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The Institute for  
Contemporary Art,  
P.S. 1 Museum  
and The Clocktower Gallery  
46-01 21st Street  
Long Island City, NY 11101  
718-784-2084

Alanna Heiss  
President and Executive Director

January 9, 1989

To Staff:

Attached please find a copy of Ake Fant's lecture  
in the gallery on Hilma Af Klint. I did very little  
editing. The narrative is as close to Ake's words as  
possible.

NOTE:

There are some parts which I could not hear on the  
tape.....etc.

There may be some minor errors aside from my usual  
typo's. Please inform me if you catch any. I hope  
you enjoy!

Thanks,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "George Yank". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.



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Arima at Flint

Lecture given by Hke Fant, at P.S. 1, January 6, 1989

Rm 1

Start with a series called the EVOLUTION SERIES, it's not the very first one. That series starts with figure painting and then it changes; figure painting, figures in a very bad mood; ...depressing, but then you have the lotus flower, and then everything changes; and then after that you have the EASTER LILY on that side; and she notes about that Easter Lily "Well it had to be brought a bit to the right hand side, so one side is a bit predominant."

And then it was on with the Evolution Series, and they become more and more abstract to the pattern, as you can see and she works very much with the surface, the Plane Surface, like this, with red and black, it changes as you can see,

Tom: are they chronological?

Ake: Well they're not quite chronological, because of the hanging, they had to change a bit.

Well, the second series that she painted in this specific mood, are the paintings here, the Pink ones on that wall and that Green one on the back wall there, across.

P: These are matched?

A: Yes, they belong together in one series, and that's the last one in that series, that pink one to the right.

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You will see the very first painting from 1903, when she has ceased painting portraits and landscapes - she had been a landscape and portrait painter, and was known as that in Sweden, and if you look in a Dictionary of Swedish Artists, she's known for that, and they are noted works till 1905, and then there are no noted works, and nothing is written about her work since that time. Now, the specific things are happening.

From the 1880s she was deeply involved with Spiritists, and work in the Spiritists, you know, you work with Automatic Writing, and Automatic Drawing. And after that work, she also got messages from Spiritist Leaders, and they told her in 1905 that she was to have a commission, the commission at first would last for one year. And she had to prepare herself for one year from 1905 - 1906, and then she started working like in the Spiritistic drawings, with the pen or the pencil working lightly, and after that with the forms, and this is called her "Primordial Chaos" and this is her very first one, and you can see a form like an Embryo in this painting, and she speaks about thunder and waves, and out of that cosmos begins to work out.

And we have the second painting ..and it goes on. There are 26 paintings of this size in the series of which we have 4, and she works with green, yellow and blue, and as it goes on the forms become more and more evident; and some words and some sounds are written on the painting. This is not a word just a sound;

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And in the meantime, between 1908 and 1912, she says "Well, during that time I became Clairvoyant. And I can also heal with my hands." And then she says "The clairvoyance of the senses, how does it work?"

Ake has found one example of that - she cured a man who was very sick with her hands, 1908.

She never married, she took care of her mother from 1908.

Questions: Why did her friend cooperate, and write down what Hilma said?

Ake: There was a group forming around her; the group of female friends who saw her as a leader, and they always noted everything she said - there are piles of books where everything is noted what she said; so we have so many books with handwritten texts about that. And that group was very close, they called themselves the Five, The Friday Group; they had their meetings on Fridays. They were 2 friends from



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the Art HS Academy in Stockholm, among others.

And so she changed her way of painting.

All these were Paintings for the "TEMPLE" she conceived of a temple in a spiral form, theoretically, all together, but never had enough money to build it.

The Swan Series, 1914.

As you can see there are swans in the paintings, and there is a sort of mirroring, the left side mirroring the right, the white swan the black side. And we can also follow that we have those colors, blue here, yellow here, the feet are blue.

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Her first works, she was a Spiritist; then she came into Theosophy, with ? and Steiner, Theosophical Ideas, and these, referring to the paintings, are representatives of Theosophy, Theosophical Ideas; at



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THE ALTAR PAINTINGS, the final series for the Temple

And I think, in looking at these paintings that they are, so to speak, recordings sort of MEDITATIONS, looking upon them, notice for example, how the forms change, more and more, as they change to a round form, and then turn in the other direction, and you can meditate in the space. And also the colors, they are very bright, and as they are getting darker and more forceful. And then you have the Sun put off.

And then reversed some how, with the triangle pointed downwards. And look how she's handling the surface, she's mixing tempera and oil colors. Notice the surface; and how she perhaps now works on the Floor, in #2, because we now have traces of a female person who walked on the canvas.

The triangle form and the globe above.

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Further evolution of the SWAN SERIES

Here we have another aspect, in this room, of forms mirroring each other, of a bright field over a darker field, she puts a sort of a shadow over her colors so that they are getting darker, with sort of prismatic forms pointings upwards and downwards; and you have that



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Tom: Was there a lot of abstract painting in Sweden at this time?

Ake: None at all.

Alanna: Who was working in Europe in 1912?

Ake: She's born in 1862 and she died in 1942; Kandinsky is born in  
1866 and dies in 1944; Mondrian 1872 - 1944; Munch 1862 - 1944. It's a  
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Malevich, a bit younger, 1870s, contemporary with the Suprematists,  
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We do know that Kandinsky was not interested in Steiner's way of working as an artist, but in his theories. Out of the theories of Baschet, Laratsky, and Steiner, Kandinsky worked out his very specific way of abstraction. So out of theory, more than out of example, like Mondrian, they worked out coming into a more abstract, non-representational pattern. They are working with very specific sources, with man meditating.

When Hilma met Baschet and Steiner, they pointed out to her that you couldn't work out of an atavistic way, like a Shaman... you had to work out your intellect on your own, and that is what I suppose, she tried to do in her painting. And the paintings are examples of that way of working.

And we can see how her work shifts...Mondrian-like colors red, blue, yellow, and notice the details of the colors in the paintings. (I can't make out the rest of this section.)

This is a bit more meditating way of working.

She always starts with figures; here, St. George, not pointing the sword toward the dragon, up, like this, And Christ, and Anti-Christ.

The very distinct rhythms, in all her paintings, you can follow the circles coming into and going out again, that sort of rhythm of the forms and the lines in all paintings are due to a very specific rhythm, perhaps, and I suppose she was right-handed, was due to the rhythm of the feeling of her body I think,

The signs of the Zodiac...



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She didn't have money to erect her temple, she asked Steiner, he said No.

She asked her nephews if they could help her; they loved her dearly, but they thought our very beloved but very specific aunt, we simply can't help her with that. and so, together, with her friends of the Five, they erected a studio building on an island outside Stockholm, and they started erecting that building in 1915, just when the works were ready; and it consisted of a very large room where her paintings were scrolled, hanged, none of the paintings were pressed? they hung on hooks against the wall and they could be changed.

Like the Altar paintings, they have been scrolled for 40 years, when we started making an exhibition out of them, and these have been laid flat, piled on each other since her death. For when she died, in 1944, the Studio Building, and everything had to be taken away, because it stood on a ground that was not free; it belonged to someone else and returned to them after Hilma's death. According to Hilma's will, all her paintings went to her nephew, an admiral in Sweden; and in 1944, he had much to do, and he couldn't take part in storing and cataloguing them. So a friend went to the admiral and asked to help the admiral, and #id them, boxed them, and then stored in the admiral's attic. Her will also stipulated that the works couldn't be shown to the public until 20 years after her death - the mid 1960s. It was also good for the admiral, who was then retired. He took some out of the attic and went to the Museum in Stockholm and said: Well I had an aunt who painted, would you like to have them for your museum; but you don't take an admiral and an aunt who painted very seriously.



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And some looked at the paintings and said, well they look a bit like Kandinsky, but we are not interested, so the Admiral, who was a very noble man said, well the time was not ripe - yet, and we went home again with the paintings.

He got older and realized that he had to do something with them. I have to give them to a foundation; it's not good for them to be private. So, founded a Foundation consisting of artists, family members, and an art historian, Ake, and they are the Board. We take care of the paintings. Ake wrote about them. Took him 10 years, because few remember her, they are now quite old. The admiral died 5 years ago and his son took over, he is a commander in the navy, an old tradition in the family. Hilma's father trained cadets for the navy.

Ake wrote an article in German on the paintings. Got responses from a Harvard Art Historian, then "The Spiritual in Art" exhibition in Los Angeles, in 1986, where they were shown for the first time.

Last Room

MEDITATION paintings

started meditating the color according to theosophical ideas, and texts by Steiner, meditating different levels of experience.

The physical level: 6 paintings

studies of character of the astral level with different squares with texts on them:

the color coming forward, downward, backward;

outwards, upwards, upwards;

Meditates the colors in different squares



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Meditations of Flowers and Birds: The physical appearance as well as the spiritual appearance, she brought them together.

of looking outward and inward, the two ways of working; Kandinsky was very interested in the actual theory; Concerning the Spiritual in Art.

Also studied the Atom, the moral aspects and their evolutions.

Meditations: Different religious systems ending with Christianity.

Mother died in 1920, remember, she took care of her since 1908, then she was freed and the world was open to her, she visited Switzerland to Steiner. And ceased painting again, now 60 years old.

Last series: she changed,

George York



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Alanna Heiss  
President and Executive Director

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Hilda at home

Lecture given by Ake Part, at P.S. 1, January 2, 1989

Rm 2

Start with a series called the EVOLUTION SERIES, it's not the very first one. That series starts with figure painting and then it changes; figure painting, figures in a very bad mood! ...depressing, but then you have the lotus flower, and then everything changes; and then after that you have the EASTER LILY on that side; and she notes about that Easter Lily "Well it had to be brought a bit to the right hand side, so one side is a bit predominant."

And then it was on with the Evolution Series, and they become more and more abstract to the pattern, as you can see and she works very much with the surface, the Plane Surface, like this, with red and black, it changes as you can see.

Tom: are they chronological?

Ake: Well they're not quite chronological, because of the hanging, they had to change a bit.

Well, the second series that she painted in this specific mood, are the paintings here, the Pink ones on that wall and that Green one on the back wall there, across.

? These are matched?

A: Yes, they belong together in one series, and that's the last one in that series, that pink one to the right.

And here you can see how she's working with a Plane Surface and with Diagonals. Now you may want to look at the very first one. And here



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you will see the very first painting from 1906, when she has ceased painting portraits and landscapes - she had been a landscape and portrait painter, and was known as that in Sweden, and if you look in a Dictionary of Swedish Artists, she is known for that, and they are noted works till 1905, and then there are no noted works, and nothing is written about her work since that time. Now, the specific things are happening.

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#4 of these figure paintings where you can see the light of natural beings, the green ones and they are in relation to the male person and the female person, the male person is painted in the yellow color and the female is painted in blue; and these colors come through during her work; and these are the paintings for the Temple. And when she came to #4 she didn't know how to do it, how to explain the painting, and then she painted that Blue one and said, "That is the key to the work," but no other comments. It's just the key to the work. And after that she just continued with her work. Then a bit, something came to her, and she said that she had to go to Stockholm in order to work. In the early Spring of 1908 she did the 1st part of the paintings for the Temple. And then things started to happen. Various people came to Stockholm, including Rudolf Steiner, the Theosophist, to lecture, and Hilma spoke to him and showed him some of her paintings. And they discussed the paintings a bit and then she ceased to paint. In 1908, she had a break for 4 years. During that time her work, her way of work changed a bit. At first she was just working as a medium, not knowing what she was doing in these paintings but then, after that break, she had a message or she saw it in a picture, and that picture she painted, and then she became more responsible herself to her work.

And this is one of her earliest, from 1912, also a series, and you can see, male and female beings... you can also see that they are looking through the body and see the bones and skeleton, and the inner organs, like the liver and the heart, and they are in different colors, blue and yellow. And you can also see how the brain is handled in 4 parts. And during this time she also dictates to a



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The Swan Series, 1914.

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And then you see on the third picture of the series, how they somehow are mixed, the black swan and white swan, and the feet are also mixed.

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THE ALTAR PRINTINGS, the final series for the Temple.

And I think, in looking at these paintings that they are, so to speak, recordings sort of IMITATIONS, looking upon them, notice for example, how the forms change, more and more, as they change to a round form, and then turn in the other direction, and you can meditate in the space. And also the colors, they are very bright, and as they are getting darker and more forceful. And then you have the Sun cut off.

And then reversed some now, with the triangle pointed downwards. And look how she's handling the surface, she's mixing tempera and oil colors. Notice the surface; and how she perhaps now works on the Floor, in #2, because we now have traces of a female person who walked on the canvas, she was not even the same person as before.

The triangle form and the globe above, and that was what was supposed to be the CENTER of her TEMPLE, belonging to these were a little painting, one of blue background, and in the center of that painting was a little girl, kneeling, holding a heart, a golden heart with in her hands.

It's a painting, more personal in appearance, we didn't bring it

Further evolution of the SWAY SERIES

Here we have another aspect, in this room, of forms mirroring each other, of a bright field over a darker field, she puts a sort of a shadow over her colors so that they are getting darker, with sort of prismatic forms, paintings upwards and downwards; and you have that



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Toni: Was there a lot of abstract painting in Sweden at this time?

Ake: None at all.

Alanna: Who was working in Europe in 1916?

Ake: She's born in 1862 and she died in 1942; Kandinsky is born in 1866 and dies in 1944; Mondrian 1872 - 1944; Munch 1862 - 1944. It's a very progressive days for artists, I would say, if you look upon Malevich, a bit younger, 1870s, contemporary with the Suprematists, tho unaware.

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According to Ake: she was a tiny little woman, black hair, deep set eyes, very straight, very earnest, dry humor, interested in Math and flowers, esp. the books on Flora; for one year at the turn of the century, she worked at the Doctors Hospital in Stockholm, drawing horses, organs, so a very direct knowledge of such.

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looked at the pictures and someone could have translated them.

We do know that Kandinsky was not interested in Steiner's way of working as an artist, but in his theories. Out of the theories of Bassant, Lavatsky, and Steiner, Kandinsky worked out his very specific way of abstraction. So out of theory, more than out of example. Like Mondrian, they worked out coming into a more abstract, non-representational pattern. They are working with very specific sources, with much meditating.

When Hilma met Bassant and Steiner, they pointed out to her that you couldn't work out of an atavistic way, like a Shaman... you had to work out your intellect on your own, and that is what I suppose, she tried to do in her painting. And the paintings are examples of that way of working.

And we can see how her work shifts... Mondrian like colors red, blue, yellow, and notice the details of the colors in the paintings. (I can't make out the rest of this section.)

This is a bit more meditating way of working.

She always starts with figures; here, St. George, not pointing the sword toward the dragon, up, like this, And Christ, and Anti-Christ,

The very distinct rhythms, in all her paintings, you can follow the circles coming into and going out again, that sort of rhythm of the forms and the lines in all paintings are due to a very specific rhythm, perhaps, and I suppose she was right handed, was due to the rhythm of the feeling of her body I think,

The signs of the Zodiac...



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She didn't have money to erect her temple, she asked Steiner, he said no.

She asked her nephews if they could help her; they loved her dearly, but they thought our very beloved but very specific aunt, we simply can't help her with that, and so, together with her friends of the Five, they erected a studio building on an island outside Stockholm, and they started erecting that building in 1915, just when the works were ready; and it consisted of a very large room where her paintings were schooled, hanged, none of the paintings were pressed? they hung on hooks against the wall and they could be changed.

Like the Altar paintings, they have been schooled for 40 years, when we started making an exhibition out of them, and these have been laid flat, piled on each other since her death. For when she died, in 1944, the Studio Building, and everything had to be taken away, because it stood on a ground that was not free; it belonged to someone else and returned to them after Hilma's death. According to Hilma's will, all her paintings went to her nephew, an admiral in Sweden; and in 1944, he had much to do, and he couldn't take part in storing and cataloguing them; So a friend went to the admiral and asked to help the admiral, and #id them, boxed them, and then stored in the admiral's attic. Her will also stipulated that the works couldn't be shown to the public until 20 years after her death - the mid 1960s. It was also good for the admiral, who was then retired. He took some out of the attic and went to the Museum in Stockholm and said: Well I had an aunt who painted, would you like to have them for your museum; but you don't take an admiral and an aunt who painted very seriously.



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And some looked at the paintings and said, Well, they look a bit like Kandinsky, but we are not interested, so the Admiral, who was a very noble man said, well the time was not ripe - yet, and he went home again with the paintings.

He got older and realized that he had to do something with them. I have to give them to a foundation; it's not good for them to be private. So, founded a Foundation consisting of artists, family members, and an art historian, Ake, and they are the Board. We take care of the paintings. Ake wrote about them. Took him 10 years, because few remember her, they are now quite old. The admiral died 5 years ago and his son took over, he is a commander in the navy, an old tradition in the Family. Hilma's father trained Cadets for the navy.

Ake wrote an article in German on the paintings. Got responses from a Harvard Art Historian, then "The Spiritual in Art" exhibition in Los Angeles, in 1982, where they were shown for the first time.

Last Room

MEDITATION paintings

started meditating the color according to theosophical ideas, and texts by Steiner, meditating different levels of experience. The physical level: 6 paintings

studies of character of the astral level with different squares with texts on them:

the color coming forward, downward, backward;

outwards, upwards, upwards;

Meditates the colors in different squares



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Meditations of Flowers and Birds: The physical appearance as well as the spiritual appearance, she brought them together.

of looking outward and inward, the two ways of working: Kandinsky was very interested in the actual theory: Concerning the Spiritual in Art.

Also studied the Atom, the moral aspects and their evolutions.

Meditations: Different religious systems ending with christianity.

Mother died in 1920, remember, she took care of her since 1913, then she was freed and the world was open to her, she visited Switzerland to Steiner. And ceased painting again, now 60 years old.

Last series: she changed.

George York



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New York Feb 27th 1989



## ART

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Hilma af Klint

long life, she was a clairvoyant and mystic, a disciple of Mme. Blavatsky, and a follower of Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner. As a "spiritist," she produced a large body of fervently non-objective work. Many of these paintings predate the breakthroughs into absolute abstraction of Mondrian and Kandinsky, of the Constructivists and Suprematists, and many—obscure though they are—exceed the work of these masters in sheer charismatic purism. They offer a vision of a world that is mysterious, incandescent, and unknowably good. The "Secret Pictures" of Hilma af Klint belong to the collection of the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk, in Stockholm. They are on view at P.S. 1, Long Island City, until March 12th, and this could very well be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see them.

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

**METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St.**—All the Ingres works in the collection (ten paintings, twenty-two drawings, and seven prints) have been put on view together. The Met's holdings tend to reflect this great neoclassical artist's most conservative side. Exceptions include the portrait of the "Princesse de Broglie" (1851) and one small sheet of reclining male nudes. Through March 19. ♦ **Sienese Renaissance paintings and manuscript illuminations.** Through March 19. ♦ **Photographs from William Henry Fox Talbot's "Pencil of Nature."** (See Photography, below.) Through April 9. ♦ **The Costume Institute** is exhibiting eighty-five outfits from the Victorian era. Through April 16. (Open daily except Mondays. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:15, and Tuesday evenings until 8:45.)

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audience participation, but that would be aberrant behavior here. "Cleaning Piece," for example—a small Plexiglas cube with a cloth beside it—is now in its own case. Concurrently, films and videos by One are on view on the second floor. (See Film Libraries, below, for schedule.) Through April 16.

♦ For all his inventiveness and creativity, Frederick Kiesler has remained relatively obscure since his death in 1965. This eye-opening retrospective is a chance to reexamine his work, including a reconstruction of the much reproduced Surrealist room at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery. Through April 16. A complementary show is at Jasot McCoy, 15 E. 71st St.

♦ A show of American folk art from the center in Williamsburg, Virginia, that is named for Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. The landmark collection, started in the twenties, identified and brought to public attention such painters (all represented here) as Ammi Phillips, Erastus Salisbury Field, and John Brewster Jr. Also, carvings, furniture, textiles, and pottery. (Open daily except Mondays. Hours: Tuesdays, 1 to 6, with no admission charge after 6; Wednesdays through Saturdays, 11 to 5; Sundays, noon to 6.)

**Brooklyn Museum, Eastern Parkway.**—Sculptures, drawings, and maquettes by four American post-minimalists: Joel Fisher, Mel Kendrick, Robert Lobe, and John Newman. Forty-six objects altogether are on display. Starts Feb. 24. (Open daily except Tuesdays, 10 to 5.)

**AMERICAN CRAFT MUSEUM, 40 W. 53rd St.**—Finland's greatest natural resource—wood—is also a major source of inspiration for its artists, as this show from Helsinki's Museum of Applied Arts points out. Through April 23. (Open Tuesdays, 10 to 6, with no admission charge after 5; Wednesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

**Arts Museum, Fifth Ave. at 92nd St.**—An exhibit examining the ways in which artists have found inspiration in the gothic legend. Through April 2. (Open daily except Fridays and Saturdays. Hours: Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, noon to 5; Tuesdays, noon to 8, with no admission charge from 5 to 8; Sundays, 11 to 6.)

**Museum Library, 29 E. 34th St.**—A show of 100 prints and seven hundred drawings.

## EDGE OF NIGHT LIFE

AFTER ten o'clock, the dining room at the Canal Bar feels like a table for a hundred and twenty-five. There is, however, one way to stand out in the trendiest crowd in town—eat alone. All around you are the young and the forever young, joyously eating off each other's plates and pouring champagne on a first-come first-served basis, but give them a minute. They'll notice. People will walk up to your table as warily as they would a cage in the zoo.

Only children and misanthropes can successfully avoid the attention. Despite our open novel—perhaps because of it—a blonde in hoop earrings, black dress, and red jacket walks up to the table. "Wouldn't you like to sit with us? We're celebrating. I don't remember why, but whenever we come here we're celebrating." A brunette in hoop earrings, black dress, and red jacket leans across the table to whisper, "I've never seen anyone in here alone. Did, like, the separation agreement just come through?" Young men, proud of newfound sensitivity and ability to bond, feel it's their duty to obliterate solitude. Pulling up a chair, the brunette's beau asks, "What do you like? We'll find you someone. No problem."

Making an unobtrusive exit is not possible: this is a watched door. "Come back next week," the blonde cries from her table. "We'll all be here." If you enjoy places like the Canal Bar but don't want to be conspicuous, there's a solution: Take a very quiet date.

## IN A CATEGORY OF THEIR OWN: PERFORMANCE ART, ETC.

**Lower East, 30 "The Passion of Ursula."** Through April 4. A three-piece band, and a three-piece band. ♦ **44th St. 74th St. 4th St.** 10-11:30 PM. 10-11:30 PM. 10-11:30 PM.

♦ **Feb. 22 at 3.** Frank Myers ranting about, among other things, the people who work for him. ♦ **Feb. 23-26 at 9:30.** Carmelita Torres. ♦ **Feb. 23-26 at 9:30.** Carmelita Torres. ♦ **Feb. 23-26 at 9:30.** Carmelita Torres. ♦ **Feb. 23-26 at 9:30.** Carmelita Torres.



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The New Yorker, Feb. 17, 1984

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Jewish Museum, Fifth Ave. at 92nd St.—An exhibit examining the ways in which artists have found inspiration in the golem legend. Through April 2. (Open daily except Fridays and Saturdays. Hours: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, noon to 5; Tuesdays, noon to 6, with no admission charge from 5 to 8; Sundays, 11 to 6.)

Museum Library, 24 E. 36th St.—A show of nineteenth- and twentieth-century drawings.

1000 12th W. 13th St. 1924-5182—A spacious, high-ceilinged bar and restaurant with an in-between room from which music issues, putting an end to some discussions and inspiring others. JANE JARVIS, who spent many years accompanying the Mets on the Shea Stadium organ, concentrates nowadays on the piano; she's here every night but Feb. 28 with MATT HINTON, a seventy-nine-year-old bassist whom Cab Calloway, his employer from 1936 to 1951, nicknamed Thump. Sundays are in the hands of guitarist BENI BERTON and bassist MICHAEL MOORE. Music from eight weeknights and from seven on Sundays.

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## IN A CATEGORY OF THEIR OWN: PERFORMANCE ART, ETC.

1000 12th W. 13th St. 1924-5182—The Passion of Ursula, a play by a writer who sings, dances, and travels with a three-piece band. 414 E. 4th St. 1924-5182. Feb. 23-24 at 10 Through March 2.

1000 12th W. 13th St. 1924-5182—Feb. 22 at 8, Frank delays ranting about, among other things, the people who make him. Feb. 23 at 8, Anne Dickinson. Feb. 25-26 at 9:30, Carmelita Trovati. On Farm Merian Soto and others in "Candela y Azucar." Through March 5. 1150 First Ave. at 9th St. 477-5265.

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GOETTERMUSEUM, Fifth Ave. at 89th St.—German figure painting of the past three decades is surveyed in a top-to-bottom (of the museum) show that includes inverted figures, to have a calligraphic hand to Penz.



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# LOOKING AT ART ARTnews

## Hilma af Klint

### BACK FROM THE BEYOND

**H**ilma af Klint, a Swedish painter who came from a prominent naval and scientific family, died in 1944 at the age of 81. In her will, she decreed that her works of art, which had been seen only by a few close friends, should be kept together by her nephew Erik. She further stipulated that they should not be shown publicly for at least 20 years, when the world might be ready to receive them.

In the '60s Erik tried to find a public institution to care for the legacy—more than 1,200 paintings, drawings, notebooks, sketchbooks, and watercolors. "He was met with incomprehension," says Ake Fant, curator of the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk, the private foundation in Stockholm Erik finally established in 1977 to administer the collection.

By the mid-'80s the art climate had changed. In 1986 more than a dozen af Klint paintings appeared in the inaugural show of the revamped Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract painting 1890–1985." Artists and historians who saw them were stunned to find an early abstractionist of such remarkable authority—yet one who was almost unknown. Now, thanks to a sweeping survey of her work at New York's Institute for Art and Urban Resources (better known as P.S. 1), the breadth of her achievement has become clear. The show was like a great archeological find: room after room of unimagined riches. Critics gave it prominent reviews. Artists went back again and again and began to speak of "Hilma" with friendly familiarity. "The work looked like it was done yesterday," one visitor said.

Af Klint was a respected member of the

Swedish academy who began her career in the conventional way, making portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. But she was not like most people, and she knew it. Even as a child, she experienced inexplicable visions of the future. Religion—especially Christianity—and spiritism became an important part of her life. In the late 1880s she started to take part in seances with a small

circle of women friends. She frequently acted as the medium herself during the sessions, sitting in a trance and conveying messages to the group from the spiritual world. The women were first urged to carry out automatic writing, then automatic drawing. And in 1904, according to af Klint, a spirit called Ananda informed her that she would be asked to execute "paint-



COLLECTION OF THE STIFTELSEN HILMA AF KLINTS VERK, STOCKHOLM

Af Klint's arcane spiritual beliefs gave rise to such paintings as *Group 10. Altar Picture No. 2, 1915*.



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## LOOKING AT ART



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ings on the astral plane." Another spirit guide, Amaliel, said sternly: "You shall deny yourself so that your pride shall be broken." The artist wrote in her notebook: "Amaliel offered me a commission and I immediately replied: yes." She was 42, not a young woman any longer, but so she embarked on her true life's work.

There were years of preliminary, purifying exercises. The first painting af Klint "received" from her spirit advisers, *Primordial Chaos* (1906), is almost a landscape. A page-size unstretched canvas, it presents an embryonic shape floating cloudlike in a pale blue field above a horizon. A choppy, dark blue stripe of paint across the bottom can be seen as a rugged sea. The image is reinforced by a veil of slanted, roughly marked black lines over all—a violent storm suitable to the creative spirit. The same year brought a series of 26 small oils, which she designated the "WU Series." Done predominantly in muted blues and greens, they show pentagrams, spirals, and astral symbols that seem to float on thinly painted fields.

Another "WU" series fol-

**Innovative abstractions like Group 4. The Ten Greatest No. 3. Youth, 1907, were made in isolation from other abstract artists of the day.**

lowed, this time of larger canvases. The works are full of pellucid pinks as clear as the pinks of Matisse. Delicate lines of blue, white, or yellow trace petal shapes or spell out words representing sounds spoken by her spirit guides: "vreu," "euw," "urv." One small painting, *Group 2. Series WU. 1907*, which looks uncannily like an early Elizabeth Murray, is an exquisite work of undulating lines and a flowerlike image. The flower is one of hundreds of natural forms used in scores of paintings. One strikingly sinuous series is based on swans, and there are studies of violets and their "guidelines," or geometric symbols, possibly used to meditate on the properties of different flowers.

If the artist had confined her work to such delicacies, it's unlikely that she would impress us today as she does. But af Klint, working in virtual isolation, with no knowledge of the paintings of Kandinsky, Kupka, or Malevich, also happened to make some of the strongest, largest, leanest works in the history of early abstraction.

In May 1907, after a period of fasting and prayer, af Klint began what she called the "Ten Great Figure Paintings." Done in egg tempera on paper and canvas, these brilliantly colored pictures are each almost eleven feet high and eight feet wide. (Her

farmer neighbors wondered why she bought so many eggs.) These "figure paintings," each completed in about four hours, are abstract, composed of rounded organic shapes floating on single-color backgrounds—bright orange, for example, in *Youth*. These exuberant works, often including details of numerals and phrases in neatly inscribed script, precede a four-year period, ending in 1912, during which the artist stopped painting altogether.

Af Klint was an ascetic person, always dressed in black, always upright and strict (though children remember her as "kind and cheerful," Fant says). Her paintings, however, are almost voluptuous in the fullness of their colors, even after the "Ten Great Figure" works, when her organic forms gave way to the stricter geometry of centered circles and triangles that she employed from the mid-teens to the early '20s. Yet the most astonishing paintings of her long, secret career were done around 1915. She worked in robust reds, lustrous whites, hot yellows, deep blacks, and the tenderest violets and pinks, using thick and buttery paint. Despite their vivid colors and textures, the works bespeak a preternatural calm and simplicity.

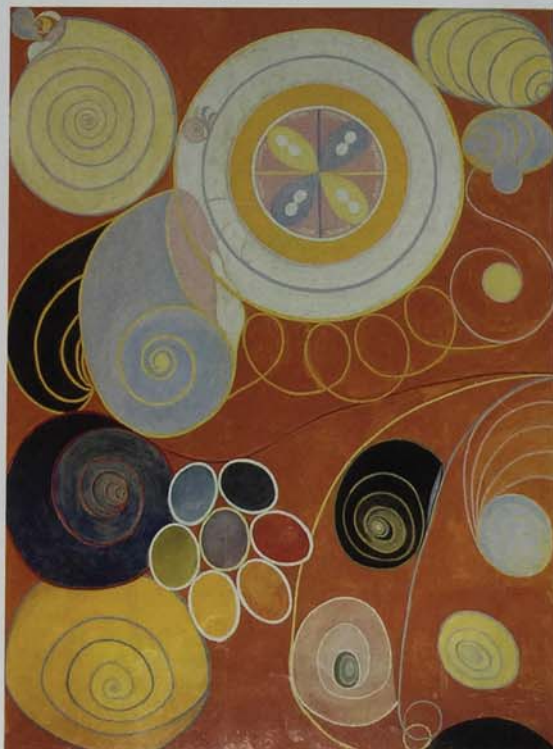
Af Klint was not a painter's painter in her lifetime, but she has emerged as one today.

The content of her paintings is arcane, and the occult underpinnings may seem irrelevant to the ordinary viewer. But her remarkably focused ideas about her spiritual search—and how to conduct that very real search in her art—tell in the paintings' commanding presence.

Af Klint's anonymity may linger on, however, among a larger art audience. Because her pictures can't be separated and sold, there is no infrastructure of influential, committed collectors and art dealers to promote them, so they may never be shown widely, except perhaps in alternative museums. Without any hype value, af Klint is the antithesis of so many contemporary artists. We look at her work only for itself because its freshness as well as its unfamiliarity make it new, and because it speaks of instinct, intellect, and the kind of profound seriousness of purpose that we all hope to be capable of in some sphere of our lives.

—Margaret Moorman

Margaret Moorman is a senior editor of ARTnews.





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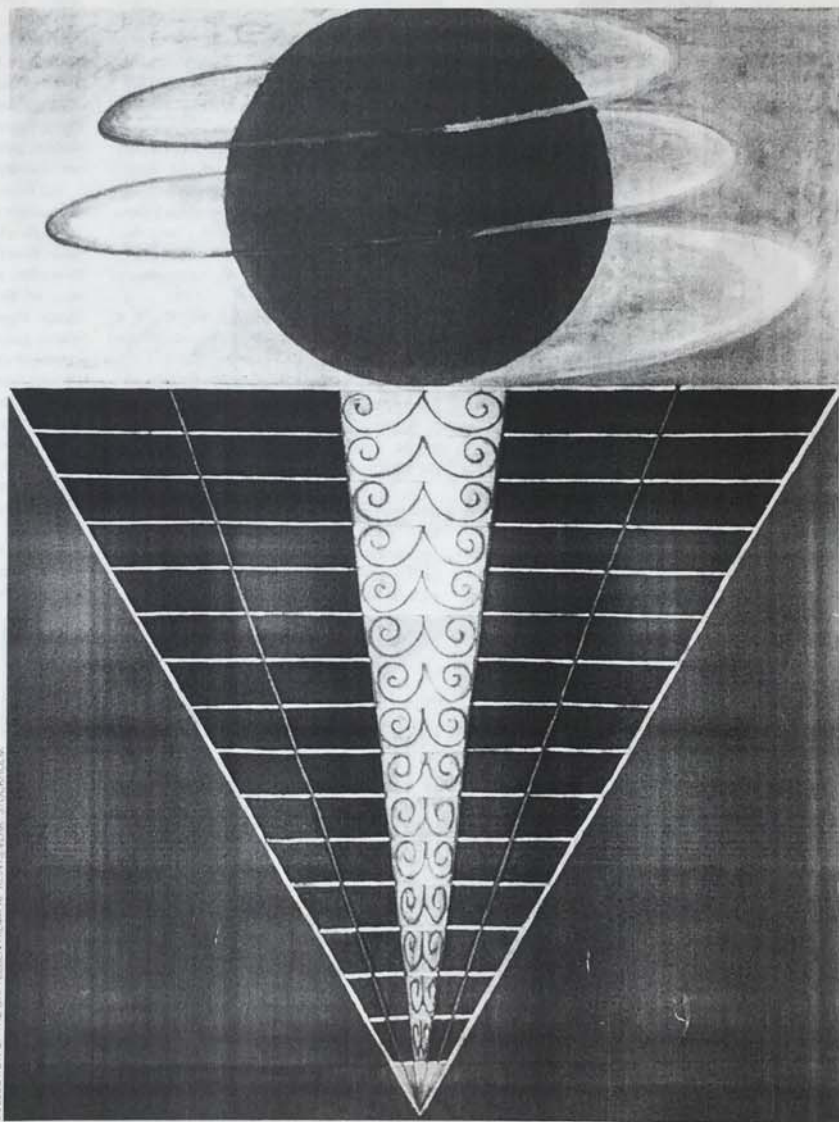
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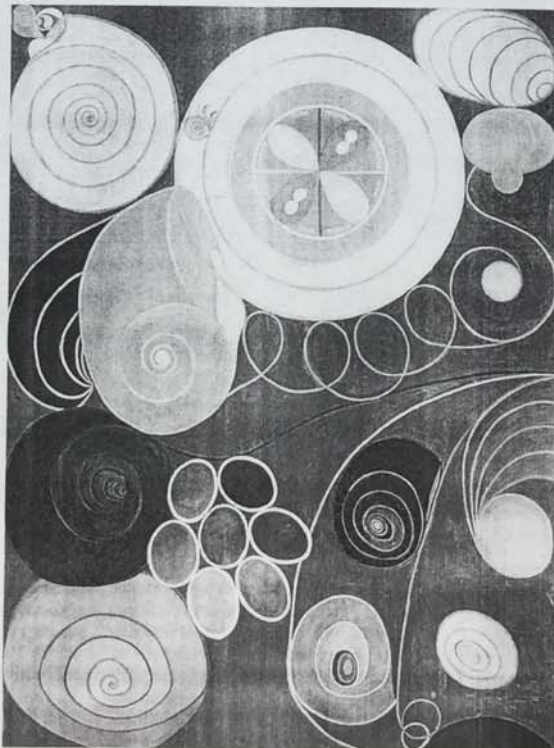
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# LOOKING AT ART ARTnews

## Hilma af Klint

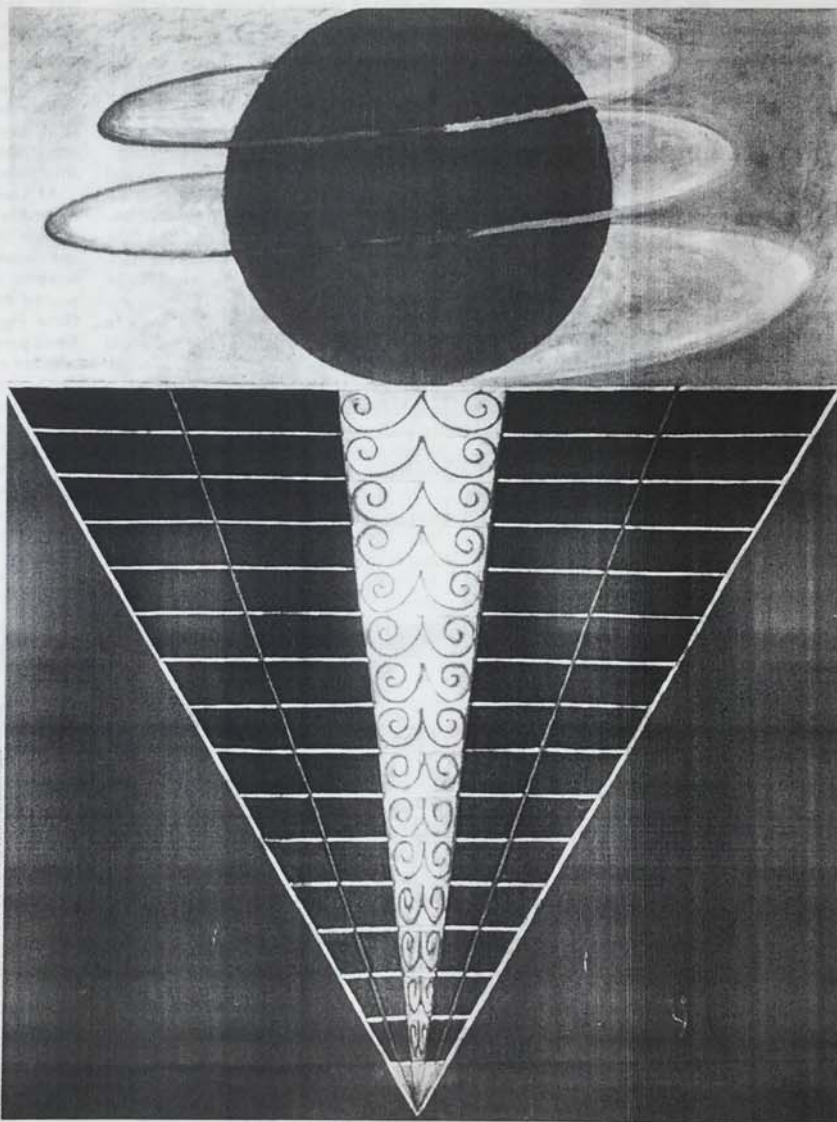
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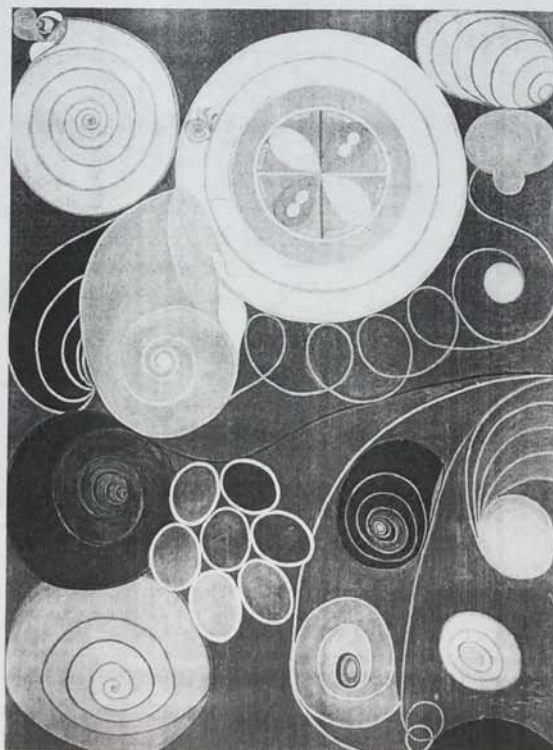
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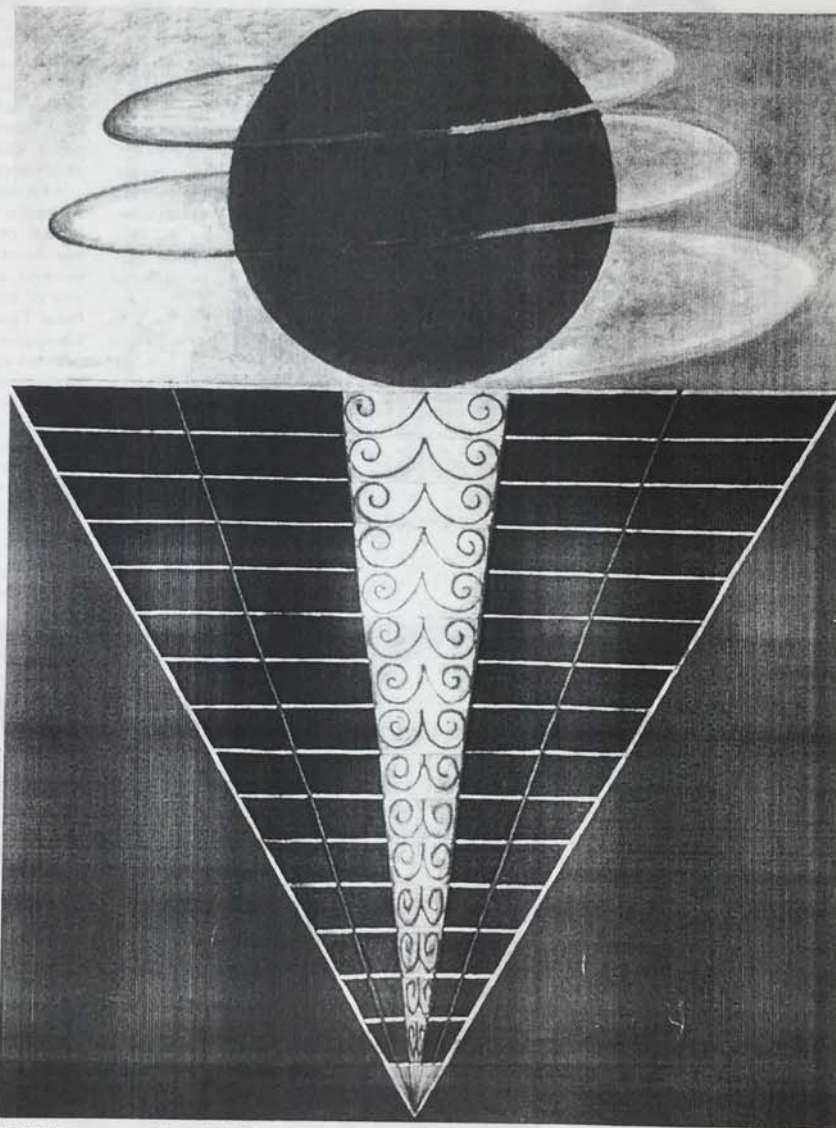
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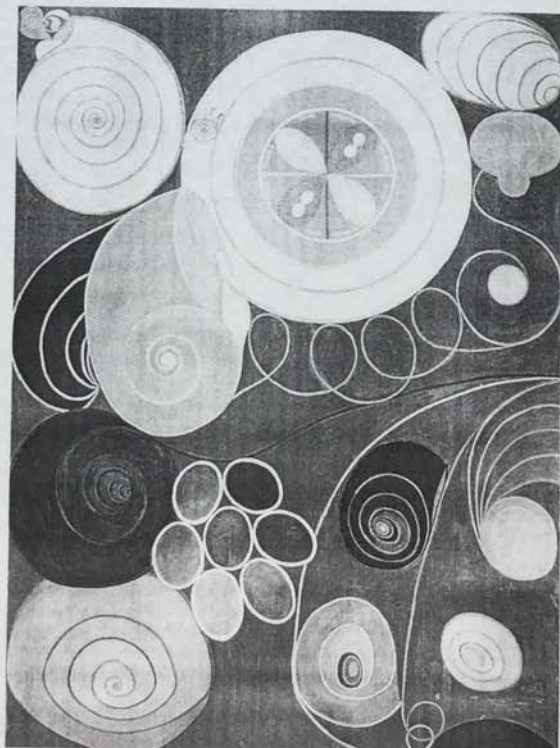
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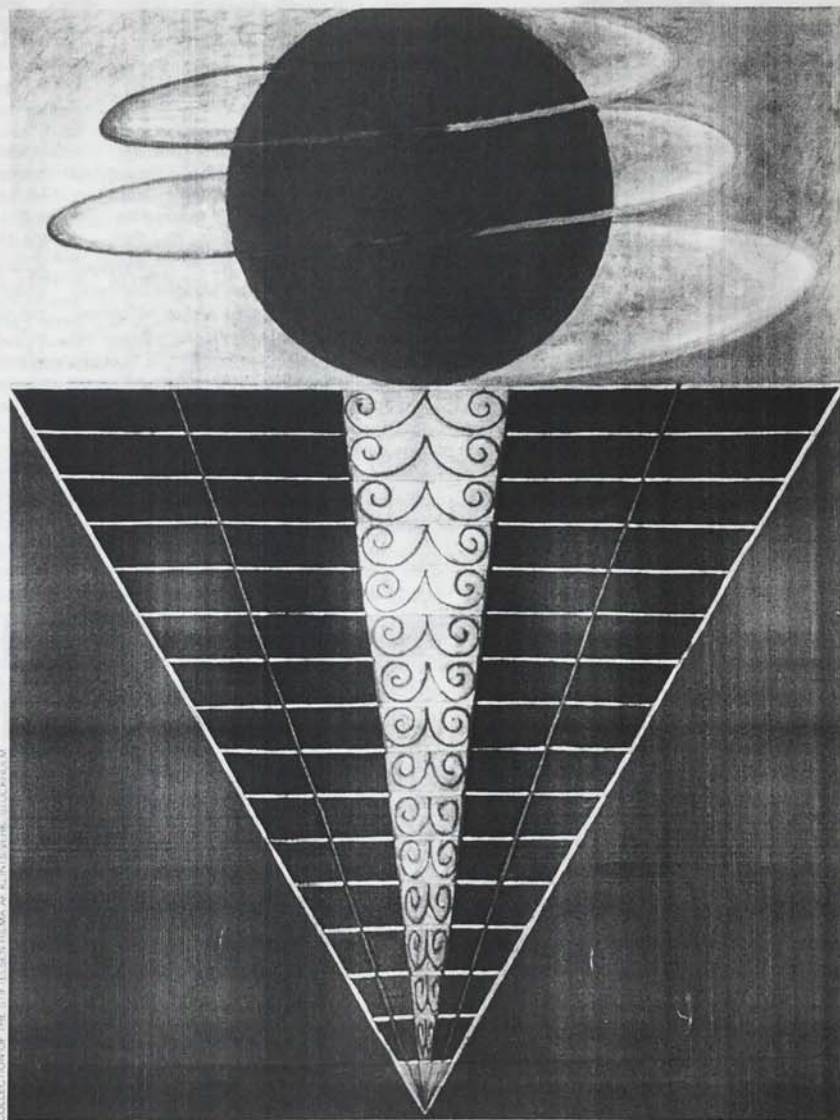
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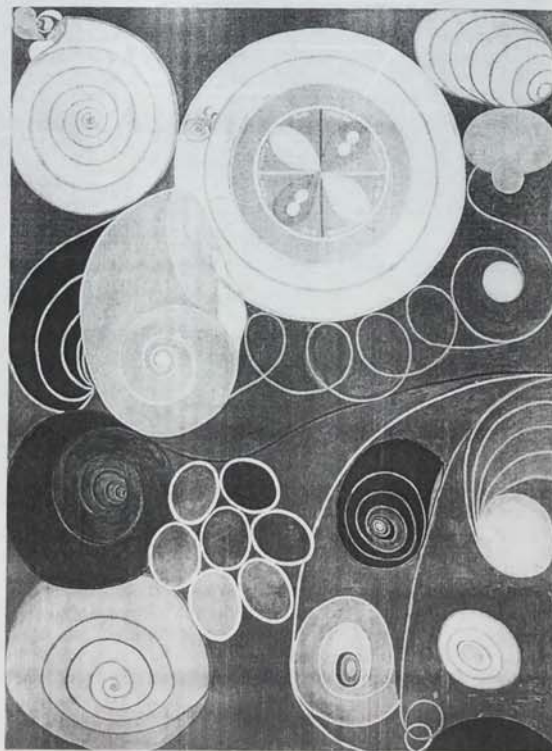
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In the early 1900's already twenty years into af Klint's career, groups of composers, writers, and visual artists began to pull away from the canons and conventions of representation toward abstraction and, subsequently, modern art. For visual artists this meant developing a new, symbolic use of line, form, color, and organization of space—as opposed to the strictly natural. Successively, symbolic signs and codes became preferred over direct observations, as mechanistic and positivistic views were being dismantled by both physics and psychoanalysis. This growth of abstraction reflected an interest in additional layers of meaning about reality and the human condition, as well as a sense of one's place in the world.

One can trace the beginning of turn-of-the-century abstraction not as a *break* from previous history, but rather as a link connected to a historical spiral, re-emerging at a later time, in an altered form. It was actually just about 150 years before that gnostic and cabalistic literature, along with Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), and Emanuel Swedenborg's *The Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation* (1734), and the work of William Blake, offered a counterpoint to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Throwing a backward view over history, these writings, particularly the cabala, had a profound influence on the major scientists and thinkers of that time as a means of speculation and interpretation. Yet it was in the Romantic early 19th century that the surge of technology coincided with materialist beliefs in science, leading to their dominance within the spheres of the social, and the personal, to which early abstraction first responded; it has proceeded in *this* century in the commodity culture and the society of the spectacle.

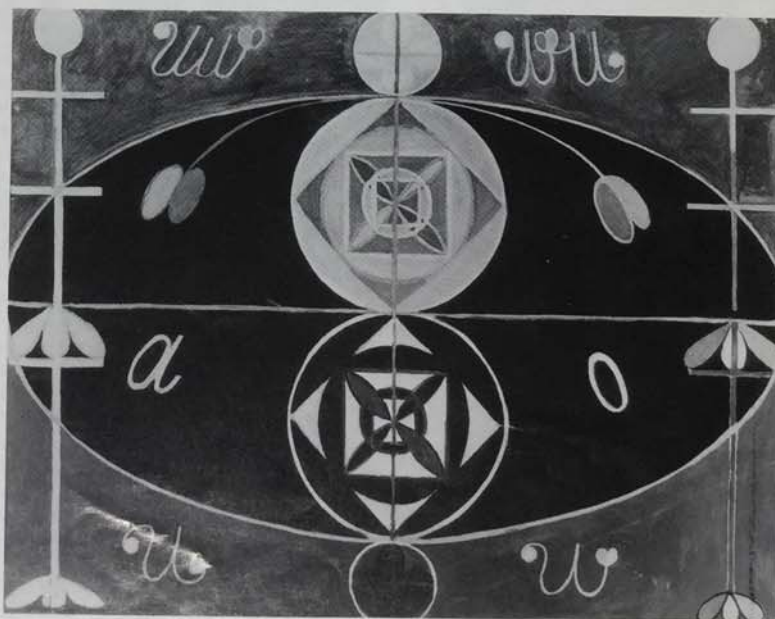
As "facts" came to replace hermeneutical interpretation and speculation in the 1800's, the same analogy could be drawn regarding the text, or location, of the human body. The strange irony here lay in the direct reversal, or displacement, as the symbolic and scientific, which *connotes* the body, replaced the *denoted*, "sensed" one. It is with this point that we face the epoch of the mid-nineteenth century in which af Klint's accomplishments can best be measured and seen not only for her personal commitment and resolve, but also for her sense of self against a (doubly) hostile environment.

Af Klint had long had an interest in mathematics and science. She was highly reclusive, preferring to work alone after her formal art training. Yet like other, more well-known artists, she was greatly interested in mysticism and occultism, and in her early years even worked in trance-like states. Within the general movement from representation to abstraction, af Klint was one of the first to typify the loss of the original referent as the organic and unified self became gradually exchanged and re-identified as symbolic in a symbolic field.

Hilma af Klint's achievements also include her pioneering use of geometric abstraction. She frequently worked through motifs of lines, squares, triangles, helixes, and spheres. These were utilized schematically, along with specific applications of color. While all this work antedates most 20th-century abstraction, it is her use of the sphere that is especially noteworthy. Here, she was able to express a different sense of time: as a nodule of experience, or time lived; as apart from a deployment of Vico's ordered, linear chronology.

These visual techniques continue in altered form today, with the linguistics intact but at best expressive of a metaphysic far removed from the transcendent. Ross Bleckner, whose paintings richly investigate the metaphysical qualities of human consciousness, masterfully portrays the continued drive toward an epistemological understanding of reality and ourselves. The paintings of Marilyn Lerner reveal their psychological resonances through intuited structuring of both shape and color. In Mary K. Weatherford's diptych paintings, a photo of a movie director is juxtaposed with the names of all the female stars consumed by the vehicle of the movie, their names in circular "targets." Like Hilma af Klint, who died in 1944, each of these artists today presents an art that stages the difference between history and nature, and in which their irresolvable difference marks that trope wherein we explore the limits and potentials of human nature, in *our* culture. (P.S. 1, Long Island City, January 15–March 12)

Pat McCoy



Hilma af Klint, Group 6: Series WUS no. 16, 1908, Oil on canvas, 43 1/2" x 56". Courtesy P.S. 1.

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In the early 1900's already twenty years into af Klint's career, groups of composers, writers, and visual artists began to pull away from the canons and conventions of representation toward abstraction and, subsequently, modern art. For visual artists this meant developing a new, symbolic use of line, form, color, and organization of space—as opposed to the strictly natural. Successively, symbolic signs and codes became preferred over direct observations, as mechanistic and positivistic views were being dismantled by both physics and psychoanalysis. This growth of abstraction reflected an interest in additional layers of meaning about reality and the human condition, as well as a sense of one's place in the world.

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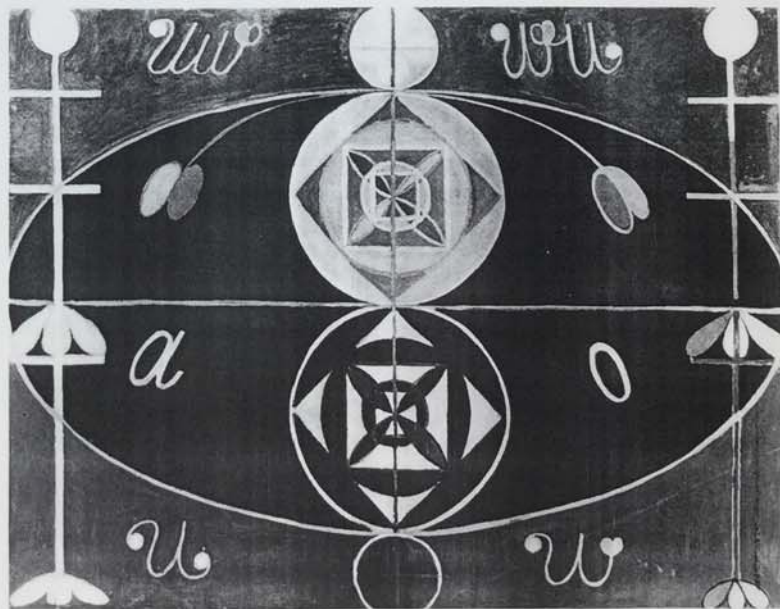
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Hilma af Klint, Group 6. Series WUS no. 16, 1908, Oil on canvas, 43 1/2" x 56". Courtesy P.S. 1.

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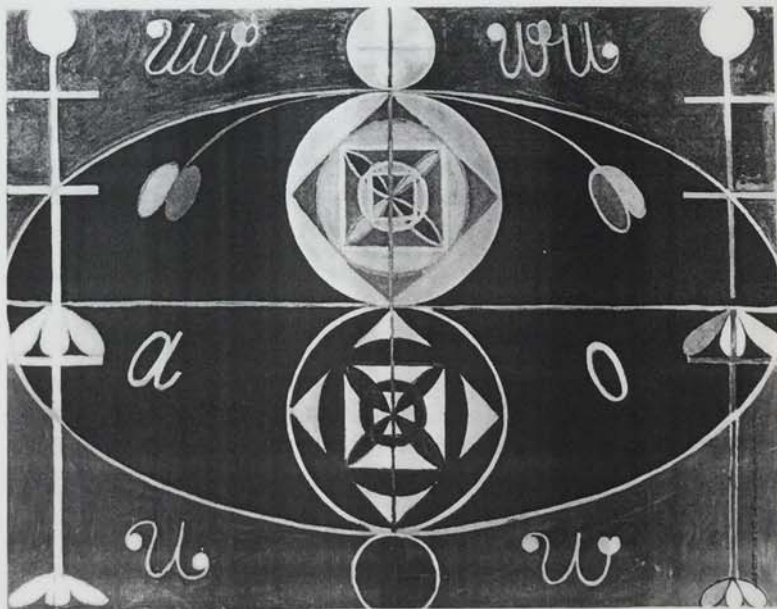
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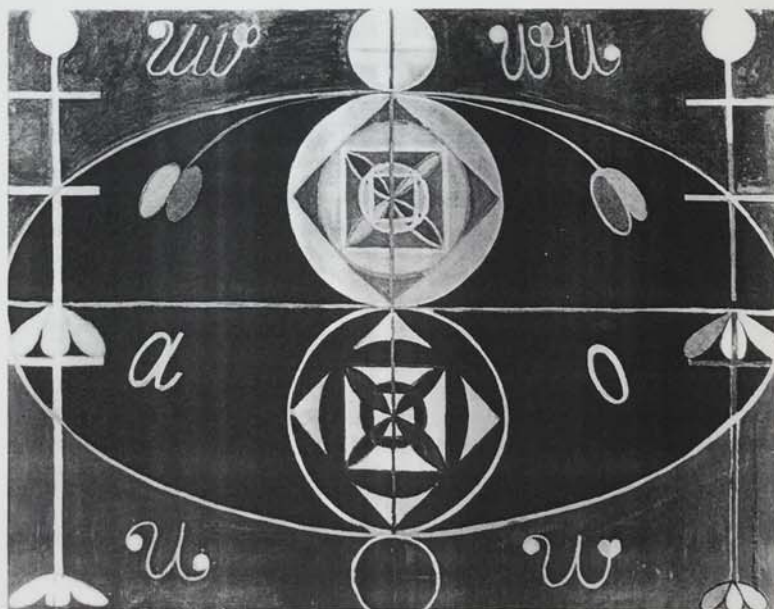
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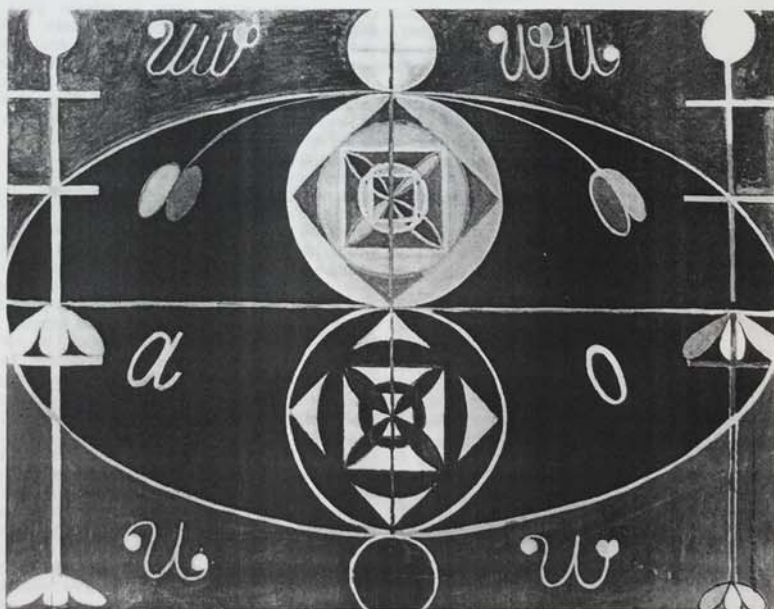
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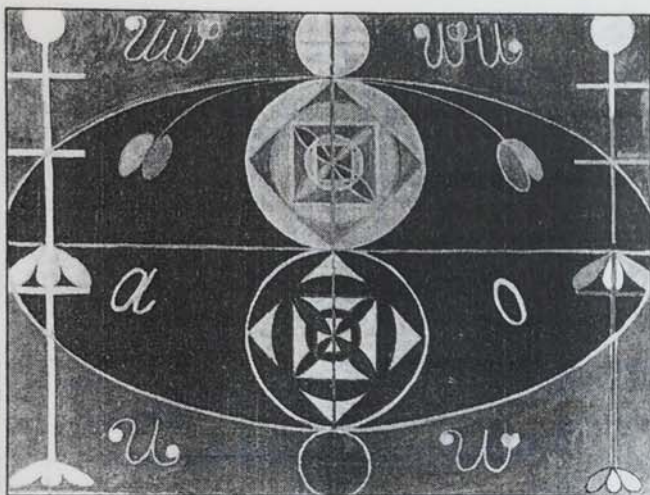
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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1989

## Review/Art

# Hilma af Klint, Explorer In Realm of the Abstract



Nicholas Watney

"Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16," oil on canvas, 1908, by Hilma af Klint, in "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint" at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, through March 12.

By ROBERTA SMITH

The two main exhibitions at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, form an odd yet effective couple.

The first, "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint," presents the work of a virtually unknown Swedish portrait and landscape painter who, in 1908 at the age of 45, made some of modern art's first abstractions. The other is "Theatergarden Bestiarium," a series of models, objects, installations and slide projections by 13 American and European artists and collaborative teams. Alternately obscure and provocative, this show attempts to update the 17th-century Baroque theater garden and to extend the notion of public art into situations that actively mingle past and present, art and nature.

Mutually exclusive as they seem, these two shows work well together. Both encourage speculation and the questioning of conventions, be they the canons of early modernism or the accepted forms of exhibition making. Together, they show that P.S. 1 continues to organize exhibitions for which other New York museums lack the space, inclination or flexibility — and doing them more professionally than in the past. In addition, the special-projects program, which features the work of several lesser-known or younger artists in individual galleries, seems especially good.

Hilma af Klint's paintings were shown for the first time in this country in 1986, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985." Her achievement may never be anything more than a footnote to 20th-century art history, but if so it will be a long and fascinating one that touches on many other artists' activities.

In a way, af Klint's work takes to extremes the mysticism that often motivated early abstract art. Like Mondrian, af Klint was a Theosophist; like Arthur Dove and Kandinsky, she believed in the transcendent power of natural forms.

Her first works are populated with flowing arabesques and schematized flower forms. Others, like "Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16" (shown above) evince a love of inspired, somewhat Mayan geometries, along with secret words and symbols similar to those that would motivate Alfred Jensen in the 1950's. Finally, there is also a sense of naïve self-sufficiency and of a grand yet largely private scheme to af Klint's activities that make one think of outsider art, especially the visual technics of Adolph Wölfl, which were recently exhibited at the Grey Art gallery in Manhattan.

Af Klint is thought to have seen no modern art except that of Edvard Munch. She asserted that her first abstractions were dictated by spirits encountered in seances, that her hand was in effect "guided." In later series

of paintings, she seems to have been more instigator than conduit. And among the final works on view in the exhibition — a series of small watercolors with handwritten explanatory captions dating from 1917 — the artist seems to focus on spiritual energy expressed in terms of the atom and its powers.

Spiritual energy is the operative term here. It gives this show its determined forward motion, as well as its lapses in abstract purity and taste. Occasionally, the pressure of af Klint's religiosity required the presence of crucified figures, winged angels or St. George and his dragon. As with many other artists of her time, abstraction was neither sustained indefinitely nor in isolation from representation.

But finally, it may be the physical nature of these paintings that makes them most interesting and most strange. The scale of af Klint's work, even in her smallest canvases, is usually large and bold; her strong, saturated colors are painted directly onto raw canvas with brushy thin washes, a technique that relates to Munch's paint handling.

Sometimes her concentric circles can bring to mind the target paintings of Kenneth Noland; elsewhere, a particularly organic approach to geometry will evoke Elizabeth Murray's work — the white interlocking spiral forms of "Swan No. 21" from 1914-15, for example.

In a sense these works could have been painted yesterday and this is both their strength and their weakness. Startlingly fresh, they are also eternally innocent; they seem almost to exist beyond time but they also lack the specific wisdom that only time endows. Nonetheless, this show goes a long way to reminding us how little we know about early abstract art and its sources; likewise, how unnecessarily narrow is the history constructed around it.

"Theatergarden Bestiarium," installed upstairs from the af Klint show, argues for the exhibition as a work in progress, as a rumination on art's potential rather than its finished products, and as a combination of modest proposals and big ideas. The show's big idea is the role that the Baroque garden — with its built-in theatricality, its contrasting moments of extreme artifice and false naturalness — might play in the public spaces of the future.

Several of the models and objects on view are mired in Surrealist jokiness. (The black leather cabbages of Alain Sechas, a French artist, are but one example.) And the show's one fully realized installation — a mirrored grotto upon whose white gravel floor are projected images of past art and present advertising — succumbs to funhouse theatrics. (It is primarily the work of Rüdiger Schöttle, a West German curator and artist who conceived of the exhibition.)

Nonetheless, other inclusions demonstrate the kind of post-modern self-consciousness these artists seem to be after. Especially intriguing is Dan Graham's "Cinema-Theater," a model for a structure that joins, back

to back, an outdoor theater and an indoor cinema — with a semi-transparent common wall that would allow film to flicker occasionally across the back of the stage. Jeff Wall's orange-flocked Cyclops-like object titled "Loge-Theater With Its Plan D" played as an illuminated sign is also noteworthy.

But the real life of the exhibition emanates from a slide projection. Lüdger Gerdes, another artist from West Germany. Part documentary, part reverie, this work juxtaposes images of a Baroque garden (Schwellingen, near Heidelberg) with what seems to be the fields and streams of a deserted farm, pulling the eye back and forth between past and present and between decorative and functional uses of the land. These contrasts persist, even after the press release reveals that the farmland also a garden, a contemporary one built near Bonn by an artist named Erwin Wortelkamp.

Confronted with Mr. Gerdes's projected images, the attraction that the Baroque garden holds for the artist in this exhibition is readily apparent as is the high standard of conception and execution that it sets for further development.

"Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint" and "Theatergarden Bestiarium" will remain on view at P.S. 1, 401 21st Street, Long Island City, Queens, through March 12.

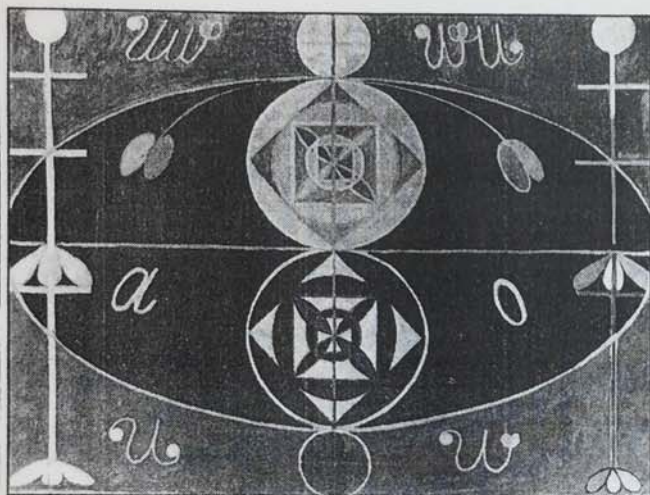


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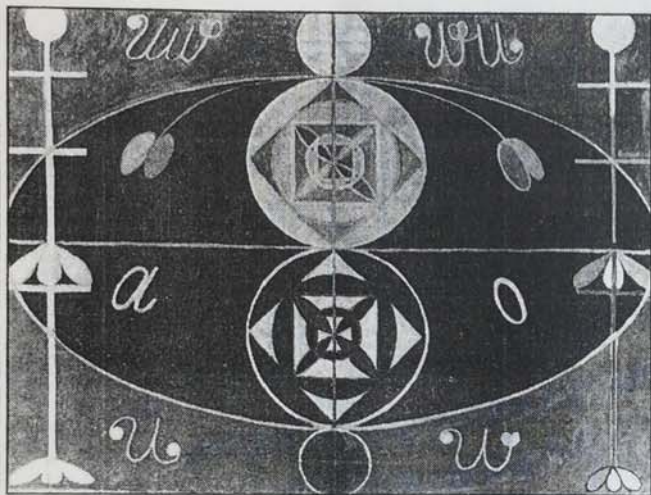
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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1989

## Review/Art

# Hilma af Klint, Explorer In Realm of the Abstract



Nicholas Walster

"Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16," oil on canvas, 1908, by Hilma af Klint, in "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint" at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, through March 12.

By ROBERTA SMITH

The two main exhibitions at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, form an odd yet effective couple.

The first, "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint," presents the work of a virtually unknown Swedish portrait and landscape painter who, in 1908 at the age of 45, made some of modern art's first abstractions. The other is "Theatergarden Bestiarium," a series of models, objects, installations and slide projections by 13 American and European artists and collaborative teams. Alternately obscure and provocative, this show attempts to update the 17th-century Baroque theater garden and to extend the notion of public art into situations that actively mingle past and present, art and nature.

Mutually exclusive as they seem, these two shows work well together. Both encourage speculation and the questioning of conventions, be they the canons of early modernism or the accepted forms of exhibition making. Together, they show that P.S. 1 continues to organize exhibitions for which other New York museums lack the space, inclination or flexibility — and doing them more professionally than in the past. In addition, the special-projects program, which features the work of several lesser-known or younger artists in individual galleries, seems especially good.

Hilma af Klint's paintings were shown for the first time in this country in 1986, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985." Her achievement may never be anything more than a footnote to 20th-century art history, but if so it will be a long and fascinating one that touches on many other artists' activities.

In a way, af Klint's work takes to extremes the mysticism that often motivated early abstract art. Like Mondrian, af Klint was a Theosophist; like Arthur Dove and Kandinsky, she believed in the transcendent power of natural forms.

Her first works are populated with flowing arabesques and schematized flower forms. Others, like "Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16" (shown above) evince a love of inspirited, somewhat Mayan geometries, along with secret words and symbols similar to those that would motivate Alfred Jensen in the 1950's. Finally, there is also a sense of naïve self-sufficiency and of a grand yet largely private scheme to af Klint's activities that make one think of outsider art, especially the visual technics of Adolph Wölffli, which were recently exhibited at the Grey Art gallery in Manhattan.

Af Klint is thought to have seen no modern art except that of Edvard Munch. She asserted that her first abstractions were dictated by spirits encountered in seances, that her hand was in effect "guided." In later series

of paintings, she seems to have been more instigator than conduit. And among the final works on view in the exhibition — a series of small watercolors with handwritten explanatory captions dating from 1917 — the artist seems to focus on spiritual energy expressed in terms of the atom and its powers.

Spiritual energy is the operative term here. It gives this show its determined forward motion, as well as its lapses in abstract purity and taste. Occasionally, the pressure of af Klint's religiosity required the presence of crucified figures, winged angels or St. George and his dragon. As with many other artists of her time, abstraction was neither sustained indefinitely nor in isolation from representation.

But finally, it may be the physical nature of these paintings that makes them most interesting and most strange. The scale of af Klint's work, even in her smallest canvases, is usually large and bold; her strong, saturated colors are painted directly onto raw canvas with brushy thin washes, a technique that relates to Munch's paint handling.

Sometimes her concentric circles can bring to mind the target paintings of Kenneth Noland; elsewhere, a particularly organic approach to geometry will evoke Elizabeth Murray's work — the white interlocking spiral forms of "Swan No. 21" from 1914-15, for example.

In a sense these works could have been painted yesterday and this is both their strength and their weakness. Startlingly fresh, they are also eternally innocent; they seem almost to exist beyond time but they also lack the specific wisdom that only time endows. Nonetheless, this show goes a long way to reminding us how little we know about early abstract art and its sources; likewise, how unnecessarily narrow is the history constructed around it.

"Theatergarden Bestiarium," installed upstairs from the af Klint show, argues for the exhibition as a work in progress, as a rumination on art's potential rather than its finished products, and as a combination of modest proposals and big ideas. The show's big idea is the role that the Baroque garden — with its built-in theatricality, its contrasting moments of extreme artifice and false naturalness — might play in the public spaces of the future.

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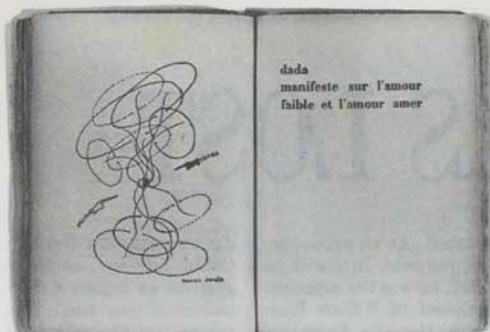


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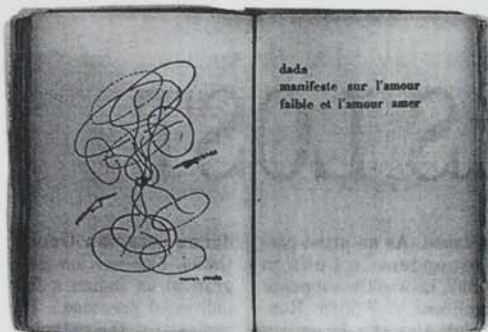
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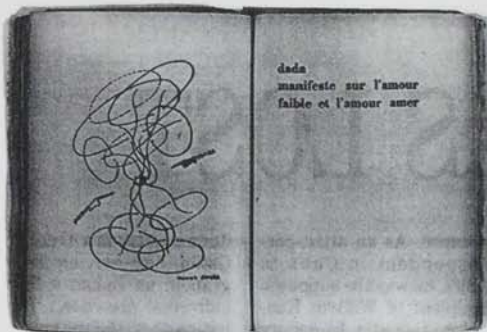
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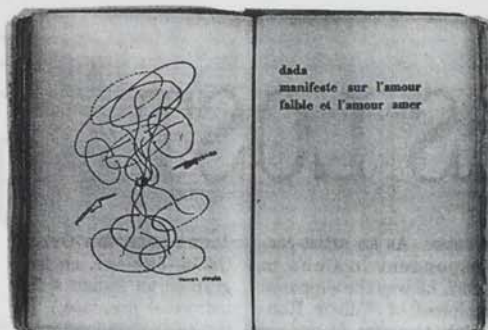
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## HERMANN NITSCH

Luring, Augustine &amp; Hodes Gallery, 41 E. 57th St. Through March 11.

Amid the fur couturiers and lizard-skin shoe boutiques of 57th Street is a show that chronicles some of the most violent, most sacrilegious and scatological, celebratorily decadent art that you will see for a long time. But the objects themselves are less interesting than the question of how they came to be "made." For over 20 years, Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch has been staging performance events that resemble Dionysian blood rites or medieval autos-da-fé. In a typical one, a brass band plays while the carcass of a lamb or bull is hoisted up and slit open, allowing its blood and entrails to slither over the bodies of nude initiates splayed below. The animal flesh is then put through various rituals on an altar, and the performers wallow in the leavings. These diversions, sometimes staged for gothic effect at Nitsch's castle in Prinzendorf, outside Vienna, have caused Nitsch and his circle to be reviled in the performance-art field. With a gesture that gives new meaning to the word *commodification*, the remnants of Nitsch's events have been collected and put up for sale. Here are priests' vestments soaked with brown, crusty lamb's blood; mock stretchers that carried performers; pseudo-sacred altar cloths covered with dried body fluids; and photographs of it all that are sensationalist, voyeuristic, and fascinating. Unfortunately, these props seem trivial, exactly like the props left over from a Joseph Beuys performance, unless one feverishly re-conjures the spectacle of their origin. In a gallery setting—through no fault of Luring Augustine, which deserves credit for even proposing this show—the objects are lifeless, unwelcome. Nitsch's rites break taboos; here, they are coddled, domesticated. **Edward Ball**



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# Contemplating the Rose Hip

*Invoking a mediumistic approach to art making, the early 20th-century Swedish artist Hilma af Klint created a remarkable body of visionary paintings that was largely unknown until a recent show at P.S. 1.*

**BY BROOKS ADAMS**

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*Hilma af Klint: Group 1. Primordial Chaos. Series WU, 1906, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 by 15 inches.*



*Group 2. The French Rose of the Lily. Series WU, 1907, oil on canvas, 22 1/2 by 31 inches.*

*Opposite, Group 10. Altar Picture no. 1, 1915, tempera and oil on canvas, 72 1/2 by 59 1/2 inches.*

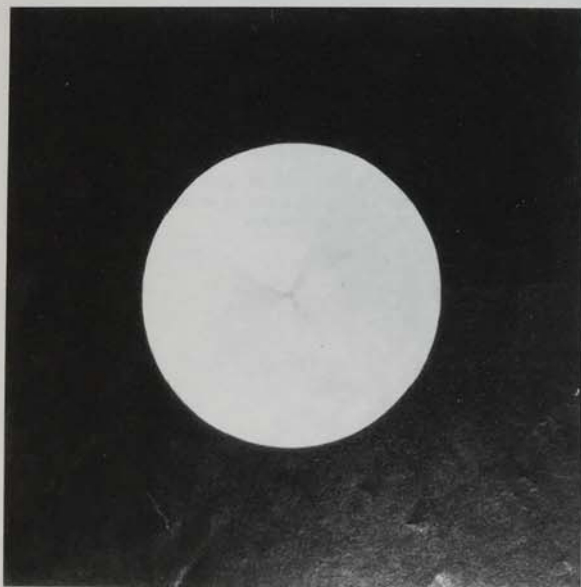


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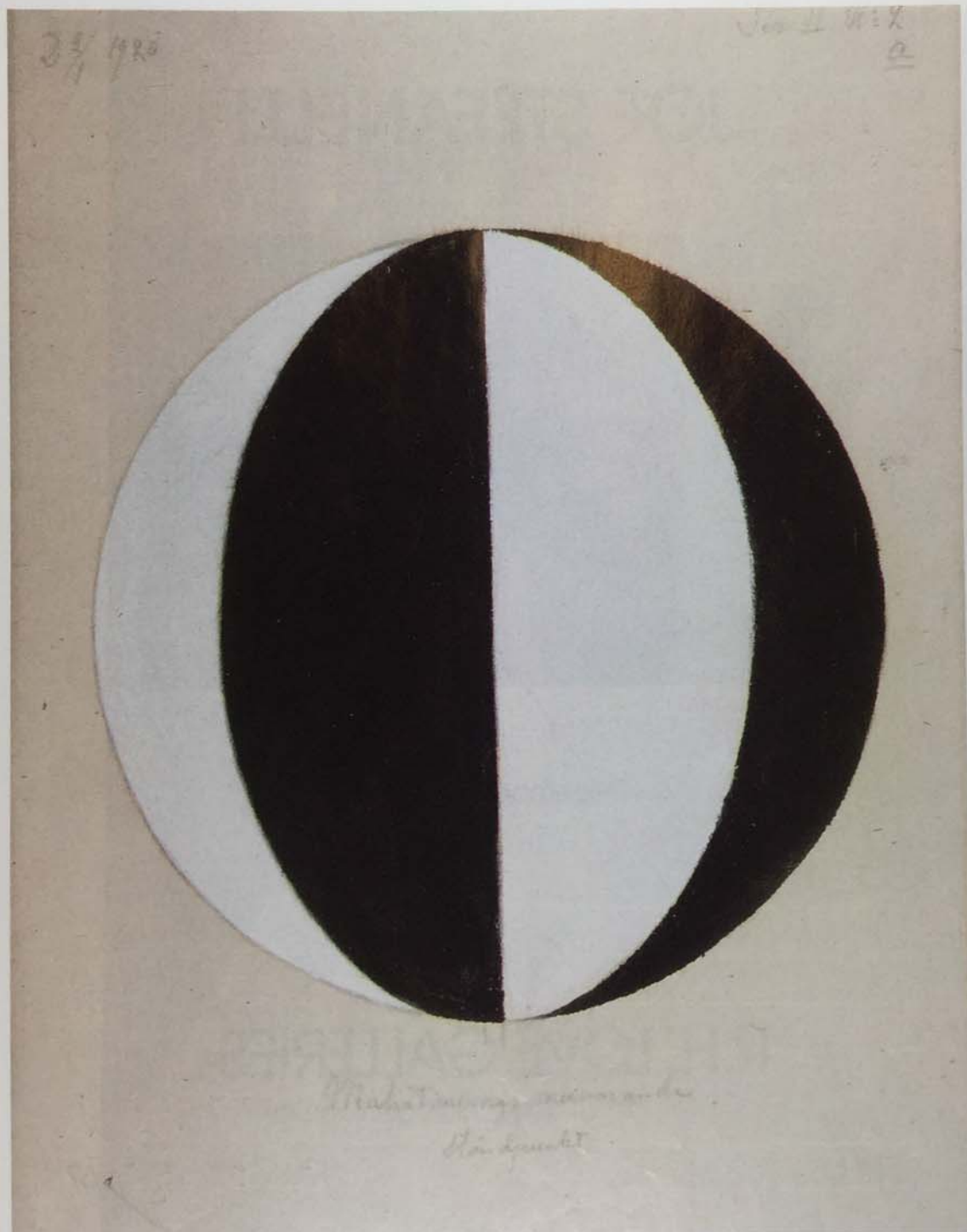
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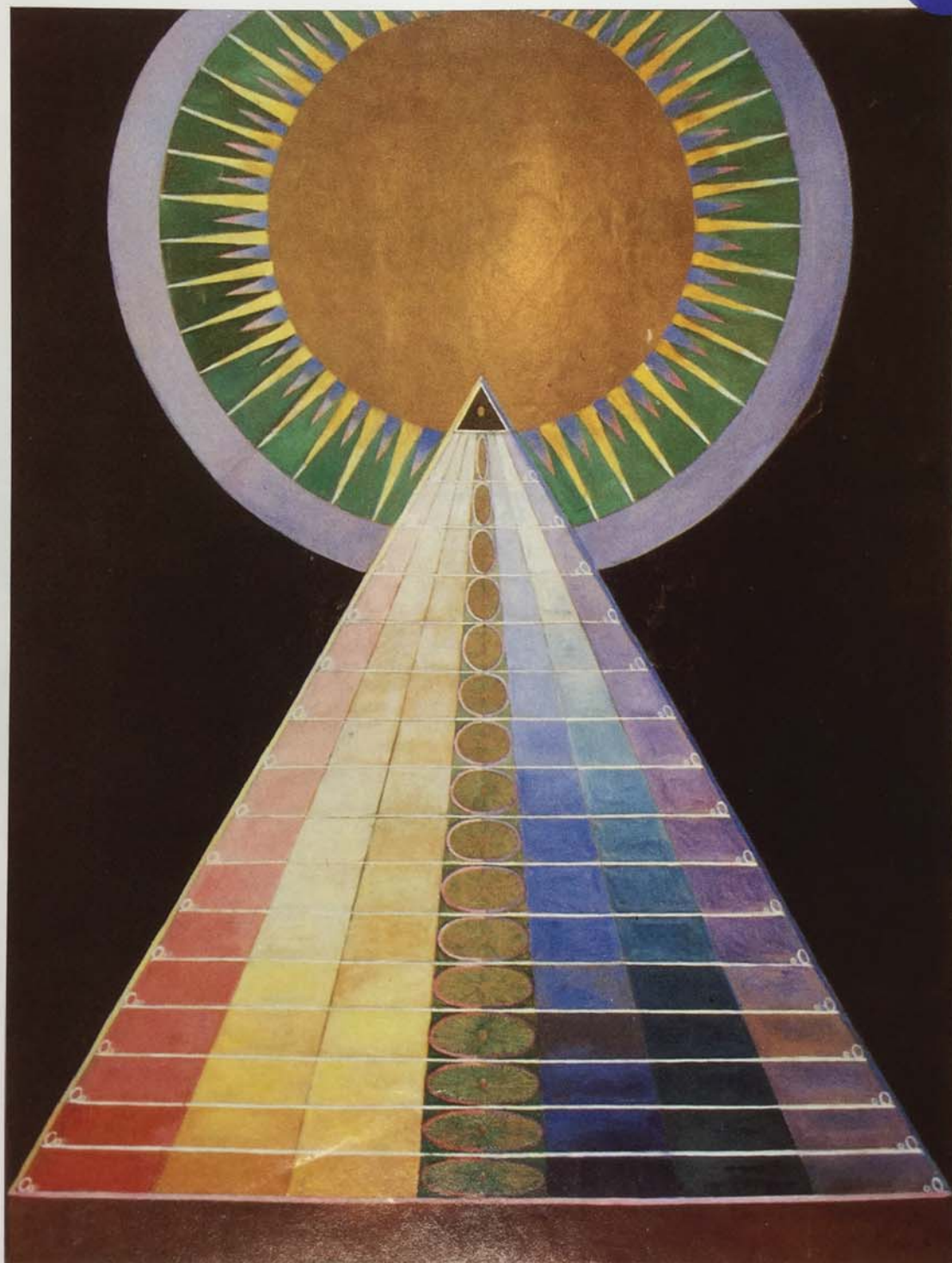


Series 11 no. 2 a. Mahatma's Present Standpoint, 1920, oil on canvas, 14 by 10 1/2 inches. All photos this article, courtesy P.S. 1.



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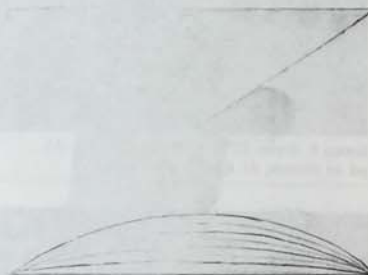
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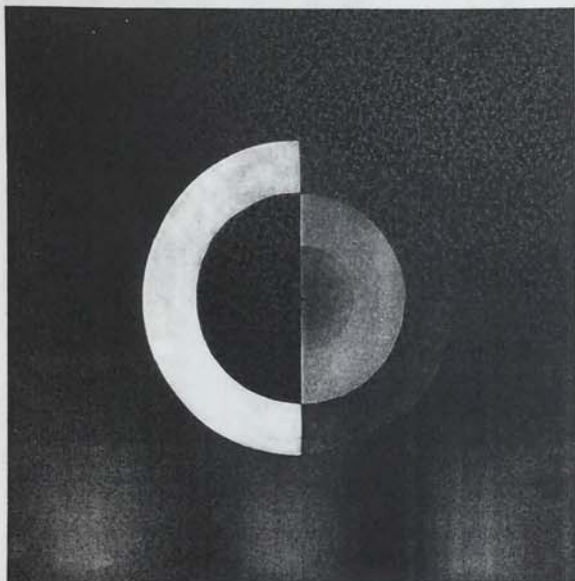
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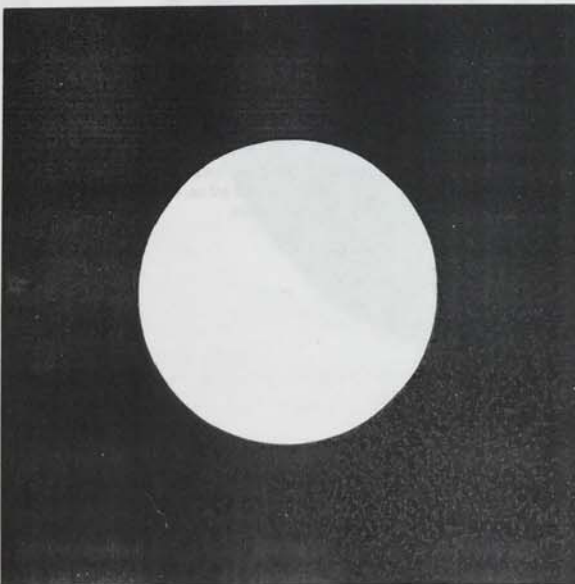


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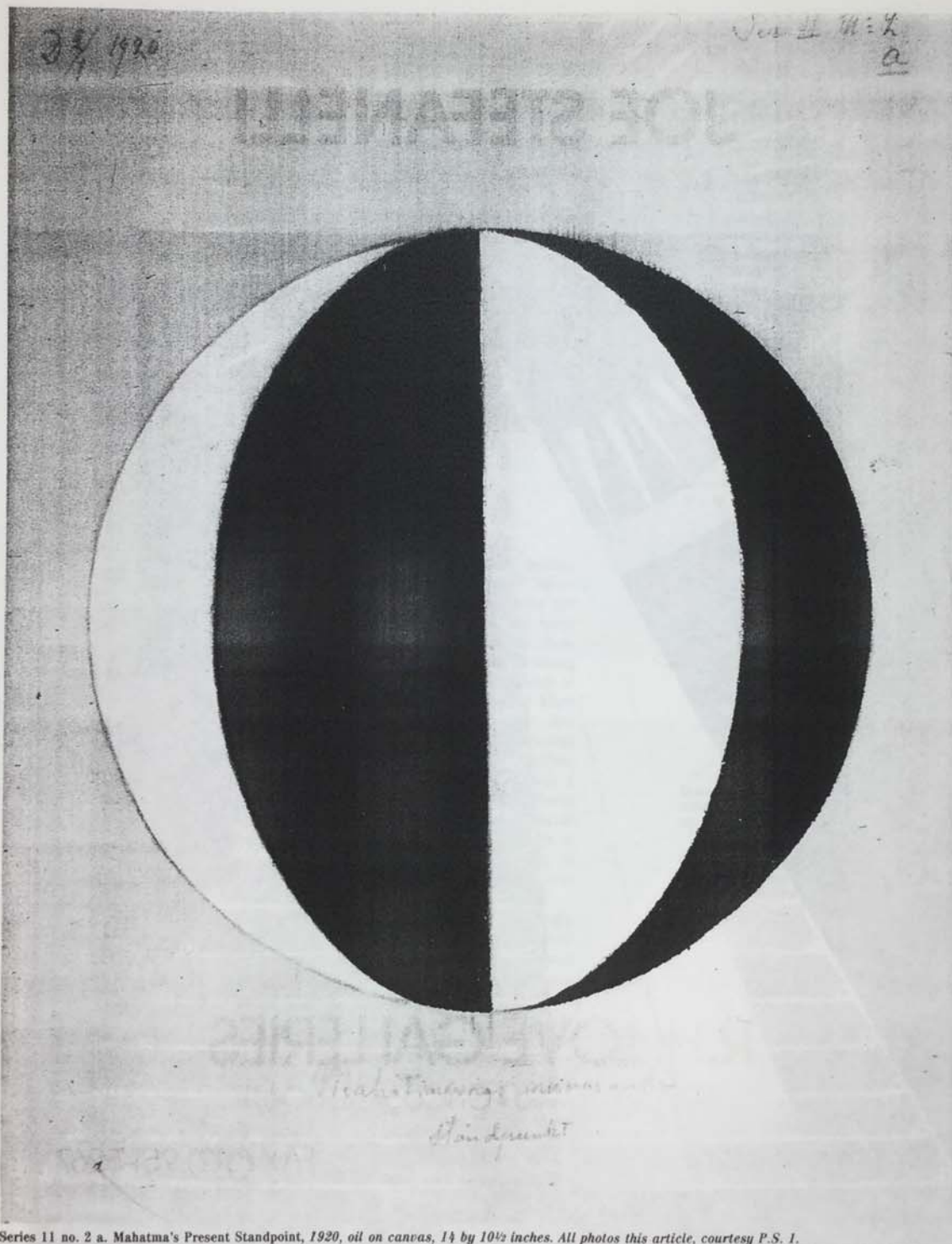
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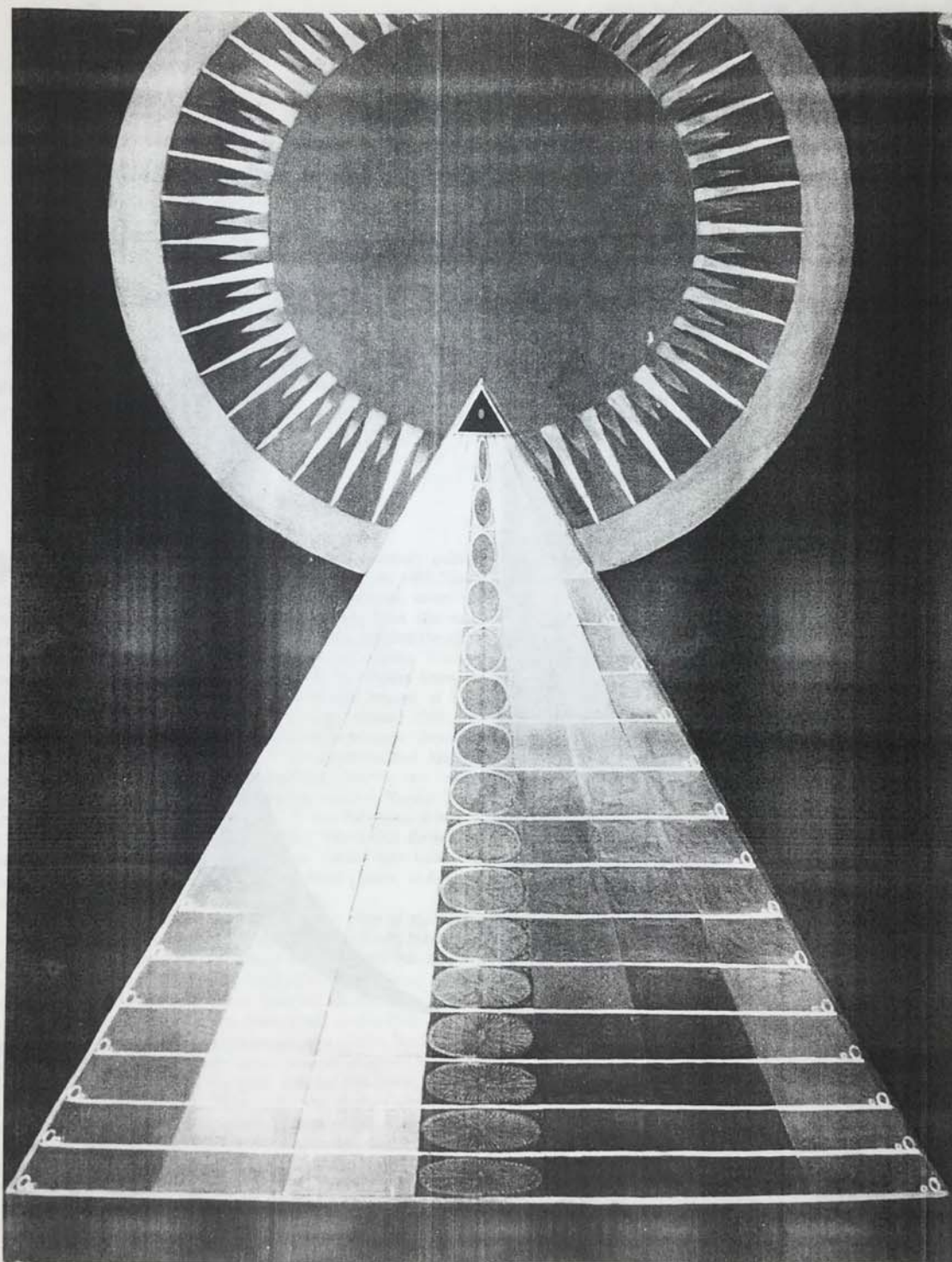


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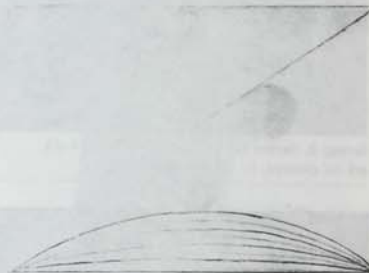
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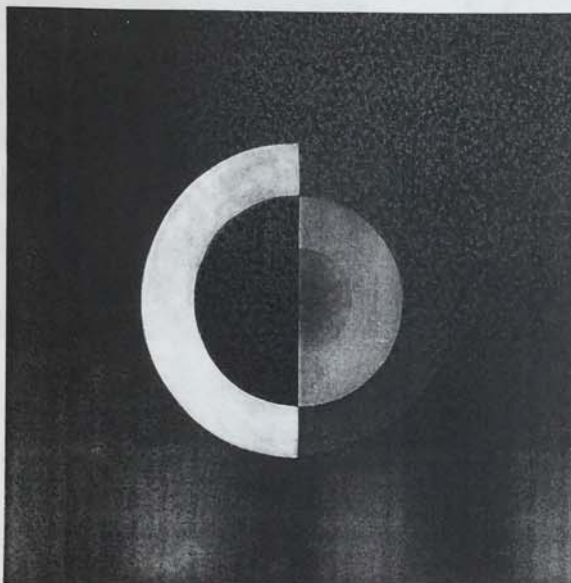
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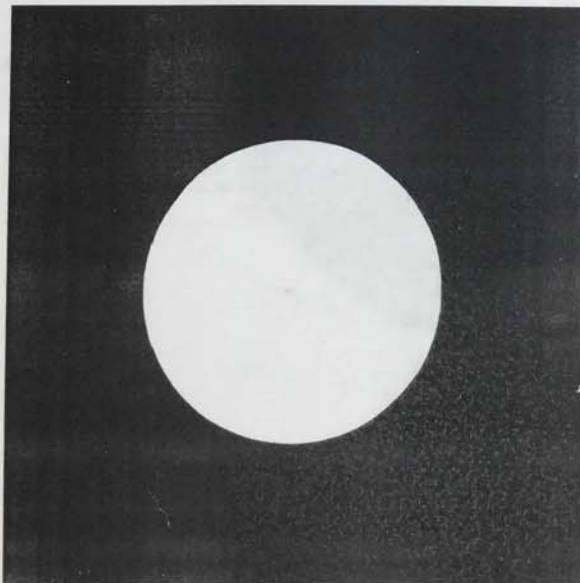


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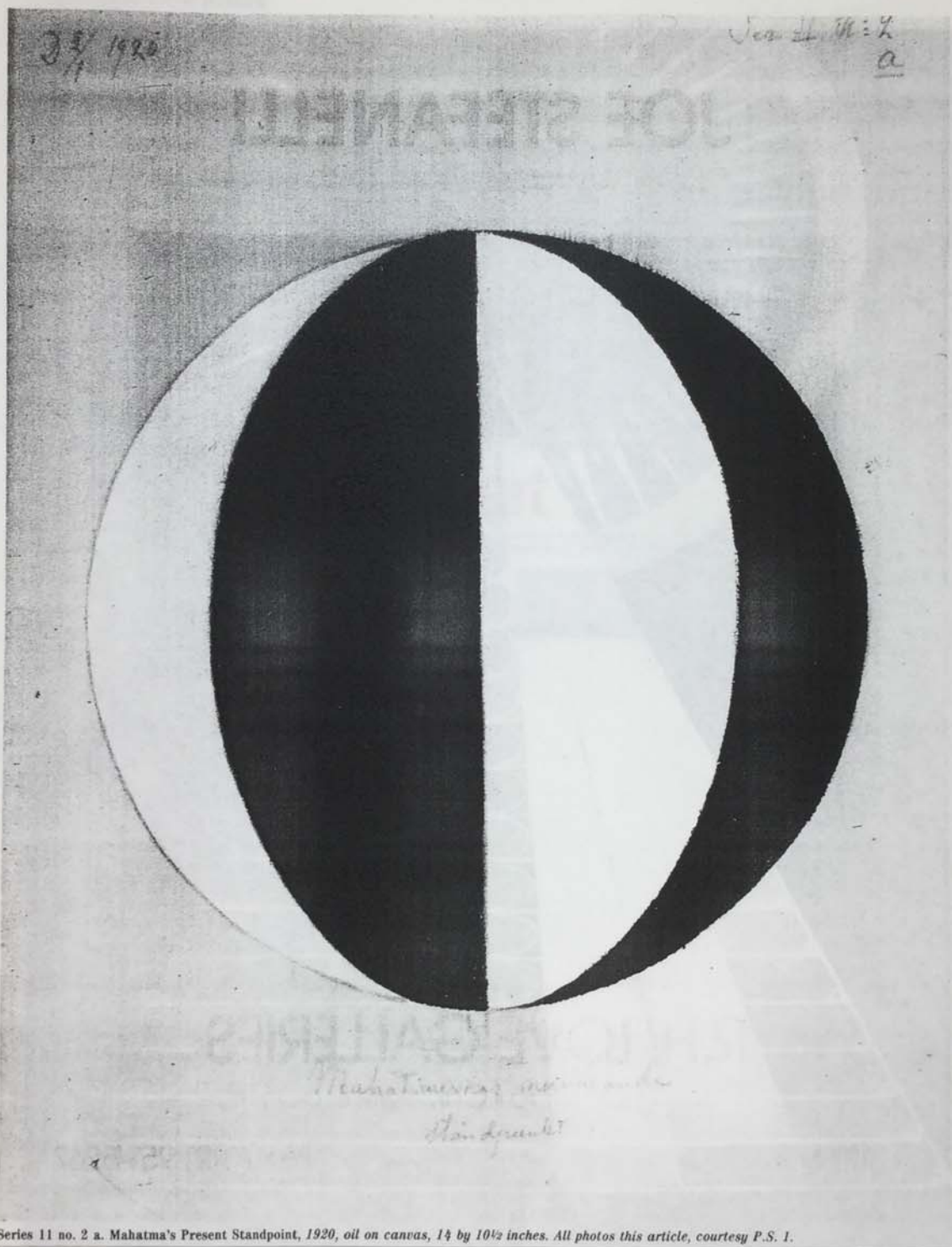
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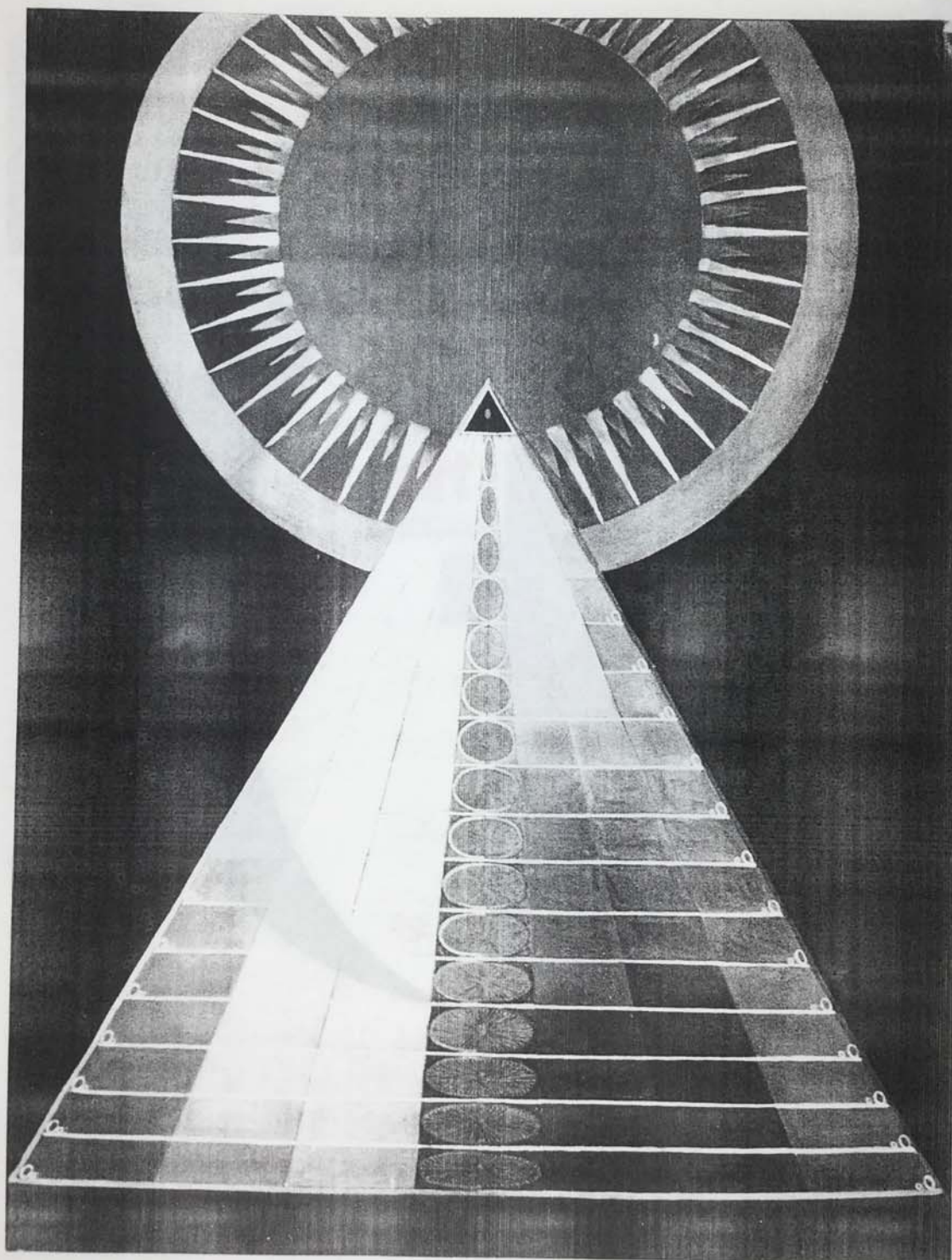


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## KRITIKER-UMFRAGE



**Grace Glueck**  
The New York Times

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Von Grace Glueck entdeckt:  
Bild von Hilma af Klint (1906)

**art**

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Warburgstraße 50, 2000 Hamburg 36

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Von Grace Glueck entdeckt:  
Bild von Hilma af Klint (1906)

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## KRITIKER-UMFRAGE



Grace Glueck  
The New York Times

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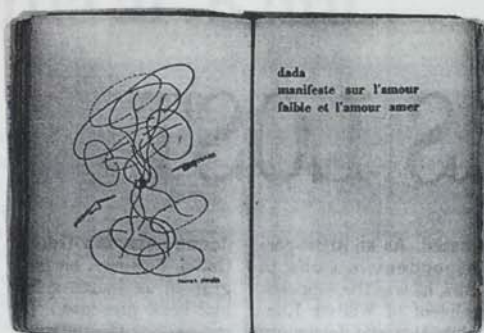
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7 DAYS • MARCH 15, 1989

## NEW THIS WEEK



7 Manifestes Dada, published in Paris in 1924, illustrated by Picabia

## THE AVANT-GARDE BOOK 1900-1945

Franklin Furnace Archive, 112 Franklin St. Through May 6.

There are so many important and hilarious books in this show, one hardly knows where to begin. My personal favorite might be Marcel Duchamp's "thing," for it is not a book but an antibook: *La boîte-en-valise* (1936-1941) is a kind of fake portfolio or tongue-in-cheek curriculum vitae that contains 71 miniatures of the artist's works, including his 1917 urinal, *Fountain*. Or it might be the clanging red-and-silver tin book made in 1932 by futurists Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Tullio D'Albisola, with its loud scenes of planes and machines painted on metal pages. Metal pages! Those modernists were comedians. In this supercharged exhibition curated knowingly by Jaroslav Andel, Franklin Furnace has arrayed texts from most of the important movements of the early 20th century: Constructivism, cubism, Dadaism, Expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, et al. While today there may be an antitextual bias in the arts, during the high modernist period artists made few works without also publishing a manifesto. Showcasing this proselytizing genre is *Cabaret Voltaire* (1916), a gleaming silver 32-page pamphlet about Dada by Hugo Ball and Jean Arp. Among the show's German books depicting Weimar-period excesses and scenes of social collapse, there is *Der Geschicht der herschend Klass* (1921), by dyspeptic seer Georg Grosz, which includes a picture of pigs, monkeys, and asses dressed in black tie, drinking from cups adorned with swastikas. And mingling visual with verbal delirium is Salvador Dali, who illustrated an edition of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1934) by poète maudit le

Comte de Lautreamont. But of all the engrossing material in the show, the most suggestive inclusion is a 230-year-old experimental novel that functioned as something of a preview of the 20th-century avant-garde: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Vol I, II, IX (1760) by Laurence Sterne. With its blank sections under various chapter headings, occasional black pages, and asterisks placed in the text, *Tristram Shandy* announced, as long ago as the 18th century, the freedom of the publisher and the artist to seize the book and make it new.

Edward Ball

## HILMA AF KLINT

PS 1, 46-01 21st St., Long Island City, Through March 12.

The title of this exhibition, "Secret Paintings," may evoke images of Nordic mystery and mysticism, of paintings produced in some drafty medieval convent or castle. Such speculation is only half wrong. Hilma af Klint was Swedish, but far from medieval. She was born in 1862 and began to create the paintings in this exhibition in 1906. Spiritually inclined, as were so many early modernists, this otherwise down-to-earth woman formed a circle of women actively interested in the occult. (Be sure to see the photograph of their seance room in the show's catalog.) During a 1904 seance, the voice of "Ananda" predicted that the artist would make mediumistic paintings, and two years later she began to produce extraordinary paintings that are among the earliest abstractions in 20th-century art. Her works are characterized by geometric diagrams and archetypal symbols that suggest everything from fetuses to molecular configurations. She never entirely abandoned representation; some works depict crucifixions and saints, swans

and flowers. But even these conventional motifs are far from sentimentalized, especially in light of late-19th-century religious art. The bold scale and lightly worked paint make many of her canvases seem peculiarly up-to-date and out-of-time. Nor is there anything in the show that fails to corroborate Klint's assertions that her hand was somehow divinely guided in the creation of these paintings. This is a fascinating show that reminds us, once again, how narrow is our understanding of the primarily spiritual basis of early-20th-century abstraction. Klint's peers are fellow theosophists and spiritualists, including Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and Franz Marc—hardly some artistic lunatic fringe.

Robert Atkins

## HERMANN NITSCH

Luring, Augustine &amp; Hodess Gallery, 41 E. 57th St. Through March 11.

Amid the fur couturiers and lizard-skin shoe boutiques of 57th Street is a show that chronicles some of the most violent, most sacrilegious and scatological, celebratorily decadent art that you will see for a long time. But the objects themselves are less interesting than the question of how they came to be "made." For over 20 years, Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch has been staging performance events that resemble Dionysian blood rites or medieval autos-da-fe. In a typical one, a brass band plays while the carcass of a lamb or bull is hoisted up and slit open, allowing its blood and entrails to slither over the bodies of nude initiates splayed below. The animal flesh is then put through various rituals on an altar, and the performers wallow in the leavings. These diversions, sometimes staged for gothic effect at Nitsch's castle in Prinzenhof, outside Vienna, have caused Nitsch and his circle to be reviled in the performance-art field. With a gesture that gives new meaning to the word *commodification*, the remnants of Nitsch's events have been collected and put up for sale. Here are priests' vestments soaked with brown, crusty lamb's blood; mock stretchers that carried performers; pseudo-sacred altar cloths covered with dried body fluids; and photographs of it all that are sensationalist, voyeuristic, and fascinating. Unfortunately, these props seem trivial, exactly like the props left over from a Joseph Beuys performance, unless one feverishly reconjures the spectacle of their origin. In a gallery setting—through no fault of Luring Augustine, which deserves credit for even proposing this show—the objects are lifeless, unwelcome. Nitsch's rites break taboos; here, they are coddled, domesticated.

Edward Ball



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## Hilma af Klint

**A**stonishing, in this day of simulacra and mass-media information, that a previously unknown artist (born in Sweden in 1862) can not only come to light, but also come to our attention with a richly developed and complete body of work that expands the history of the movement from representation to abstraction. Hilma af Klint, unlike her near-contemporaries Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Arthur Dove, labored under the effects of those conditions which frequently marginalized women, non-conformists, and the self-taught.

In the early 1900's already twenty years into af Klint's career, groups of composers, writers, and visual artists began to pull away from the canons and conventions of representation toward abstraction and, subsequently, modern art. For visual artists this meant developing a new, symbolic use of line, form, color, and organization of space—as opposed to the strictly natural. Successively, symbolic signs and codes became preferred over direct observations, as mechanistic and positivistic views were being dismantled by both physics and psychoanalysis. This growth of abstraction reflected an interest in additional layers of meaning about reality and the human condition, as well as a sense of one's place in the world.

One can trace the beginning of turn-of-the-century abstraction not as a *break* from previous history, but rather as a link connected to a historical spiral, re-emerging at a later time, in an altered form. It was actually just about 150 years before that gnostic and cabalistic literature, along with Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), and Emanuel Swedenborg's *The Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation* (1734), and the work of William Blake, offered a counterpoint to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Throwing a backward view over history, these writings, particularly the cabala, had a profound influence on the major scientists and thinkers of that time as a means of speculation and interpretation. Yet it was in the Romantic early 19th century that the surge of technology coincided with materialist beliefs in science, leading to their dominance within the spheres of the social, and the personal, to which early abstraction first responded; it has proceeded in *this* century in the commodity culture and the society of the spectacle.

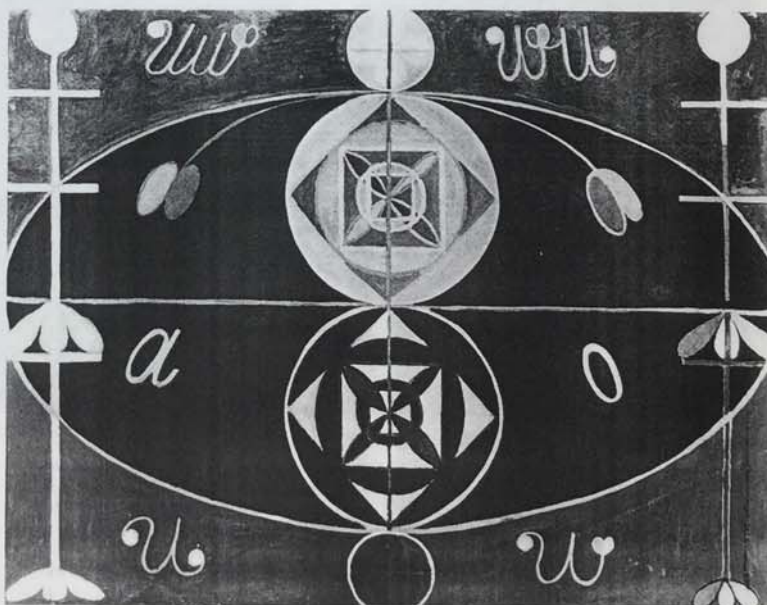
As "facts" came to replace hermeneutical interpretation and speculation in the 1800's, the same analogy could be drawn regarding the text, or location, of the human body. The strange irony here lay in the direct reversal, or displacement, as the symbolic and scientific, which *connotes* the body, replaced the *denoted*, "sensed" one. It is with this point that we face the epoch of the mid-nineteenth century in which af Klint's accomplishments can best be measured and seen not only for her personal commitment and resolve, but also for her sense of self against a (doubly) hostile environment.

Af Klint had long had an interest in mathematics and science. She was highly reclusive, preferring to work alone after her formal art training. Yet like other, more well-known artists, she was greatly interested in mysticism and occultism, and in her early years even worked in trance-like states. Within the general movement from representation to abstraction, af Klint was one of the first to typify the loss of the original referent as the organic and unified self became gradually exchanged and re-identified as symbolic in a symbolic field.

Hilma af Klint's achievements also include her pioneering use of geometric abstraction. She frequently worked through motifs of lines, squares, triangles, helixes, and spheres. These were utilized schematically, along with specific applications of color. While all this work antedates most 20th-century abstraction, it is her use of the sphere that is especially noteworthy. Here, she was able to express a different sense of time: as a nodule of experience, or time lived; as apart from a deployment of Vico's ordered, linear chronology.

These visual techniques continue in altered form today, with the linguistics intact but at best expressive of a metaphysics far removed from the transcendent. Ross Bleckner, whose paintings richly investigate the metaphysical qualities of human consciousness, masterfully portrays the continued drive toward an epistemological understanding of reality and ourselves. The paintings of Marilyn Lerner reveal their psychological resonances through intuited structuring of both shape and color. In Mary K. Weatherford's diptych paintings, a photo of a movie director is juxtaposed with the names of all the female stars consumed by the vehicle of the movie, their names in circular "targets." Like Hilma af Klint, who died in 1944, each of these artists today presents an art that stages the difference between history and nature, and in which their irresolvable difference marks that trope wherein we explore the limits and potentials of human nature, in *our* culture. (PS. 1, Long Island City, January 15–March 12)

Pat McCoy



Hilma af Klint, Group 6, Series WUS no. 16, 1908, Oil on canvas, 43 1/2" x 56". Courtesy P.S. 1.

May 1989



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# LOOKING AT ART ARTnews

## Hilma af Klint

### BACK FROM THE BEYOND

**H**ilma af Klint, a Swedish painter who came from a prominent naval and scientific family, died in 1944 at the age of 81. In her will, she decreed that her works of art, which had been seen only by a few close friends, should be kept together by her nephew Erik. She further stipulated that they should not be shown publicly for at least 20 years, when the world might be ready to receive them.

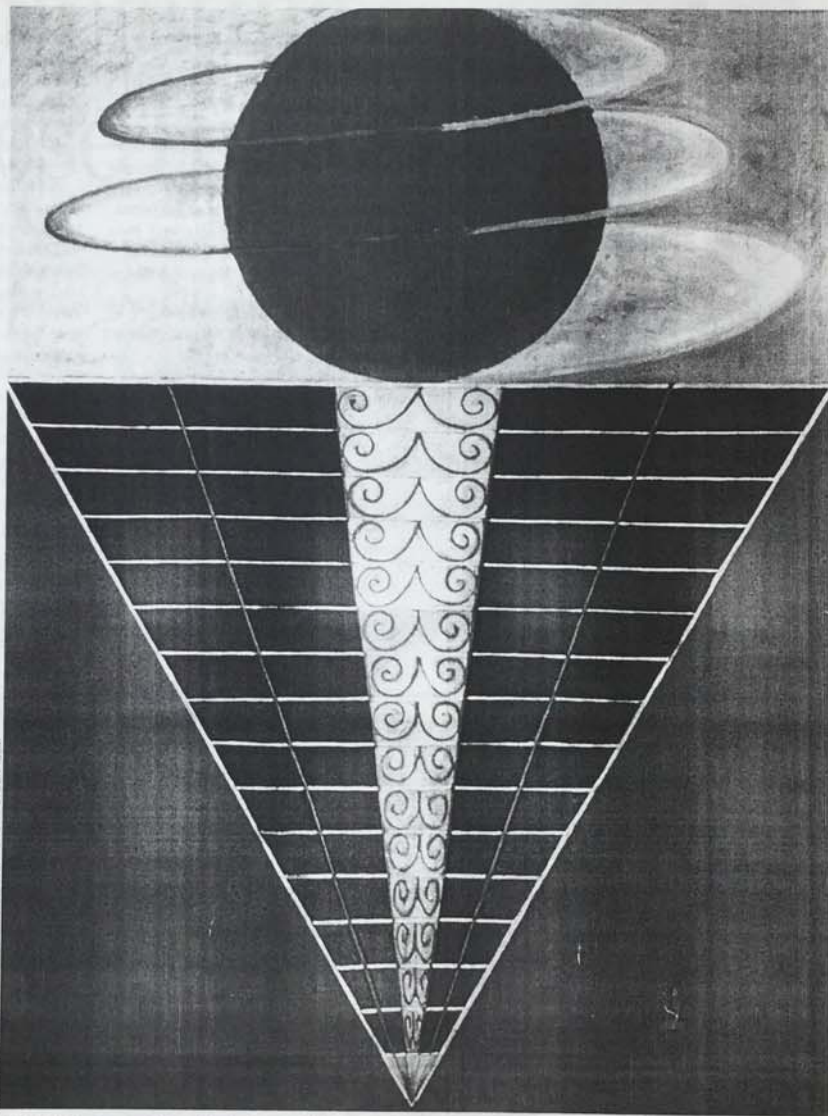
In the '60s Erik tried to find a public institution to care for the legacy—more than 1,200 paintings, drawings, notebooks, sketchbooks, and watercolors. "He was met with incomprehension," says Ake Fant, curator of the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk, the private foundation in Stockholm Erik finally established in 1977 to administer the collection.

By the mid-'80s the art climate had changed. In 1986 more than a dozen af Klint paintings appeared in the inaugural show of the revamped Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "The Spiritual in Art, Abstract painting 1890–1985." Artists and historians who saw them were stunned to find an early abstractionist of such remarkable authority—yet one who was almost unknown. Now, thanks to a sweeping survey of her work at New York's Institute for Art and Urban Resources (better known as P.S. 1), the breadth of her achievement has become clear. The show was like a great archeological find: room after room of unimagined riches. Critics gave it prominent reviews. Artists went back again and again and began to speak of "Hilma" with friendly familiarity. "The work looked like it was done yesterday," one visitor said.

Af Klint was a respected member of the

Swedish academy who began her career in the conventional way, making portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. But she was not like most people, and she knew it. Even as a child, she experienced inexplicable visions of the future. Religion—especially Christianity—and spiritism became an important part of her life. In the late 1880s she started to take part in seances with a small

circle of women friends. She frequently acted as the medium herself during the sessions, sitting in a trance and conveying messages to the group from the spiritual world. The women were first urged to carry out automatic writing, then automatic drawing. And in 1904, according to af Klint, a spirit called Ananda informed her that she would be asked to execute "paint-



Af Klint's arcane spiritual beliefs gave rise to such paintings as *Group 10. Altar Picture No. 2, 1915*.



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Af Klint insisted her work remain hidden until the world was ready to receive it.

ings on the astral plane." Another spirit guide, Amaliel, said sternly: "You shall deny yourself so that your pride shall be broken." The artist wrote in her notebook: "Amaliel offered me a commission and I immediately replied 'yes.'" She was 42, not a young woman any longer, but so she embarked on her true life's work.

There were years of preliminary, purifying exercises. The first painting af Klint "received" from her spirit advisers, *Primordial Chaos* (1906), is almost a landscape. A page-size unstretched canvas, it presents an embryonic shape floating cloudlike in a pale blue field above a horizon. A choppy, dark blue stripe of paint across the bottom can be seen as a rugged sea. The image is reinforced by a veil of slanted, roughly marked black lines over all—a violent storm suitable to the creative spirit. The same year brought a series of 26 small oils, which she designated the "WU Series." Done predominantly in muted blues and greens, they show pentagrams, spirals, and astral symbols that seem to float on thinly painted fields.

Another "WU" series fol-

**Innovative abstractions like Group 4, The Ten Greatest No. 3, Youth, 1907, were made in isolation from other abstract artists of the day.**

lowed, this time of larger canvases. The works are full of pellucid pinks as clear as the pinks of Matisse. Delicate lines of blue, white, or yellow trace petal shapes or spell out words representing sounds spoken by her spirit guides: "vreu," "euw," "urv." One small painting, *Group 2, Series WU* (1907), which looks uncannily like an early Elizabeth Murray, is an exquisite work of undulating lines and a flowerlike image. The flower is one of hundreds of natural forms used in scores of paintings. One strikingly sinuous series is based on swans, and there are studies of violets and their "guidelines," or geometric symbols, possibly used to meditate on the properties of different flowers.

If the artist had confined her work to such delicacies, it's unlikely that she would impress us today as she does. But af Klint, working in virtual isolation, with no knowledge of the paintings of Kandinsky, Kupka, or Malevich, also happened to make some of the strongest, largest, leanest works in the history of early abstraction.

In May 1907, after a period of fasting and prayer, af Klint began what she called the "Ten Great Figure Paintings." Done in egg tempera on paper and canvas, these brilliantly colored pictures are each almost eleven feet high and eight feet wide. (Her

farmer neighbors wondered why she bought so many eggs.) These "figure paintings," each completed in about four hours, are abstract, composed of rounded organic shapes floating on single-color backgrounds—bright orange, for example, in *Youth*. These exuberant works, often including details of numerals and phrases in neatly inscribed script, precede a four-year period, ending in 1912, during which the artist stopped painting altogether.

Af Klint was an ascetic person, always dressed in black, always upright and strict (though children remember her as "kind and cheerful," Fant says). Her paintings, however, are almost voluptuous in the fullness of their colors, even after the "Ten Great Figure" works, when her organic forms gave way to the stricter geometry of centered circles and triangles that she employed from the mid-teens to the early '20s. Yet the most astonishing paintings of her long, secret career were done around 1915. She worked in robust reds, lustrous whites, hot yellows, deep blacks, and the tenderest violets and pinks, using thick and buttery paint. Despite their vivid colors and textures, the works bespeak a preternatural calm and simplicity.

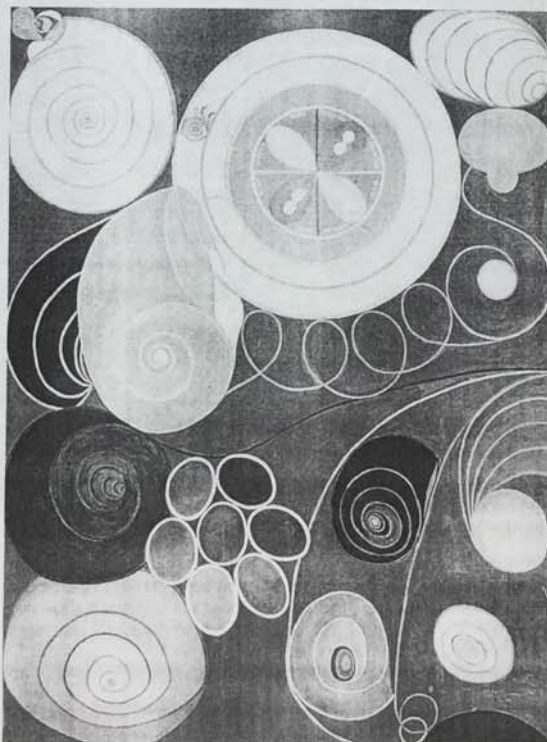
Af Klint was not a painter's painter in her lifetime, but she has emerged as one today.

The content of her paintings is arcane, and the occult underpinnings may seem irrelevant to the ordinary viewer. But her remarkably focused ideas about her spiritual search—and how to conduct that very real search in her art—tell in the paintings' commanding presence.

Af Klint's anonymity may linger on, however, among a larger art audience. Because her pictures can't be separated and sold, there is no infrastructure of influential, committed collectors and art dealers to promote them, so they may never be shown widely, except perhaps in alternative museums. Without any hype value, af Klint is the antithesis of so many contemporary artists. We look at her work only for itself because its freshness as well as its unfamiliarity make it new, and because it speaks of instinct, intellect, and the kind of profound seriousness of purpose that we all hope to be capable of in some sphere of our lives.

—Margaret Moorman

Margaret Moorman is a senior editor of ARTnews.





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# Contemplating the Rose Hip

*Invoking a mediumistic approach to art making, the early 20th-century Swedish artist Hilma af Klint created a remarkable body of visionary paintings that was largely unknown until a recent show at P.S. 1.*

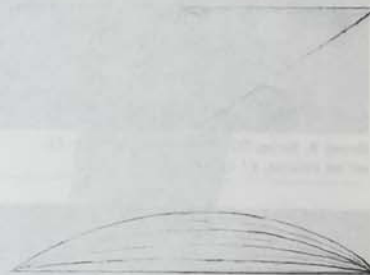
BY BROOKS ADAMS

**H**ilma af Klint (1862-1944) was a Swedish visionary painter whose work was almost totally unknown until the 1986 "Spiritual in Art" show at the Los Angeles County Museum; there her bizarrely proto-Minimalist geometric compositions from the early part of the century came as a complete revelation, stealing the show from Kandinsky, Kupka and many contemporary artists. Working mediumistically, at first in a circle of women, the Friday Group or the Five, and later under the influence of Rudolf Steiner, af Klint made some of the earliest abstract paintings, around 1907. She construed them as part of a great commission to execute "Drawings for the Temple" (ostensibly "dictated" by spirits named Amaliel, Ester and Georg), and having completed 111 pictures, she built a special studio to house them on the Swedish island of Munso. Today all her work belongs to the collection of the Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk in Stockholm. This show, called "The Secret Pictures of Hilma af Klint," which originated at the Nordic Arts Center in Helsinki, was the first in-depth look at af Klint's work, and it was extremely enterprising of P.S. 1 to take it on.

At P.S. 1, we were confronted by room after room of startlingly reductive Symbolist paintings. Af Klint had worked as a traditional portraitist and landscape painter during the 1880s and '90s, and was somewhat acclaimed in her native Stockholm; none of these conventional works, unfortunately, were included in the P.S. 1 show. Although af Klint was involved in mediumistic circles from an early age (owing perhaps to the childhood death of a sister), her work did not start to show wholeheartedly occult tendencies until 1905, when she received her calling from the spirit Amaliel and vowed to spend a year fulfilling his mission. Notes from the group's séance book read: "Amaliel draws a sketch, which H. then paints. The goal is to represent a seed from which evolution develops under rain and tempest, lightning and storm." Such a vision is conveyed in the little oil *Group 1. Primordial Chaos. Series WU* (1906), which shows a spiraling figure cavorting above a choppy sea; this series, too, was executed by means of psychic automatism under the guidance of a spirit called Wu.



Hilma af Klint: Group 1. Primordial Chaos. Series WU, 1906, oil on canvas, 19½ by 15 inches.



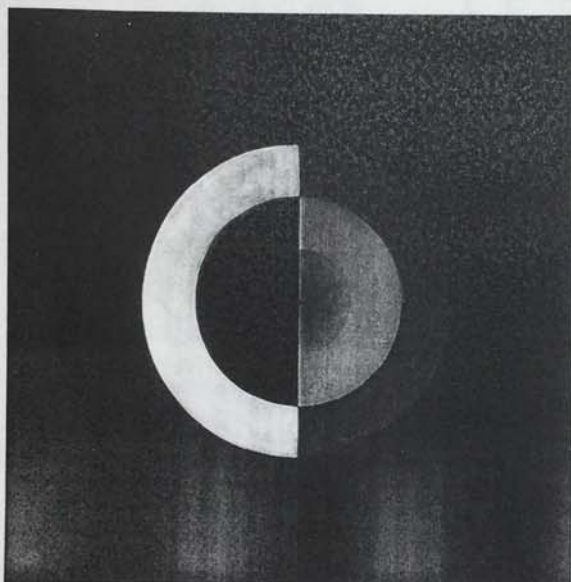
Group 2. The French Rose of the Lily. Series WU, 1907, oil on canvas, 22¾ by 31 inches.

Opposite, Group 10. Altar Picture no. 1, 1915, tempera and oil on canvas, 72¾ by 59¾ inches.

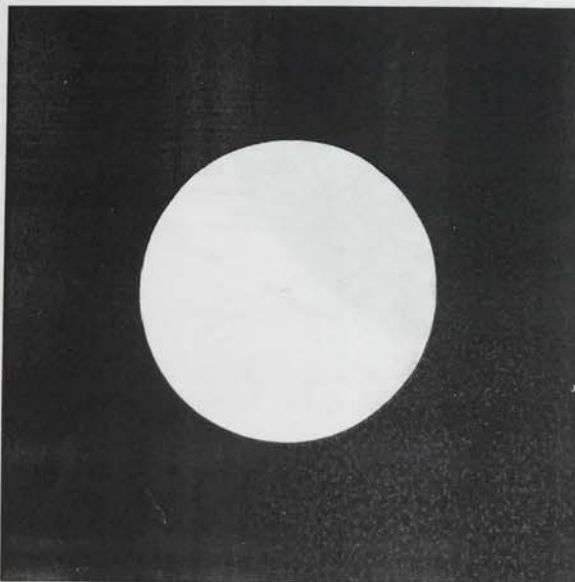


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**A proto-Minimalist series of crisp black-and-white circular diagrams from 1920, resembling phases of the moon, seems to delineate a highly reductive attempt at comparative religion.**



Group 9. Series SUW. Swan no. 17, 1914-15, oil on canvas, 61 by 59 1/4 inches.



Group 9. Series SUW. Swan no. 14, 1914-15, oil on canvas, 61 by 59 1/4 inches.

Af Klint's early spiritualist paintings are characterized by their bright tempera colors and strict linear outlines, which recall the visionary "dictations" of William Blake (whose influence can also be felt in the contemporaneous drawings of Kahlil Gibran). Her imagery of crucifixes surrounded by allegorical figures, organic shapes, astral signs and words like "Vestal-Ascetic" (af Klint's ideal self-image) would not be out of place in the more esoteric realms of Dutch and Belgian Symbolism; and I feel sure she would have had something to talk about with the likes of Jean Delville or even Mondrian, whose early connections to Theosophy are well known.

Her exclusion from art history until now is thus something of a conundrum; her isolation seems to have been more than geographical (she remained a spinster and did not leave home until the age of 58, when her mother died). She was omitted from a recent survey of Scandinavian art, Neil Kent's "The Triumph of Light and Nature: Nordic Art 1740-1940" (1987), which included other marginal, though more cosmopolitan, figures such as Nils Dardel.

**E**arly sequences, notably *The Ten Greatest* series of 1907, with its loopy spirals and egg shapes in large field paintings denoting "Youth" and "Manhood," again executed under the influence of mediumistic spirits, were later described in her journal: "Ten paradisiacally beautiful paintings were to be executed; the paintings were to be in colors that would be educational and they would reveal my feelings to me in an economical way. . . . It was the meaning of the leaders to give the world a glimpse of the systems of the four parts in the life of man." From 1908 to 1912, her visions having ceased, af Klint stopped painting. Then she began again.

Probably the high point of the show was a dazzling group of largely black-and-white canvases (1914-15) depicting swans, with electric blue feet and beaks, kissing and even copulating. *Final Picture from the Series SUW. Swan* (1915) is almost square, divided into four parts with a black and a white swan kissing at the center; their beaks interlaced with an astral symbol of a floating cube. Af Klint envisioned St. George and the Dragon as a series of tiny and big vulva shapes in large fields containing crucifixes and orbs. Her trio of big *Altar Pictures* (1915) are proto-Paul Klee color pyramids with foliate scrolls below and gold orbs whizzing above—a novel form of 20th-century religious painting.

A botanical illustration like *Violets with Guidelines* (1919) accompanied by square diagrams for each plant, documents her move towards a more naturalistic approach under Steiner's influence. Yet what those little squares mean is anyone's guess—is she graphing the spiritual energy of each plant? A 1920 series of crisp black-and-white circular diagrams, resembling phases of the moon, delineates "The Standpoint of the Jews at the Birth of Jesus," "The Muslim Standpoint" and "Mahatma's Present Standpoint." These seem to be a highly reductive attempt at comparative religion. In the '20s, when she traveled frequently to Dornach, Switzerland, to be near Steiner, af Klint started doing loose, flowing abstract water colors with titles like *Contemplating the Rose Hip* (1922).

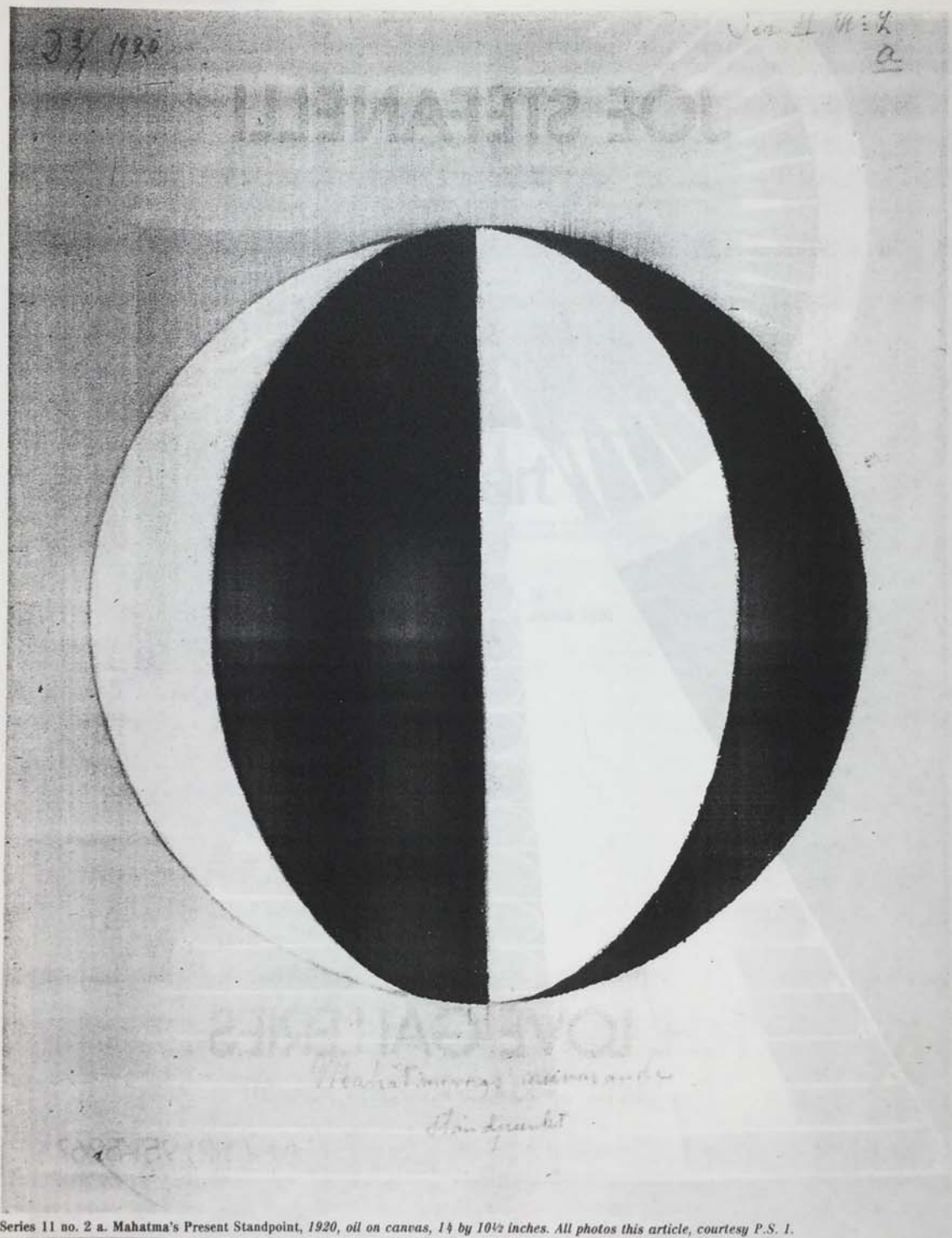
In the '30s, af Klint alternately continued her plant studies and painted portraits of her neighbors (none of which were in the show); she is even on record as painting her vision of the bombing of London—1932! Having stipulated in her will that her paintings were not to be shown until 20 years after her death, she is said to have believed that recognition for her work would come only near the end of the century. In this, as in so much of her art, Hilma af Klint seems to have been way ahead of her time.

Author: Brooks Adams is a free-lance writer who lives in New York.



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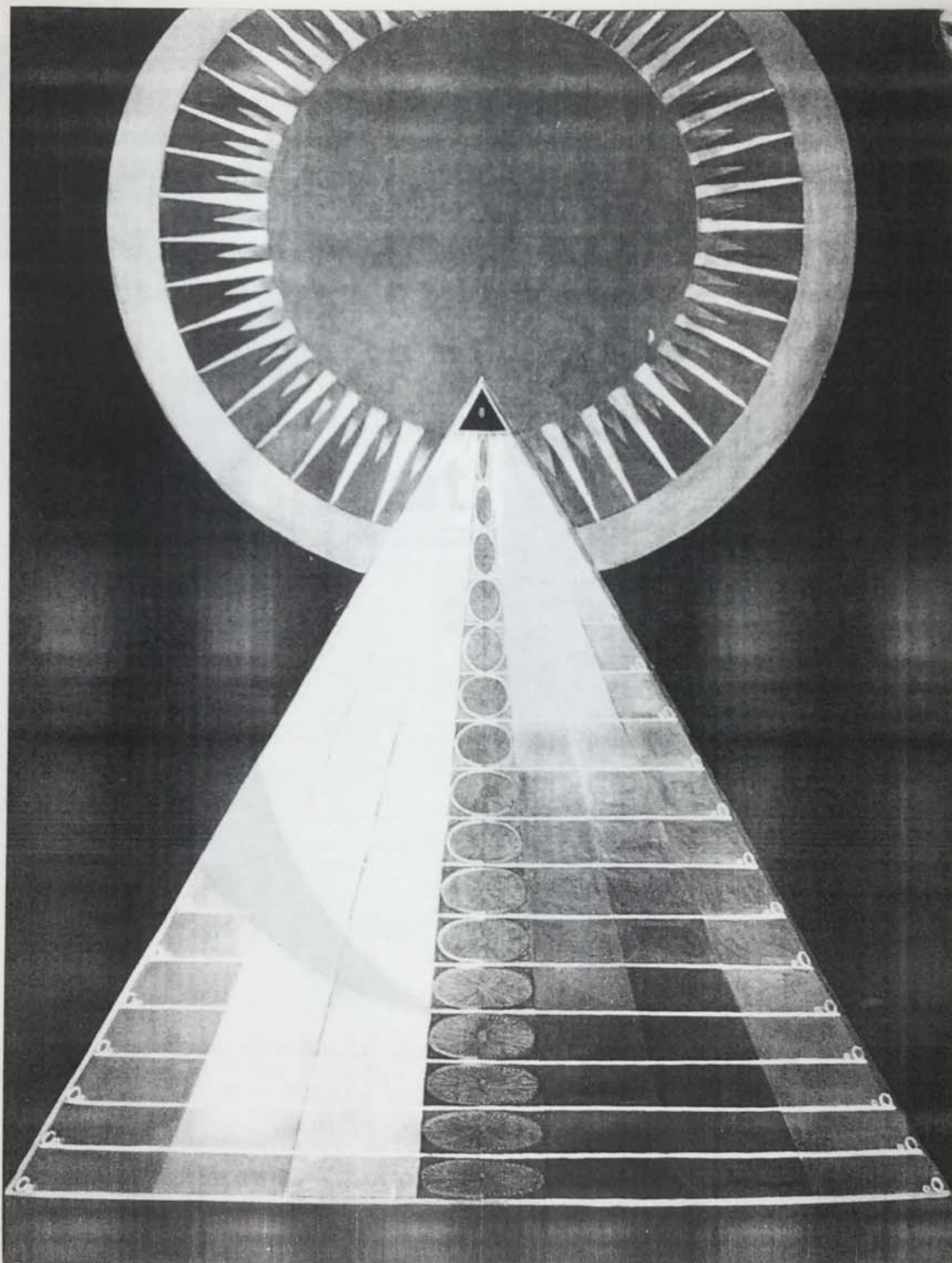


Series 11 no. 2 a. Mahatma's Present Standpoint, 1920, oil on canvas, 14 by 10½ inches. All photos this article, courtesy P.S. 1.



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## KRITIKER-UMFRAGE



Grace Glueck  
The New York Times

1. „Picasso und Braque: Pioniere des Kubismus“ im New Yorker Museum of Modern Art – wegen ihrer starken, kompromißlosen Konzentration auf die vitalen Wechselbeziehungen zwischen den beiden Männern, die den Modernismus des 20. Jahrhunderts erfunden haben.



Von Grace Glueck entdeckt:  
Bild von Hilma af Klint (1906)

art

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2. Die Francis-Bacon-Retrospektive im Hirshhorn Museum von Washington, D.C. – weil Bacon nie dazu imstande war, die Formel seiner obsessiven und höchst theatralischen Angst-, Sex- und Gewalt-Botschaften zu ändern. Er ist zwar ein brillanter Maler, tritt aber auf der Stelle.

3. Hilma af Klint (1863 bis 1944), eine schwedische Malerin, die in der Zeit von 1906 bis zu den frühen zwanziger Jahren und völlig abgeschnitten von der Kunstwelt erstaunlich innovative Werke abstrakter Kunst hervorbrachte. Pulsierende Farben, organisch-geometrische Formen und sprechende Kompositionen ließen einen an Kandinsky und Matisse denken (Gesehen im P.S. 1, Queens).

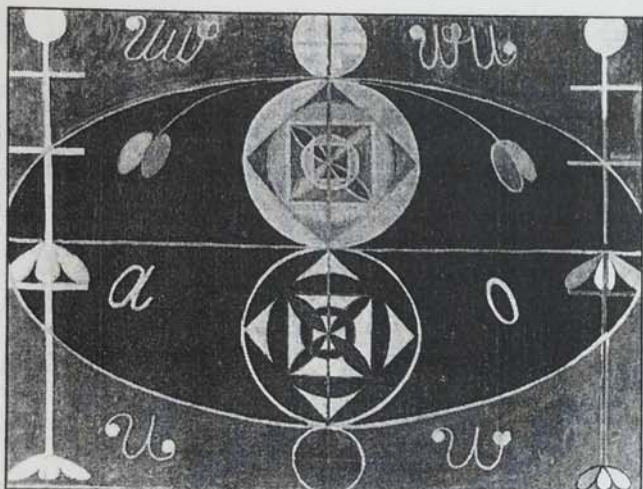


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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1989

## Review/Art

# Hilma af Klint, Explorer In Realm of the Abstract



"Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16," oil on canvas, 1908, by Hilma af Klint, in "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint" at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, through March 12.

By ROBERTA SMITH

The two main exhibitions at the P.S. 1 Museum in Long Island City, Queens, form an odd yet effective couple.

The first, "Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint," presents the work of a virtually unknown Swedish portrait and landscape painter who, in 1908 at the age of 45, made some of modern art's first abstractions. The other is "Theatergarden Bestiarium," a series of models, objects, installations and slide projections by 13 American and European artists and collaborative teams. Alternately obscure and provocative, this show attempts to update the 17th-century Baroque theater garden and to extend the notion of public art into situations that actively mingle past and present, art and nature.

Mutually exclusive as they seem, these two shows work well together. Both encourage speculation and the questioning of conventions, be they the canons of early modernism or the accepted forms of exhibition making. Together, they show that P.S. 1 continues to organize exhibitions for which other New York museums lack the space, inclination or flexibility — and doing them more professionally than in the past. In addition, the special-projects program, which features the work of several lesser-known or younger artists in individual galleries, seems especially good.

Hilma af Klint's paintings were shown for the first time in this country in 1986, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985." Her achievement may never be anything more than a footnote to 20th-century art history, but if so it will be a long and fascinating one that touches on many other artists' activities.

In a way, af Klint's work takes to extremes the mysticism that often motivated early abstract art. Like Mondrian, af Klint was a Theosophist; like Arthur Dove and Kandinsky, she believed in the transcendent power of natural forms.

Her first works are populated with flowing arabesques and schematized flower forms. Others, like "Group 6, Series WUS, No. 16" (shown above) evince a love of inspired, somewhat Mayan geometries, along with secret words and symbols similar to those that would motivate Alfred Jensen in the 1950's. Finally, there is also a sense of naive self-sufficiency and of a grand yet largely private scheme to af Klint's activities that make one think of outsider art, especially the visual technics of Adolph Wölfl, which were recently exhibited at the Grey Art gallery in Manhattan.

Af Klint is thought to have seen no modern art except that of Edvard Munch. She asserted that her first abstractions were dictated by spirits encountered in seances, that her hand was in effect "guided." In later series

of paintings, she seems to have been more instigator than conduit. And among the final works on view in the exhibition — a series of small watercolors with handwritten explanatory captions dating from 1917 — the artist seems to focus on spiritual energy expressed in terms of the atom and its powers.

Spiritual energy is the operative term here. It gives this show its determined forward motion, as well as its lapses in abstract purity and taste. Occasionally, the pressure of af Klint's religiosity required the presence of crucified figures, winged angels or St. George and his dragon. As with many other artists of her time, abstraction was neither sustained indefinitely nor in isolation from representation.

But finally, it may be the physical nature of these paintings that makes them most interesting and most strange. The scale of af Klint's work, even in her smallest canvases, is usually large and bold; her strong, saturated colors are painted directly onto raw canvas with brushy thin washes, a technique that relates to Munch's paint handling.

Sometimes her concentric circles can bring to mind the target paintings of Kenneth Noland; elsewhere, a particularly organic approach to geometry will evoke Elizabeth Murray's work — the white interlocking spiral forms of "Swan No. 21" from 1914-15, for example.

In a sense these works could have been painted yesterday and this is both their strength and their weakness. Startlingly fresh, they are also eternally innocent; they seem almost to exist beyond time but they also lack the specific wisdom that only time endows. Nonetheless, this show goes a long way to reminding us how little we know about early abstract art and its sources; likewise, how unnecessarily narrow is the history constructed around it.

"Theatergarden Bestiarium," installed upstairs from the af Klint show, argues for the exhibition as a work in progress, as a rumination on art's potential rather than its finished products, and as a combination of modest proposals and big ideas. The show's big idea is the role that the Baroque garden — with its built-in theatricality, its contrasting moments of extreme artifice and false naturalness — might play in the public spaces of the future.

Several of the models and objects on view are mired in Surrealist jokiness. (The black leather cabbages of Alain Sechas, a French artist, are but one example.) And the show's one fully realized installation — a mirrored grotto upon whose white gravel floor are projected images of past art and present advertising — succumbs to funhouse theatrics. (It is primarily the work of Rüdiger Schöttle, a West German curator and artist who conceived of the exhibition.)

Nonetheless, other inclusions demonstrate the kind of post-modern self-consciousness these artists seem to be after. Especially intriguing is Dan Graham's "Cinema-Theater," a model for a structure that joins, back

to back, an outdoor theater and an indoor cinema — with a semi-transparent common wall that would allow film to flicker occasionally across the back of the stage. Jeff Wall's orange-flocked Cyclops-like object titled "Loge-Theater With Its Plan D" played as an illuminated sign" is also noteworthy.

But the real life of the exhibit emanates from a slide projection: Lüdger Gerdes, another artist from West Germany. Part documentary, part reverie, this work juxtaposes images of a Baroque garden (Schwazingen, near Heidelberg) with what seems to be the fields and streams of a deserted farm, pulling the eye back and forth between past and present, and between decorative and functional uses of the land. These contrasts persist, even after the press release reveals that the farmland is also a garden, a contemporary one built near Bonn by an artist named Erwin Wortelkamp.

Confronted with Mr. Gerdes's projected images, the attraction that the Baroque garden holds for the artist in this exhibition is readily apparent: as is the high standard of concept and execution that it sets for further development.

"Secret Pictures by Hilma af Klint" and "Theatergarden Bestiarium" will remain on view at P.S. 1, 401 21st Street, Long Island City, Queens, through March 12.