibition **Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen** at the Serpentine Galleries, (3 March – 15 May 2016). The exhibition is co-curated by the Serpentine Galleries in collaboration with Daniel Birnbaum.

The aim of this seminar is to advance the understanding of Hilma af Klint’s visionary work; the impact it is having in our own time, over a 100 years after their extraordinary creation, and how af Klint expands our notion of art history.

The Foundation has arranged a number of academic seminars on the artist Hilma af Klint and the evolution of abstract art since 2013; at Moderna Museet Stockholm, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, Museum of Modern Art Louisiana and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo, as well as published an essay volume *Hilma af Klint- The Art of Seeing the Invisible*. This seminar is arranged by the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation together with the Serpentine Galleries, as a part of the Ax:son Johnson Foundation’s ongoing effort to further the dissemination of scholarly knowledge.
PROGRAMME

MONDAY 9TH OF MAY 2016

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2:30 PM  VIEWING of the exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery

3:30 PM  REGISTRATION and REFRESHMENTS

4:00 PM  WELCOME by Kurt Almqvist, President, Ax:son Johnson Foundation

4:05 PM  INTRODUCTION by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Director, Serpentine Galleries

4:15 PM  The Botanical Roots of af Klint’s Abstraction by Professor David Lomas

4:30 PM  Hilma af Klint: Image-worlds and Spirit-worlds by Professor Briony Fer

4:45 PM  Abstract Painting and af Klint by Professor Branden W. Joseph

5:00 PM  DISCUSSION moderated by Daniel Birnbaum, Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

5:30 PM  CLOSING REMARKS by Daniel Birnbaum

5:35 PM  SEMINAR Ends
© Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk. Photo: Moderna Museet/Albin Dahlström
Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 322 x 239 cm.
BIO: Kurt Almqvist is President of Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson foundation for public benefit since 1999. He is founder of Axess Magazine (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.
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Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 234 cm.
Daniel Birnbaum

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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.
BIO: Briony Fer has written extensively on modern and contemporary art. She has produced numerous essays on artists including Helen Marten, David Batchelor, Roni Horn, Gabriel Orozco, Jean Luc Moulene and Ed Ruscha as well as the outsider artist James Castle. In addition to a major monograph on abstraction, *On Abstract Art* (1998), her recent books include *The Infinite Line* (2004) and *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (2009). She is currently preparing an exhibition and monograph on the work of Gabriel Orozco to be held at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh from July 2014. She is Professor of History of Art at University College London.

SYNOPSIS: Briony Fer discusses the work of Hilma af Klint in the context of a history of diagrammatic representation. Paying particular attention to her serial production of abstract schema, she approaches af Klint’s work as part of an image world, conforming to existing patterns of ‘diagramming’, drawn from colour theory and other esoteric graphic practices.
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Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 234 cm.

SYNOPSIS: Responding to a slight that Hilma af Klint’s works were “not paintings,” Joseph will discuss the status of her work in relation to the development of abstraction and the role that spiritualism plays in their development and current status with the history of art.
BIO: David Lomas is Professor of Art History at the University of Manchester. He has written extensively on the visual culture of surrealism. His books include *The Haunted Self* (2000) and *Simulating the Marvellous* (2013). A current research interest concerns botanical themes in modern and contemporary art. He has curated the exhibitions *Subversive Spaces* (Whitworth Art Gallery 2009) and *Narcissus Reflected* (Fruitmarket Gallery 2011). He is also a practising artist.

SYNOPSIS: One cannot fail to be struck by the prevalence of floral and plant motifs right across Hilma af Klint's oeuvre, from exquisitely observed botanical studies of flowers through to *The Ten Largest*, her crowning achievement as an abstract painter. My talk will survey her treatment of botanical subjects and speculate how this interest in botany may have been linked with an impulse to abstract. A first clue lies in the fact that Art Nouveau was at its zenith at the time of af Klint's artistic formation in the 1890s.

A tendency to abstract stylization in Art Nouveau botanical decoration carries across to af Klint's abstract painting, resulting in a positive connection between the decorative and the abstract, something which male “pioneers” of abstract art were generally keen to disavow. During the same period, botany was the locus of a discourse about form and morphology that had important aesthetic crossovers. Such views licensed a tendency to extract quite general formal, morphological principles from nature. A resurgent vitalism, taken up avidly by theosophy which attributes spirit and soul to plants, and related aesthetic notions of empathy, are other factors that can be seen to link botany with abstraction. My talk will conclude with some thoughts about botany as a source of af Klint's ideas about the overcoming of gender dimorphism, an important principle for her as she took on the mantle of abstract artist against enormous odds.
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Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 234 cm.
HANS ULRICH OBRIST

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BIO: Hans Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968, Zurich, Switzerland) is Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries, London. Prior to this, he was the Curator of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Since his first show “World Soup” (The Kitchen Show) in 1991, he has curated more than 300 shows. Obrist’s recent publications include Conversations in Colombia, Ways of Curating, The Age of Earthquakes with Douglas Coupland and Shumon Basar, and Lives of The Artists, Lives of The Architects.
ORGANISATION

President: Kurt Almqvist
Project Leader: Louise Belfrage
Project coordination: Amelie Danielsson and Alexander Nyquist
Staff at The Serpentine Galleries: Claude Adjil and Lucia Pietroiusti

Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation
Stureplan 3, 103 75 Stockholm, Sweden
Telephone: + 46 8 788 50 50
www.axsonjohnsonfoundation.org