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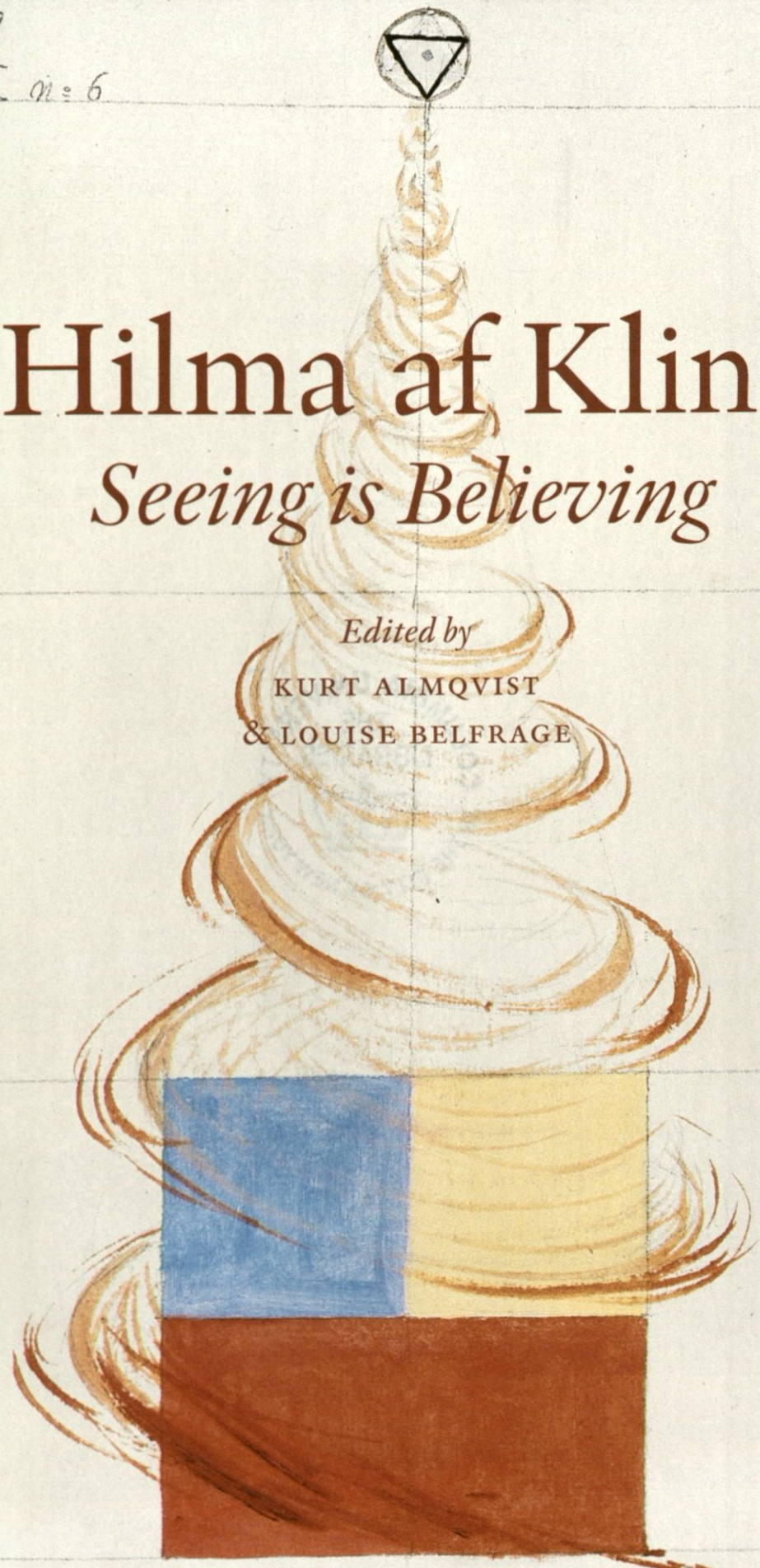
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Hilma af Klint

Seeing is Believing

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Knowledge, Painting, Abstraction and Desire



I first encountered Hilma af Klint's remarkable oeuvre in depth at the Moderna Museet's exhibition *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* in 2013. Soon after returning from Stockholm to New York, I began noting curious responses to my enthusiasm for her work, particularly for her spectacular series *Group IV, The Ten Largest* of 1907, which charts the phases of human development from childhood through to old age and figures among the pieces some artists and historians would include in the genealogy of abstract art. One particular exchange remains in my mind. "They're impressive," an art-world acquaintance stated, "but they're not paintings."

"They're not paintings? They're tempera, which is maybe not oil paint, but..."

"They're not paintings. She wasn't a painter."

"But she trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts..."

"They're not paintings. They were made for a temple", my interlocutor flatly declared, in reference to af Klint's plans for a spiralling architectural structure to house much of her work. The back-and-forth continued until I realised that the position was not negotiable.

Three years later, I remain puzzled by the baldness of an assertion that would so starkly separate af Klint from the realm of legitimate artistic practice ("painting"), let alone Modernist history. During that initial conversation I pointed out that paintings made for religious settings were, of course, far from being outside the canon of European art. What

would it be, I asked, to exclude Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling or Raphael's Sistine Madonna from the history of Western painting? Within the realm of Modernist abstraction, neither Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* nor Mark Rothko's canvases for the de Menil-sponsored chapel in Houston seem to have precluded either abstract expressionist from consideration as a painter.

Upon reflection, the sticking-point around af Klint's work seems two-fold. The first objection pertains to her apparent "outsider" status. As has frequently been mentioned, *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction* ran at the same time as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York's exhibition *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*. That exhibition proposed that the history of abstract painting could be represented as a network, taking visual form as a rather substantial graph (reproduced on the endpapers of the exhibition catalogue). Af Klint did not evidently fit into, or operate within, this diagram. No direct line could be traced from af Klint to, say, Gustav Klutis in the manner that one could be drawn between Sonia Delaunay-Terk and August Macke.

Despite its up-to-date, network-like configuration, MoMA's graph, heir to Alfred Barr's "Cubism and Abstract Art" chart of 1936, is essentially a formalist proposition (as I doubt its creators would deny), one that strictly separates artistic developments from other sorts of existence in the world. That being the case, we may do well to remember T.J. Clark's call "to reject the idea that the artist's point of reference as a social being is, *a priori*, the artistic community. On this view," he continues, writing about a predominantly formalist methodology,

history is transmitted to the artist by some fixed route, through some invariable system of mediations: the artist responds to the values and ideas of the artistic community (in our period that means, for the best artists, the ideology of the *avant-garde*), which in turn are altered by changes in the general values and ideas of society, which in turn are determined by historical conditions.¹

From such a perspective, non-artistic historical conditions exist at a distinct remove, serving merely "as 'background' to the work of art – as something which is essentially absent from the work of art and its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance". One would need only to glance cursorily into the historical conditions surrounding af Klint and her work – to push, that is, the very near background into the

foreground – to find a connection with the MoMA graph. Af Klint's 1908 meeting with Rudolf Steiner, general secretary of the German branch of the Theosophical Society, puts her at only one remove from such an undisputed abstract painter (and theosophically inclined thinker) as Piet Mondrian.

This leads to a second sticking-point, closely related to the first, which revolves around the fact that af Klint's paintings were apparently not produced as autonomous, self-reflexive modernism, art for art's sake. *The Ten Largest* were not only destined to furnish a temple, but were made upon the urging of higher spiritual powers and quite possibly under their continuing influence. "Commissioned" during a séance, af Klint's work remains tainted by the stain of the occult. Such an objection to af Klint's status ignores the theosophical leanings and inspiration of Mondrian, the occult beliefs of the Futurist Luigi Russolo, similar interests in František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, probably Wassily Kandinsky and so on. But more than that, I would argue, the demand for a fully self-reflexive intentionality in the production of abstract painting places a nearly impossible historical burden on af Klint. For despite the fact that she was an academy-trained artist with a certain amount of visibility and success in Sweden, no one in 1907 would have encouraged her to paint ten-to-eleven-foot-high abstract paintings: not within the artistic community (since abstraction would not, as MoMA would have it, be "invented" for three more years), nor within the community of theosophical beliefs, as Steiner famously informed her that her work would not be understood for at least half a century. As there was literally nobody on Earth who would have legitimated af Klint's ambition to produce work on the order of *The Ten Largest*, she sought and received authorisation from an unearthly force.

In the classic study *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989), Ann Braude argues for the importance of female spirit and trance mediums in the struggle for women's suffrage in the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th century, an era in which proper womanhood was defined in terms of passivity and domesticity, the spirit medium came to play a significant, indeed pioneering role for women in the public sphere. In a trance, women could do and say things, could assume forms of transgressive agency, that they otherwise could not without suffering swift and severe consequences for their character and place within personal and public life. Access to the spirit realm

empowered women to speak, even though – and, indeed, precisely *because* – they did not seem to speak in their own names, from their own fully intentional subject positions. Nevertheless, the effect they had upon history, and specifically upon the historical development of gender roles was, as Braude argues, substantial. No less a figure than Susan B. Anthony, a leader of the women's suffrage movement, wrote of her admiration for the spirit mediums she saw speaking in public, women whose example encouraged her to take her place on stage and within the public sphere. At a time, Braude argues, when neither a man nor a woman might ever have seen a female speaker in public other than a spirit medium, authorisation from the spirit realm proved key for producing the very notion of an autonomous, public, female subjecthood. One might propose that af Klint found herself in an analogous position when faced with the task of bringing *The Ten Largest* to fruition.

Unless we believe, as did 19th- and early 20th-century spiritualists, in the existence of an autonomous paranormal realm, then we must consider the nature of this encouragement from beyond. If, as Michel Foucault has argued, the modern subject was formed by a folding inward of forces and drives that we now largely recognise as psychological, the subject in communication with the spirit realm is one for whom such forces are not housed within an unconscious, but organised in different ways, forging connections with forces outside the individual's psyche.² Within a spiritualist paradigm that preceded the conceptualisations of Sigmund Freud, all that the modern subject considers within the purview of the unconscious, particularly desire in all its manifestations, derived from or had traffic with an outside, conceived in some cases as an otherworldly beyond. Approached from this perspective, af Klint would have been communicating with and receiving encouragement from none other than herself, phantasmatically projected on to an "other" (the spirit-being Amaliel) who would authorise her creation of some of the most stunning works in Western visual culture.

Stated in this manner, we find af Klint in a classic situation of self-estrangement, even if it is a productive one, ascribing to another what is properly her own. Yet this is not how Foucault would think of it. As he argued throughout the texts collected as *Lectures on the Will to Know and Oedipal Knowledge* (2013), the question is one of re-establishing desire (including the desire for knowledge, the "will to know") in a situation of distance and exteriority from the self-possession of knowledge as such.³

Although Foucault broaches the topic of "magical knowledge" only briefly (and from a different perspective), 19th- and early 20th-century spiritualism is, I would argue, one historical context in which will or desire has been decoupled from the dominant protocols of knowledge, where the forces of conflict, contestation, and even a certain violence underlying knowledge production are pressed into service against particular "relations of domination" – including those of institutionalised gender hierarchies – which they seek to overturn, evade, or overrun. All "knowledge," even the most conventional, Foucault argues, "rests on a network of relations", a certain "interplay of differences"; what certain spiritualist phenomena manifest is a contestatory relationship to those existing networks of relations and/or differences. Braude, for instance, points out how 19th-century spirit mediums had the power to contest even such an authority as the Bible, which prohibited women's preaching.⁴

This is where, I believe, the particularly forceful affect behind some of those who would deny af Klint's status within the genealogy of abstract art comes into play: the flat denial that these works could even be admitted into the realm of "painting", let alone assume a position of being pioneering abstractions. For the premise behind the still predominant notion of Modernist abstraction is fully beholden to an Enlightenment ideal of self-possessed knowledge. Clement Greenberg's much-quoted invocation of Immanuel Kant as "the first real Modernist", in his 1960 essay "Modernist Painting", reveals as much. What is at stake in acknowledging af Klint's esoteric relationship to subjective agency is nothing less than recognising two conceptions of knowledge: one that holds fast to an Enlightenment ideal of self-reflexive, intentional knowledge (even for those, such as the abstract Expressionists, who sought to harness their unconscious) and one, potentially more frightening, that traffics in forces not answerable solely to, or enveloped fully within, those terms.⁵ Despite its stunning chromatic brightness, then, af Klint's work opens onto something of a dark side: the spirit medium's lack of intentional subjectivity implies a form of alterity that the prevailing Modernist history of abstraction cannot encompass, no matter how vast its diagrammatic network.

Which brings me to a final point. In "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts", postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses the Santal uprising against British rule of 1855.⁶ Although the Santal, a native people

located in the east of India, mobilised some 60,000 fighters against the colonial government, they ascribed their rebellion not to their own agency, interests, or collective power, but rather to the will and directive of their god. The historian focusing on subaltern perspectives thus encounters a paradox: the very people to whom one wants to ascribe subjective agency, those whom one wants to investigate as the true subjects of history, steadfastly deny their subjective role. "Taken literally," Chakrabarty writes,

the rebel peasants' statement shows the subaltern himself as refusing agency or subjecthood. "I rebelled," he says, "because [the god] Thakur made an appearance and told me to rebel." . . . In his own telling, then, the subaltern is not necessarily the subject of his or her history, but in the history of [the journal] *Subaltern Studies* or in any democratically minded history, he or she is. What does it mean, then, when we both take the subaltern's views seriously – the subaltern ascribes the agency for their rebellion to some god – and want to confer on the subaltern agency or subjecthood in their own history, a status the subaltern's statement denies?

This is not a paradox that Chakrabarty solves, or dissolves, by coming down on one side or the other. Rather, he argues that it is precisely the function of history writing to confront such a measure of difference: differences in time period, of course, but also differences in beliefs, belief structures, forms of knowledge, and what we might call forms of life. From the point of view of modern history, the Santal are agents of their rebellion; from the point of view of the Santal, however, they are not. According to Chakrabarty, the task of the historian is to keep these two perspectives in tension, to see in the irreducibility of the Santal's beliefs "different ways of being through which we make the present manifold". "Subaltern pasts," Chakrabarty continues,

thus act as a supplement to the historian's pasts. They are supplementary in a Derridean sense – they enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show what its limits are. In calling attention to the limits of historicizing, they help us distance ourselves from the imperious instincts of the discipline.

There is, perhaps, nothing that speaks more clearly to the "imperious instincts" of the discipline of Modernist art history than MoMA's

"Inventing Abstraction" diagram, a military-style communications chart befitting the very notion of an avant-garde. Chakrabarty's point that all history writing confronts issues of difference (including those of differential agency and differential beliefs), as well as his point that this very confrontation of difference puts the notions of modernity and modern history into question, are ones, I would argue, that can also be productively applied to writing the history of modern art. Like the Santal, Hilma af Klint was undoubtedly the producer of an historical event and, also like the Santal, she denied in some measure that she was the agent of that event. Perhaps, following Chakrabarty's lead, we might see her as an irreducible Derridean "supplement" to the history of Modernist abstraction. Yet such a position should not be understood as an exclusion, but rather as a constitutive component of the irreducible alterity that makes for history, including the history of art.