

Connections with the Spiritual in Modern and Contemporary Abstract Art

According to the theories of Goethe, “The artist reaches further than the scientist or the philosopher since he possesses the unique ability to visualize laws that remain inaccessible for science¹.”

As a daughter of a mechanical engineer and hobby photographer, I grew up in a household filled with science. At the same time I was raised as a Christian. However it felt to me the ‘machinery of belief’ could never be investigated fully. As I moved away from home, I knew I had to put aside my religious bounds and let myself ask some questions freely, openly. My encounter with a healing method from Tibet two years ago helped me unlocking some doors to a knowledge which was almost completely hidden for me until then. It slowly changed my perspectives about the world we live in, and with a new perspective to life and to others I had to reassess my experiences and view about art as well.

There are astonishingly few examples in western culture drawing parallel between the work of modern artists and their spiritual background. Due presumably to the lack of knowledge and experience most of us have with such practices.

In my thesis I would like to draw attention to possible connections how and why the development in art, particularly abstraction could have been influenced both by spirituality and science, and hopefully raise curiosity what this information could mean to us on different levels.

It took me a couple of years, after leaving my studies in finance until I could learn to trust my own imagination and intuition. The seemingly endless possibilities might create the illusion that one is totally free, but what to do with this freedom – I asked myself – if one does not know exactly yet how to use it?

Bridget Riley, who was inspired beside other matters by varying optical frequencies in her work, stated that “the artist has to create his own limitations for each work. These limitations are internal and come from within the artist for there are no external limitations in the exhaustible number of resources. It is when the artist is working that he discovers and learns; those marvelous moments of freedom are the rewards, they are amongst the pleasures of which one works.”² As Hundertwasser added in 1966, “The freedom of the artist is a limited one: it is the freedom to dream, to do on canvas that which he cannot do in reality. It is the

artist, therefore, who is the most sensitive of all those who fight for their freedom...Only he who is conscious of himself, only he who takes the time to get to know himself, only he can free himself." He believed, in a free society "art" exists neither as an undersupplied commodity nor as spiritual edification. Art is as omnipresent and natural as the grass and trees, which grows wherever there is water."

They both are referring to types of 'limitation'. Riley clearly talks about as if someone's limitations as self created. It arises from the inside and draws its own directions and borders. It is when the artist succeeds to step over her/his own limits experiences a sensation like "freedom", which she calls the real reward of working. This could be a main force that pushes one forward. Hundertwasser reflects more on freedom from the view of the individual linked to society. True freedom could only be accomplished by leaving "mass existence" mentality behind³. Until this is achieved, it can only actually be realized in someone's dreams or artwork. Either way a new recognition about the concept of freedom could help self awareness and re-think our roles in community and relation to others.

From another perspective, Adorno highlighted how art could become a weapon against the system with false morality. It could be perhaps the escape to freedom from the capitalist society, or the last hideaway from the rational, dominating logic of today. The only exit from our illusions, to create real life.

However if the limitation of freedom would only be an illusion, a limitation which we created ourselves, we must rely on intuition.

Many artists are seeking 'something' during their work process which will temporary fulfill them until they complete the new work. But sooner or later a new impulse arises, and they must look further, like an urge, which never leaves them rest. What could exactly that 'something' be. Perhaps this 'something' has also to do with the hunger of the scientist for understanding the universe, with the belief of the priest to keep praying, the philosopher for rethinking and questioning, and with my curiosity.

There have been early theorists in abstract art, who were certain of that religion, science and art were indivisible⁴. For them artists were possible connectors between these rational and non-rational, expressing in their own new languages what could not have been done in other ways. What can be only felt, not described. It is difficult to create good work in overwhelmed thinking. One has to learn how to let go, to let the mind rest and concentrate without any force. The careful analysis of this process could perhaps help us to make connections with overlooked spiritual dimensions.

A unique quality of the human mind 'derives not from observation, concepts and reason but from the mind's reflection on itself', states Griffiths (1982). How it happens exactly remains mostly unknown to the thinker. Perhaps we could originate it from a 'passive intellect, where movement of molecules in the body, mark of emotions and memory are registered.' Before

the intellect beings to act, it receives the impressions of the experience of the body, the senses, the feelings, the imagination, which will become the source of intuition. 'Maritain speaks of it as 'beneath the sunlit surface' of the mind , the subliminal consciousness, which is possible to become more aware of. One can go beneath the surface of the mind and explore its depths , which is thought in the West as psychoanalysis. However, a 'Western psychologist rarely goes beyond the level of the dream consciousness and that of repressed emotions, whereas in the East, in Hindu and Buddhist and Taoist yoga for example, they have penetrated to the depths of the psyche and discovered its original ground.'¹⁸ One of the most powerful methods they use for it is meditation.

Rudolf Steiner was the founder of anthroposophy, a philosophy which stated the existence of a higher spiritual world which is accessible through inner development. He layed big emphasis on Goethe's statement that "the Beautiful is a manifestation of secret laws of nature which otherwise would have remained hidden forever"⁵. He believed that Goethe managed to fill a gap between artistic creation and sciences: a work of art is more perfect as it stays more true to natural laws and it is produced "according to the divine necessity" to them. As if a work of art would accomplish to bring down eternal ideas to the physical world, by raising the world into the 'sphere of Divinity' and this was 'the cosmic mission of an artist'. If the creation of an artwork would become the manifestation of higher forces through the intuitive work process of the artist.

Goethe created his own theory about light and darkness and developed a relationship between color and medicine. For him, "colors produced a corresponding influence on the mind". His discoveries were followed by Charles Féré among others who thought of colored light as different waves or vibrations of radiant energy⁶. This became a key concept of the theosophical mysticism. Steiner had a clear concept of a transformation in life "between opposing forces also applied to forms and colors". They thought of color in a form and a notion of vibration, which actually were physical representations of reflection of invisible forces. They recognized the pattern of the human aura, and believed that its "shaped and colored by supersensible vibrations generated by thoughts and emotions"

Albert Einstein later on stated that all forms of matter are really light waves in motion. Even if understanding matter in such manner would not be the major topic most artists are directly concerning about, they would intuitively follow the rules of nature according to Goethe.

In an interview made with the architect leoh Ming Pei ⁷ regarding his composition of the pyramid at the Louvre, a question was proposed to him: Why did he transmit the exact scale of the ancient buildings into his new architecture? He didn't understand first why would anyone compare his work to the ancient ones. "They are totally different, but the scales are just coming somehow naturally. I don't make any troubles for myself with mathematics

anymore..! Yes of course they are similar, because the measurements of the Golden Section are still relevant today...I tried out many forms and shapes, but somehow I always came back to the original one.”

There could be several ways of looking at his answer: there are many geometrical shapes existing in nature, but somehow the scale of the Golden Ratio is still questioned as a ‘divine proportion’ till today. A belief how it is applied in the visual forms, “as they are most aesthetically pleasing when possessing golden mean proportions of some type”⁸ was applied since ancient times. It can be found in nature around us from the atoms till the size of galaxies. There are many theories doubting the assumption of its importance, not being possible to prove its role rationally. Even though our connection to the numbers are not clear, it isn’t presumptuous to pose a question, whether it would be a mere coincidence?

Some of the most remarkable artworks meant to direct attention to connections between invisible spiritual forces were created by Swedish painter Hilma af Klint.

Her work was only made public at the beginning of our decade, and since then she has been considered as one of the pioneers of abstract art. Af Klint created her images in order to visualize the indescribable and supernatural in a “metaphysical cosmology that deals with the universe as an orderly system”. Its relationships are based on scientific discoveries and theosophy: “I am an atom in the universe that has access to infinite possibilities of development. These possibilities I want, gradually, to reveal.”⁹ “Most of her work deals with matter developing from the spirit and trying to underline how the micro and macro cosmos are linked: everything is in a perfect balance and interlinked with each other”¹⁰. She believed that behind the perceivable to the eye, in this invisible world everything is as one.

She stated that “only to the person who is prepared to lose her life in its known form will life appear in its new guises of ever-greater beauty and perfection. But in order to achieve such a position, silence must be reached in both thinking and feeling. This is losing life, for life is, first and foremost, pervaded by human thoughts and feelings in a universal and common form.”¹¹ Af Klint leaves questions open for the spectator; instead of telling about herself,” she offers keys for the viewer to contemplate who you might really be”. With a rather ‘egoless’ feminine manner she leaves space for the other to be.

She rather worked within the group of female painters and lived a humble lifestyle. Her concerns that she would not be able to express her own views within a male dominated art world and the unready public lead her create her own society. After completing her traditional art studies at the local university, she started to attend séances and got involved in spiritual circles. She became a leader of a women’s séance group called ‘The Five’, and later on attended the Theosophical Society. Although she had a Christian upbringing and she never renounced that, she became under the influence of The Secret Doctrine of Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner. The Secret Doctrine was first published in 1888, and had significant

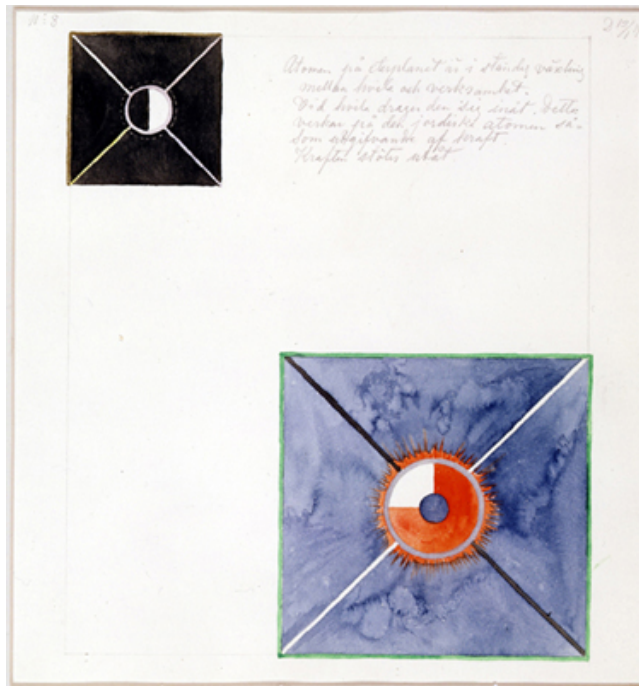
influence with its ideas from occult and esoteric ideas, and offered a combination of modern science with balance of ancient eastern wisdom.

Af Klint drew inspiration from such invisible phenomena, and attached her personal experiences to it. She wrote: "The development of the world is connected with this wonderful problem that the light divided itself into light and darkness. This problem is particularly difficult to grasp for a blind world whose organization is built on two powers instead of one."¹²

She worked mostly in series and created in a way her own symbolism and "sacred geometry". Certain forms have a repetition and obviously significant meaning such as the circle, square and the division by four, the way of using oppositions and colors among others. They were not meant to give a direct guidance with a definite meaning. As every person is an individual, everyone is on a different level of consciousness and will experience them in different ways.

Agnes Martin who was born 50 years later, was also highly interested in expressing and researching the invisible worlds behind the matter in her work. She realized however that her own experiences were not much use to others; every person has to find their own path to help themselves. "People have got to come ready, just like the artist was ready for his inspiration."¹³

Similarly as her contemporaries, such as Mondrian, Kandinsky or Klee, af Klint was also very much influenced and draw inspiration from science of her time, such as Einstein's theory of relativity or the revelation of the Röntgen waves which all directed the attention of public opinion towards the hidden materia behind the visible. She expresses her fascination towards Einstein's theory of relativity in her Atom Series by example: On the square shaped painting titled 'Nr. 8' we can observe two different sized squares within the frame. The image shows harmonious symmetry. The smaller square is exactly half a size of the larger one and they are placed up and down, exactly in the opposite corners diagonally. They are both divided into four equal parts by two crossing lines starting from the poles. She painted on top of the crossing points in the middle one circle, which is divided into unequal parts similar to a clock. The smaller square is black and white colored, the larger is indigo blue and red, with a green contour line. The smaller black square has white divisional lines, the larger black and white. Its red circle centrum has a blue magma and is surrounded by a layer of streams like a radiation outwards.



Nr. 8: "The atom on the ether plane is constantly shifting between rest and activity. At rest it pulls itself inwards. This affects the earthly atom as a giving off of force. The force is pushed outwards."
January 1917

Although her paintings were made at the end of the 19th century, she asked them to be stored and kept together after her death hidden from publicity. She claimed that her work could be misunderstood during her life time and should only be revealed the soonest 20 years after her death: "My work was made for the 21st century."

At the beginning of the 20th century, another artist drew his attention to the theories of Goethe.

Wassily Kandinsky left his juridical studies when he was 30 in order to study art. He became known for his abstract imagery and how he turned music through his theories into visual form. However, barely have art critiques commented on the influence of his researches and experiences in spirituality. As Kandinsky himself remarked, it was "his inclination for the Hidden".

One of the most astounding fact about his work how he managed to combine a rational and a non rational perception, while he also became a passionate researcher of hidden laws between science and nature. He envisioned a hierarchical system of our society in a form of a triangle, which represented the manifestation of spirituality and expressed a timeless interrelation between the past and future.

His interest drew him to try out exercises in mystical Indian practices and to investigate theories of Blavatsky and Steiner. One of the most famous of his philosophical texts became the Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912). "When religion, science, and morality are shaken (the last by the mighty hand of Nietzsche), when the external supports threaten to collapse, then man's gaze turns away from the external toward himself. Literature, music, and art

provide an intimation of that greatness which first becomes noticeable only to a few, as just a tiny point, and which for the masses does not exist at all. [...] „

He approached the world as a harmonious living entity, and looked at the solid matter also as a living being. " The affinity of color, sound and feeling reveals a unity of cosmic dimensions, since Nature also plays on the strings of our soul, setting them in vibration.¹⁴"

He believed that artists have the task to visualize the 'Spiritual in matter'. By using different colors and shapes, they will transfer a message of 'higher unity into the material world', therefore the subject matter of abstract art will rely on a cosmic composition.

By developing our artistic sensitivity we can develop our receptiveness to a 'higher knowledge of creative cosmic laws.' He thought of art as 'one of the most powerful agencies' to accomplish this, and highlighted the necessity of more finer vibrations in order to achieve better understanding and consciousness. He referred to these inner elements as the "vibration of the soul". His famous group The Blue Rider was founded mainly in order to 'awaken the ability to experience the spiritual in the material and abstract things, an ability which (they believed) will be absolutely necessary in the future...' ¹⁵

The work of Kandinsky and af Klint were meant to be the representations of invisible but existing forces in a visual form. Their way of expression gives us considerable reasons to have a specified approach towards their abstraction.

From the psychological approach, works without definitive objects in them attract the viewer often with an uncanny effect. The painter Hans Hofmann said that art is "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak" ¹⁶. It leaves the analytic mind to draw its own relations without giving a hint of any other interpretation: "we know more about abstract art than we think; we recognize the mind behind the art" ¹⁷

The hungarian painter Gábor Kovács-Gombos have been interested from the beginning of his career how sacral elements are being applied in art today.

In an interview in 2013 he explained his observation how the sacral meaning in contemporary works became more hidden then it is used to be ¹⁸. Hundred years ago the sacral content was obviously visible, by today we cannot categorize only religious artworks as such. The possible reason is that the imagery of contemporary artists has rather switched towards an inward, spiritual plane.

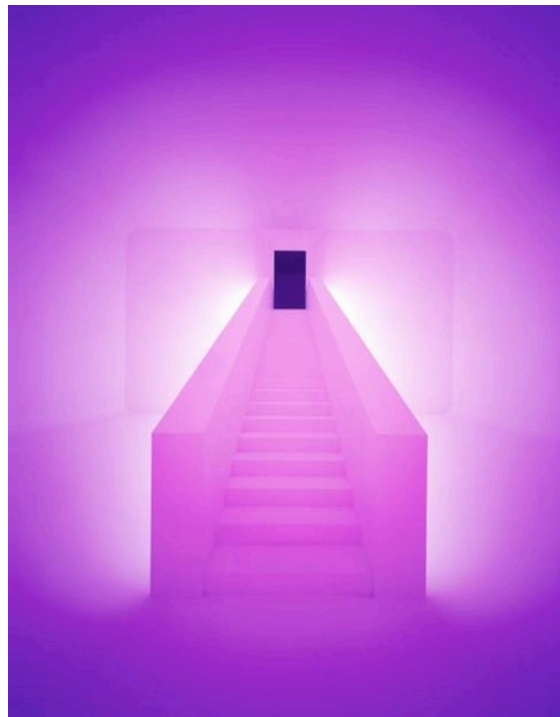
Artists needed to create a new type of space, where the mind can rest and leave behind the overload of images from our century's everyday life, a space where it will be able to find 'itself again'. This could be an intuitive reason why "art started to turn away from a realistic way of representation in order to express an inner vision". Therefore the work could help the viewer to turn to himself, and find perhaps even a connection to others in it. Finally, it can offer the opportunity to meet with the transcendental, higher spiritual force.

The works of Kovács – Gombos give us a luminary sensation on a flat surface, which opens up as if it would allow the spectator enter into other dimensions or a limitless space. Its dept depends on the imagination of the viewer, similarly just as the encounter the works of Turell.

James Turrell has never expressed that he had any direct contact to divine theories, still in his work and imagery there is almost no doubt of an intuitive experience of it. The way how he plays and uses light to create his illusionary spaces, spending longer time within one can easily find himself almost in a hypnotic state of mind.

By experiencing his work, its effect can be just as profound as a walk into nature. Just like in a forest, one will suddenly notice how everything becomes more quiet, not only from the outside, also from the inside of the head. The thoughts will become less and the mind starts to rest slowly. As one will be more and more present, at the end it is no other possibility almost but just 'be' there, in the immediate moment of existence. In a room of James Turrell, space and time and the outside world get's lost.

"I'm no more a shaman than any other artist. Part of the role of the artist is to direct attention and to precipitate change. (2002)"



'Turell's work allows us to see ourselves seeing' in a very personal and fascinating way. "I want to create an atmosphere that can be consciously plumbed with seeing." His fascination with the phenomena of light is ultimately connected to a very personal, inward search for mankind's place in the universe.¹⁹ We become more aware of our connection to multidimensional spaces and of the fragility and illusionary attribute of our vision with the material world. The consciousness expands and the installation may help us to encounter the feeling of the Divine.

What some of these artists inspired most, that 'they understood the importance of drawing inspiration directly and indirectly from ancient and modern, Eastern and Western forms of spirituality'. For them art becomes more than just a process, it helps transmitting awareness of consciousness such as a ritual.

As Wilhelm Worringer expressed himself (1908), 'to transcendentalism of religion there always corresponds a transcendentalism of art, for which we lack the organ of understanding only because we obstinately insist upon appraising the vast mass of factual material in the whole field of art from the narrow angle of vision of our European-Classical conception. We perceive the transcendental feeling in the content, to be sure; but we overlook it in the real core of the process of artistic creation, the activity of the form-determining will' ²⁰

Bede Griffiths reflects in his book *Marriage of East and West* concerning the differences between East and Western thinking as well on intuition:

'Intuition cannot be produced. It has to be allowed to happen. But that is just what the rational mind cannot endure. It wants to control everything. It is not prepared to be silent, to be still, to allow things to happen.'²¹ He is referring to a hypothesis, how a more rational way of thinking has become the dominating power and spread all over the world since the Greek philosophers. He stresses the importance how a balance should to be restored on a global level in order to find solutions for an increasing crisis. This would only be possible, 'when a meeting takes place between East and West. This meeting must take place at the deepest level of the human consciousness.'²²

He emphasized the importance of our awareness about a universal harmony in his own way, such as Af Klint did with her visual images. In an article Adam Fuss writes about her: "I am left in no doubt that Hilma af Klint wished her work to be a form of teaching and intuitively I believe it is important that as many people as possible are exposed to these images." ²⁶

Human understanding about life expands on unpredictable speed in our times thanks to discoveries of science. However, more and more scientists and philosophers are faced with its limits and potential application. 'It denies metaphysical causality and dependency, which in turn fuels a paradigm for potentially unproductive research and theoretical activity.'²² Many of these thinkers are slowly becoming open towards spiritual approaches on matter.

Af Klint chose to disclose her images in this century, perhaps to hope for more understanding in a foreseeable higher cosmic consciousness. Opinion may be divided about her way of expression and future prediction. Yet we have to admit that she drew attention to a least discussed language behind abstraction, which could gain more focus than before.

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