

NC 0019906 0



T625

nc055725Nc

THE RELEVANCE OF THE REVIVAL OF  
SPIRITUALISM IN RELATION TO THE BIRTH OF  
MODERN ABSTRACTION

JOSEPHINE CUSKELLY

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE RELEVANCE OF THE REVIVAL OF SPIRITUALISM IN RELATION TO THE BIRTH OF  
MODERN ABSTRACTION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY

JOSEPHINE CUSKELLY

1989

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page No.
List of Illustrations	Overleaf
Introduction	2
 CHAPTER I	 6
The Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton - Her life and theories.	
The Work of Hilma Af Klint	
 CHAPTER II	 18
The Relevance of the Revival of Spiritualistic Literature in relation to the Development of Kandinsky's Abstraction	
 CHAPTER III	 46
Brief Account of some of the Abstractionists since Kandinsky	
Critical Accounts of the Influences of the Occult on Art in Renaissance and Pre-Renaissance Times. Questions about the Public and Historians' reluctance to accept or query the Occult Influences on Abstraction	
Recent Discoveries by Scientists involved in Egyptology in relation to Psychokinesis, Out-of-Body Experiences.	
Studies by Aby Warburg and Poggioli	
Sean Scully's Work as a Contemporary Abstractionist in relation to Spiritualism	
 CONCLUSION	 73
GLOSSARY	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY	91

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. 'Man Invisible' (1912) Watercolour - Charles W. Leadbeater
2. 'The Omnipresence of the Lord' (1864) 24 x 32 cm - Georgiana Houghton
3. 'The Eye of God' (1862) Oil 23.5 x 32.5 cm - Georgiana Houghton
4. 'The Sheltering Eye of the Most High' Oil 23 x 32 cm - Georgiana Houghton
- 5/6 Catalogue of Spirit Drawings in Water Colours (1871) - Georgiana Houghton
7. 'Untitled' (1875) 25 x 53 cm Monogram - Georgiana Houghton
- 8/9 Catalogue of Spirit Drawings in Water Colours (1871) - Georgiana Houghton
10. 'Untitled' no. 14 from Series (Swan 1914 - 1915) Oil on Canvas 61 x 59 in - Hilma Af Klint
11. 'Disks of Newton' (1911 - 1912), Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris - Frantisek Kupka
12. 'Rayonist Composition', Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris - Michail Larionov
13. 'Improvisation 7' (1910) Oil on Canvas 131 x 97 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) - Wassily Kandinsky
14. 'Black, Red' (1927) Lenbachhaus Museum, Munich - Wassily Kandinsky
15. 'Black Accompaniment' (1929) Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris - Wassily Kandinsky
16. 'Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue' (1920) - Mondrian
17. 'Flight of an Aircraft' (1915) - Malevich
18. 'Improvisation' (1912) Guggenheim Museum, New York - Wassily Kandinsky
19. 'Sambhu' Yantra, Nepal (1760)
20. 'Picture with White Border' (1913) Oil on Canvas - Wassily Kandinsky
21. 'Evolution' (1910 - 1911) - Mondrian
22. 'Evolution and Devolution' (19th century) - Rajasthan
23. 'Dying Chrysanthemum' (1910) - Mondrian
24. Jung's Primary Two Ford Division of Psyche - Figure from J. Jacobi, p 15 'The Psychology of C. J. Jung' - Routledge, London (1942)
25. Figure from J. Jacobi 'The Psychology of C. J. Jung - Routledge, London (1942)
26. Figure from Robert Fludd 'Utriusque Cosmi Historia' 11. (1619)



27. Head, Maori Tribe, New Zealand - Figure from 'The Mystic Spiral of the Soul' p 17 - Paolo Uccello
28. 'St George and the Dragon' (detail) 15th century figure from 'The Mystic Spiral of the Soul' Fontana Press - Paolo Uccello
29. 'Christ among the Doctors' - Butinone c. 1500 (Scotland N.G.)
30. 'Improvisation' (1911) - Wassily Kandinsky
31. 'Dynamism of a Soccer Player' Mona, New York - Boccioni
32. 'Tomlinson Court Park' (1959 - 1960) Collection, R. A. Rowan - Frank Stella
33. 'Tantric Detail II' (1981) Artist's Collection - Jasper Johns
34. 'Clepsydra' (1976) - Bridget Riley
35. 'Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue' Oil on Canvas 298.1 x 262.5 cm Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles - Mark Rothko
36. 'Concetenation' Engraving Italy (c. 1510) - Leonardo de Vinci
37. 'Virgil and Dante behold the Stars' (1824 - 1827) Divine Comedy - William Blake
38. 'Geography of Heaven' from Dante's Divine Comedy - William Blake
39. 'Ferryman' of Dante's Inferno - William Blake
40. Photograph of third Gizeh Pyramid
41. Photography of 'Sensory Deprivation Box' at University of Manitoba, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, published New York 1987, NY Univeristy Press
42. Photography of Sacrophagus in King's Chamber of Great Pyramid, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
43. Diagram of Polar Stars used by Sir Norman Lockyer, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
44. Detail from 'Text of Unas', figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
45. Photograph of View Inside Sacrophagus of Unas, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
46. Photograph of Boat and Detail from Papyrus of Nu, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
47. Photograph of one of pits alongside Pyramid, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
48. Photograph of granite basin stone at New Grange, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987

49. Photograph of Head facing Polar Stars, figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
50. Photograph 'A Toltec Initiate's Voyage', figure from Star Maps - W. M. R. Fix, New York 1987
51. Photograph of Spiral Stones from Surrey, Megalithic, on location
52. Photograph of Mural in St. Peter and St. Paul's Chaldon, Surrey, figure from The Mystic Spiral - Fontana Press, edited by Suree - 1979.
53. Photocopy of photograph of a ghost, reproduced in A. N. Aksakov, Animsuss und Spiritismus - Edwin Babbit, pyschic lights and colours, Renaissance and zodiacal illustrations, figure from The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting (1890 - 1985) L.A. County Museum of Art - original by M. Tuchman, Judi Freeman in collaboration with Carel Blotcamp - et. all, New York, Alevillo Press, 1986
- 54/55 Photocopy of illustrations Alcati, Emblemata, Ex Bello Aux from the 1531 first edition (left) and plate from 1610 Antwerp version (R), figure from The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting (1890 - 1985), Tuchman, Freeman, Blotcamp, New York, Alevillo Press, 1986.
56. 'Amber' (1972) catalogue no. 4 - Sean Scully, Warwick Arts Trust
57. 'Untitled' (1981), figure from Catalogue Sean Scully's Absolute Paintings article by Sam Hunter, p 32 -35, published 1971
58. Photocopy from Robert Fludd 'Ultruisque Cosmi' (Oppenheim 1617) p 58 Philosophical Research Library, Manly, P. Hall Collection Los Angeles, figure from The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting (1890)
59. Photograph of Illustration of Chakras from Theosophia Pracitica of John George, Gichtel
60. Photocopy from Jacob Bohme's 'Forty Questions of the Soul'
61. Photograph of an anonymous Renaissance depiction of the otherworldly vision associated with the breakthrough in plane
62. Photograph of Illustration of Ptolemaic conception of universe, figure from 'The Mystic Spirit of the Soul' - Fontana Press, edited by Suree, (1979)
63. Photocopy from Leadbeater's 'Man Visible and Invisible' (1908), Theosophical University Press
64. Photocopy of photograph taken in January 1889, from 'When Daylight Comes' - Howard Murphet
65. Photograph of photograph of W. B. Yeates 1885, featured in catalogue called 'Art of the Invisible' in V.A. ref Library, London
66. Photocopy of 'The Tree of the Soul' from Jakob Bohme, vol. 2 London, M Richardson 1764, Philosophical Research Library Manly P Hall Collection, Los Angeles
67. Photocopy 'Dialectical Opposition' diagram by Jakob Bohme in The Works of Jacob Bohme vol. 2 London M Richardson 1764 - Philosophical Research Library



1.

'MAN INVISIBLE' 1912 - WATERCOLOUR

CHARLES W. LEADBEATER



## INTRODUCTION

In an introduction to Kandinsky (Wir entdecken Kandinsky) Oscar Dalvit recounts a visit to the Guimet Museum of Oriental Art in Paris. There in a recess, he noticed what seemed to him to be modern paintings which he thought could only be by Kandinsky. On closer inspection they turned out to be Tibetan prayer and meditation paintings. His mistake was by no means a foolish one for the art of Kandinsky and the Tibetan figures have something in common. Indeed both are inspired by a similar spiritual philosophy. It may at first seem strange that a philosophy, nurtured in Tibet, should have so decisive a bearing on the emerging style of a young artist working in Munich in the early years of this century, but the connections will be clarified soon. The line of transmission is clearly identifiable in the affects of the revival of Spiritualism in the 19th century. My own curiosity was aroused in line with that of Oscar Dalvit when, during the summer recess, I came across photographs of works in the Modern Painters magazine which I initially thought to be contemporary abstract paintings. To my astonishment these works were created in the early 1860s. This led to an investigation into the work of the artist Georgiana Houghton, whom I believe along with writer Tom Gibbons, anticipated Kandinsky by half a century. The headquarters of the Victorian Spiritualists' Union in Melbourne, Australia, contain a remarkable collection of thirty five small abstract paintings by the English artist Georgiana Houghton, most of which were painted between 1862 and 1870. Two copies of her thirty two page catalogue exist featuring the exhibition of 1871, one of which is to be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, in which she gives a detailed account of the genesis and symbolic meanings of her works.



I shall discuss the work of this English artist, Georgiana Houghton, her artistic development through mediumship and connect her directly with a Swedish contemporary of hers, namely Hilma Af Klint. Both were undoubtedly influenced by the revival of Spiritualism and Theosophy in the 19th century. Their art and their theories are then compared to those of Kandinsky who was influenced strongly by its revival. He will be discussed in artistic, philosophical, theosophical and political terms being the thread of connection with 19th century modernist forms of transcendental abstraction seen in the works of Rothko and particularly the Irish born New York artist, Sean Scully. The primary aim of this thesis is to argue the fact that historians who over-emphasise the importance of Kandinsky as the initial 'inventor' of abstraction are perhaps overlooking the relevance of these artists like Houghton and Af Klint who may have been precursors. Moreover, in briefly referring to the role of the spiritual in the art of the Renaissance and medieval times it becomes clearly obvious that Kandinsky's pedestal as innovator of abstraction is indebted to 'Spiritualism'.

Of secondary importance to the above objective Egyptology will be briefly mentioned. This subject clarifies how psychokinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, out-of-body experiences and so on were accepted as normal experiences of living during ancient Egyptian times. Much can be learned about the Egyptians' strength of mental development and sensory development despite their practical natures. The 'Spiritualism' of today is still at exploratory levels by comparison and even our physicists are making direct comparison with 'Zen' philosophy and 'Quantum Theory'. Keeping the primary objective in mind, this investigation has carried me into a vast arena of eye-opening information and diverse opinions but I hope to clarify the relevance of Spiritualism in relation to the birth of abstraction, the necessity of Spiritualism in relation to the development of Kandinsky's

work and briefly account for the affects of Spiritualism after Kandinsky on some modern and contemporary forms. Towards the end of this thesis art historians will be discussed briefly, particularly those historians who try to assert the purity of abstraction by denying the influences of the occult on its development. Reference will be made to visionaries and paintings dealing with visions of the apocalyptic nature. The Florentine scholar Aby Warburg will be discussed in relation to the research he carried out on Florentine frescoes and the ultimate motives behind the revival of ancient art in 15th century Italy - which lay in doctrines of astrology and magic.

I shall define various words which will frequently appear throughout the essay in a glossary enclosed at the back of the thesis. These words are relevant within the context of the revival of Spiritualism itself, words such as alchemy, anthroposophy, theosophy, cabala and many more including their brief historical foundation. More importantly, words which are central to the thesis itself are also defined in brief such as Spiritualism, Occultism and Mysticism.





2.

'THE OMNIPRESENCE OF THE LORD' 1864 - 24 X 32 cm

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON



3.

'THE EYE OF GOD' 1862 - OIL - 23.5 X 32.5 cm

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON

## CHAPTER I

Georgiana Houghton was born on 20 April 1814 in Las Palmas on the island of Grand Canary. She lived in London most of her life and died in March 1884 a few weeks before her seventieth birthday. Her writings give scant information about her life before 1859. She college trained as an artist, gave up portrait and landscape painting through grief at the death of her youngest sister in 1851. Being a devout Christian all of her life, she had a formidable knowledge of holy scripture characteristic of 19th century believers. In 1859 she first heard of the possibility of communicating with spirits of the dead. She allegedly received regular communication by means of table rappings and in 1861 she began using a planchette for receiving written messages. Later in 1861 she exhibited her own spiritual drawings which had been created by attaching coloured pencils to the planchette. Next she began to draw freehand and paint in order to produce abstract representations of spiritual flowers and spiritual fruit. From October 1861 she communicated with the spirits of sects who revealed her part in the coming millenarium age of the Third Dispensation. An American, Rev. J. Murray, titled her 'the Holy Symbolist'. Towards 1865 she submitted some of her works for exhibition at the Royal Academy. Although her pieces were officially accepted, they were not hung for some unknown reason. Writings of Houghton include "Evenings at home in Spiritual Seance" which provides minutely detailed accounts of the frequent seances in which she partook together with the devotees of Spiritualism. By the mid 1860s Spiritualism became a subject of widespread enthusiasm. Holmann Hunt, another painter and contemporary, was present at one of her seances. Her parents died and her brothers neglected to help her financially because of her spiritualist connections. She therefore lived alone in genteel



poverty, pawning occasionally to live. In 1871 she exhibited 155 "Spirit Drawings in Water Colours" at the New British Gallery in Old Bond Street, losing all her life savings in the venture.

"On the walls were some crazy looking pictures, some of clouds that here and there disclosed a lurid coloured face, others that looked like geometric puzzles"

Anon - "A Very Dark Seance", 1871.

Tom Gibbons ('Modern Painters' writer) says:

"She delved in photographic seances with a photographer who was denounced as a fraud in 1877" but does not elaborate on the nature of the fraud. An anonymous benefactor provided her with the money to publish three volumes of her spiritual paintings in both 1881 and 1882.

Tom Gibbons emphasises her unrelentless sincerity, as a woman of deeply religious fervour who for many years was made use of by others far less scrupulous than herself. Most of her pieces are only A4 except two which are roughly twice A4, these two include 'The Plant of Sidney Alexander Houghton' (1863) and 'The Glory of God' (1864). These are watercolour, gouache and ink combinations. The portrait of the 'Lord Jesus Christ' (1862) depicting a bearded face of 'Christ' with hypnotically large eyes surrounded by abstract lineations, and 'The Eye of the Lord' (1870) are the only two semi-representational works which she did. The reverse sides of her works reveal elaborate calligraphic scrolls and detailed hand-written exegeses of the paintings and their spiritual authorship, e.g. "I, David, was assisted in the creation of this drawing by many saints also by Gabriel the messenger of the Lord." Signatures, with vortex-like patterns, apparently were instigated by an echo of shapes in the painting itself. She herself saw her more fully developed spiritual work in the

'Omnipresence of the Lord' (1864).

Some of the drawings may be likened to a mass of brilliantly coloured threads laid one over the other not in confusion or not according to any particular rule, yet in the most pleasing manner possible. Large slide projection reveals their superb technical execution which were not intended to be decorative but rather a visionary vehicle for the communication of transcendental realities lying beyond everyday experiences. In Laternos 1887 is written:

"Georgiana Houghton is a fervant millenarium who inhabits a complex mental world of mystical numbers, correspondences and symbols."

She herself writes:

"Contemporary Spiritualism is not in place of Christianity but forms the third dimension, that of the Holy Spirit in harmony with and in completion of the two previous ones."

Transcendentalism and millenarianism are of course by no means unfamiliar features of western belief, being basic to the Christian tradition itself. The Third Dispensation to which Houghton refers is the millennial third age of the Holy Spirit and the world wide Spiritual Church predicted in the writings of Joachim de Fiore (1102 - 1202, who also influenced Kandinsky). "Here begins the great epoch of the Spiritual" he wrote in his reminiscences of (1913) (in Kandinsky - Complete Writings in Art ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and P. Vergo-Boston G. K. Hall 1982).

The immediate source of 19th century Spiritualism, is the most famous Swedish visionary Emmanual Swedenborg 1688 - 1772. Georgiana Houghton was influenced greatly and principally by "The Principles of Nature" (1847) which was a combination of mesmerism and Swedenborgian Spiritualism. Its chief spokesman was the visionary socialist Andrew Jackson Davis. The first 'mediums' to enter upon the 19th century scene were the Fox sisters,

who produced the famous 'Hydesville Rappings' in New York State in the year of 1848. Their hordes of imitators in America and Europe, as well as producing their own 'spirit-rappings' quickly added their own forms of 'psychic automatism' to the repertoire of the seance-room: automatic writing, automatic orations, automatic musical compositions and automatic drawing and printing, all allegedly produced by the inhabitants of the spirit world, became commonplace during the next decade. 'Spirit drawings' were not uncommon during the latter half of the 19th century, for example a Mrs. Catherine Berry exhibited at Brighton in 1874 some of her five hundred spirit drawings. Although such paintings were often 'symbolic' in the emblematic sense, or more directly representational, it is quite possible that many completely abstract works such as Houghton's were produced. In his spirit drawings W. M. Wilkinson (1858) states that when he guided groups in this activity, many of his students began to draw 'generally at first in spiral forms'.

Houghton's paintings would almost certainly have been known to John Varley Jnr. (1850 - 1933) the prominent theosophist and uncle of W. B. Yeates who drew the abstract illustrations for Besants' and Leadbeaters' 'Thought-Forms' for two of the works listed in Houghton's Catalogue are abstract 'spiritual portraits' of Varley's second cousin Cromwell and his wife. The prolific Varleys, prominent in 19th century spiritualist circles, had inherited their fascination with astrology, occultism and spiritual portraiture from John Varley's grandfather, John Varley Snr. (1778 - 1842), famous as William Blake's intimate companion and fellow visionary.

"Enter the Mediums" is the title of an article published in 1892 in which Andre Breton described the early experiments of Phillipe Soupoult and himself in automatic writing. The article was later incorporated into the "First Surrealist Manifesto" of 1924, in which Surrealism was famously





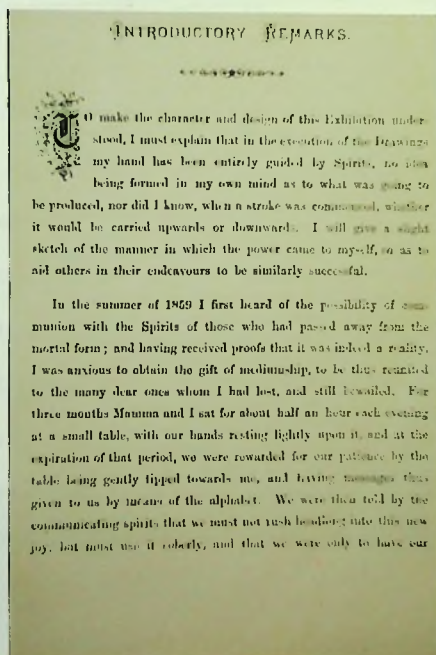
4.

'THE SHELTERING EYE OF THE MOST HIGH' 1862 - OIL - 23 X 32 cm

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON



6.



GEORGIANA HOUGHTON'S CATALOGUE OF 22 MAY 1871 - NOW IN VICTORIA AND ALBERT  
REFERENCE LIBRARY - LONDON



defined as "Pure psychic automation, by which it is intended to express verbally in writing or by other means, the real process of thought." In 1922 and despite Breton's fashionable references to Freud, there was, as we have seen, nothing new in the presence of mediums and in the practice of psychic automation. Breton whose main sources are to be found in the fields of psychical research (F. W. H. Myers) Occultism (Eliphas Levi) and Alchemy (Albert Poisson) is clearly deeply indebted to the late 19th century 'occult revival' which had been gathering force in western societies particularly since 1848, the 'Year of Revolutions'. It is equally clear that many of the key terms and concepts of early modernism, such as the 'Fourth Dimension' referred to by Apollinaire in 1911 in connection with Cubism, and the 'vibrations' referred to at about the same time by Kandinsky and Wyndham Lewis, derive from similar late 19th century and early 20th century spiritualist and theosophical sources.

During the twenty years which have elapsed since the publication of the article by Sixten Ringbom mentioned above, much important research has been done into the occultist infrastructure of early modernist abstraction. Georgiana Houghton's work strongly supports the argument that occultist doctrines are central to the development of early modernist abstraction. More importantly, it also makes clear that this occult-based abstraction is consciously intended to express millenarian and utopian convictions about



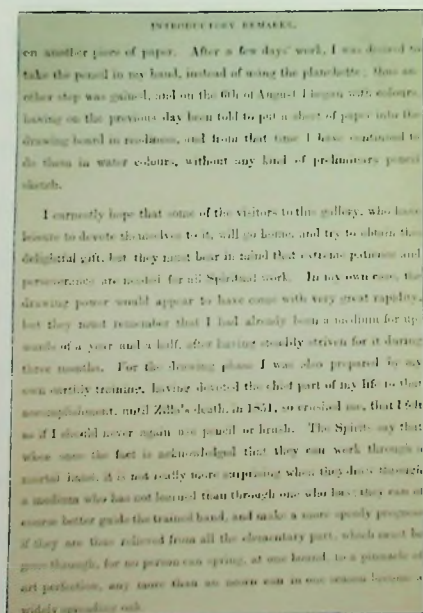
7.

UNTITLED 1875 - 25 X 35 cm

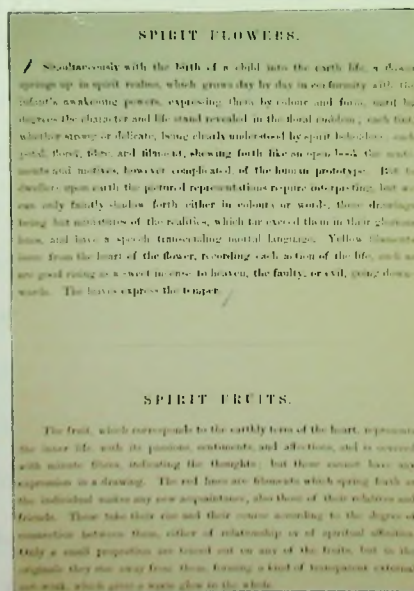
GEORGIANA HOUGHTON

the imminent transformation and regeneration of contemporary art and society, both of which it implicitly condemns as materialistic and therefore decadent. An ideological and iconographical re-interpretation of modernist abstraction is now possible which will relate it directly to the most pressing social and political concerns of its day.

In his seminal article 'Art in 'the Epoch of the Great Spiritual'', (Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institute, 1966) Sixten Ringbom has forcibly argued that this widely-read work is of fundamental importance in the development of early 20th century 'transcendental abstraction'. Kandinsky stated a philosophy of his - "I value only those artists who really are artists that is, who consciously or unconsciously in an entirely original form embody the expression of their inner life, who work only for this end and cannot work otherwise." He longed to provide painting with the independence from nature that he felt in music. ("Ilber das Geistige in der Kunst" - Philosophies of Kandinsky) which will be discussed in the next chapter.



8.

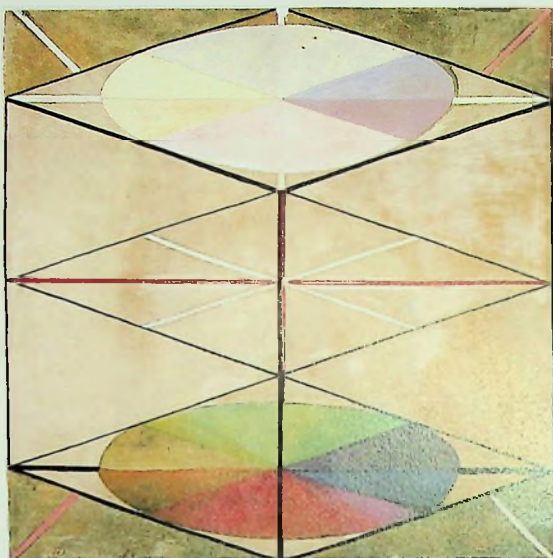


SAMPLE OF HER CATALOGUE 1871

GEORGINA HOUGHTON

Another Spiritualist who came a little later than Houghton was Hilma Af Klint and her direct influences from Spiritualistic texts are evident. Hilma Af Klint, a Swedish born artist (1862), is a painter who can be compared in many respects to Georgiana Houghton. As a child she was susceptible to extra-sensory perceptual experiences and at seventeen she became seriously involved with spiritualism. After her study at the Royal Academy at Stockholm together with four women she formed a spiritualist group during the 1890s. The 'Friday Group' used a psychograph (an instrument for recording spirit writings). Af Klint, Anna Cassel, Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedmann and Mathilda N, met in each others' homes and studios. Through its spirit leaders, as with Georgiana Houghton, the group was inspired to draw automatically in pencil without apparent conscious effort. Af Klint was not alone in Swedish art history in working with spiritualist, automatic drawings: the painter Ernst Josephson worked during the 1880s in a manner similar to that of Klint's group. Josephson suffered mental illness and deluded that he was Raphael or Michelangelo "these lead to extraordinarily free and revolutionary drawings" according to Ake Fant. The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch who also had strong occult leanings with his friend August Strindberg had strong influences on Af Klint. She became aware of the psychological states that could be expressed through painting. Klint was evidently inspired by the evolutionary theories of Helena P. Blavatsky, but Klint transformed them in her art. Her mediumistic capacities and experiences, with their inherently unconscious nature, made her an antithesis to Wassily Kandinsky, whose exploration into the spiritual in art was a very conscious process. She spent one year of her painting devoted to 'Amaliel', one of her spirit leaders. These paintings vary in size, colour and degree of abstraction. There are often words written within them, such as 'Vestal - Ascetic' (meaning a virgin living a life dedicated to higher morality and ascetism, the kind of person Klint tried to be).





10.

UNTITLED NO 14 FROM THE SERIES - S.U.W./SWAN 1914 - 1915  
OIL ON CANVAS - 155 X 152 cm  
STIFTELSEN HILMA AF KLINTS VERK



11.

FRANTISEK KUPKA - DISKS OF NEWTON  
1911 -12.  
MUSEE NAT D'ART MODERNE, PARIS  
AF KLINT UNEXPOSED TO INFLUENCES  
FROM PEOPLE LIKE KUPKA



12.

MIKHAIL LARIONOV  
- RAYONIST COMPOSITION  
MUSEE NAT D'ART MODERNE - PARIS  
AF KLINT UNEXPOSED TO PEOPLE LIKE  
LARIONOV AS SHE CHOSE THE LIFE OF  
ALMOST TOTAL SECLUSION

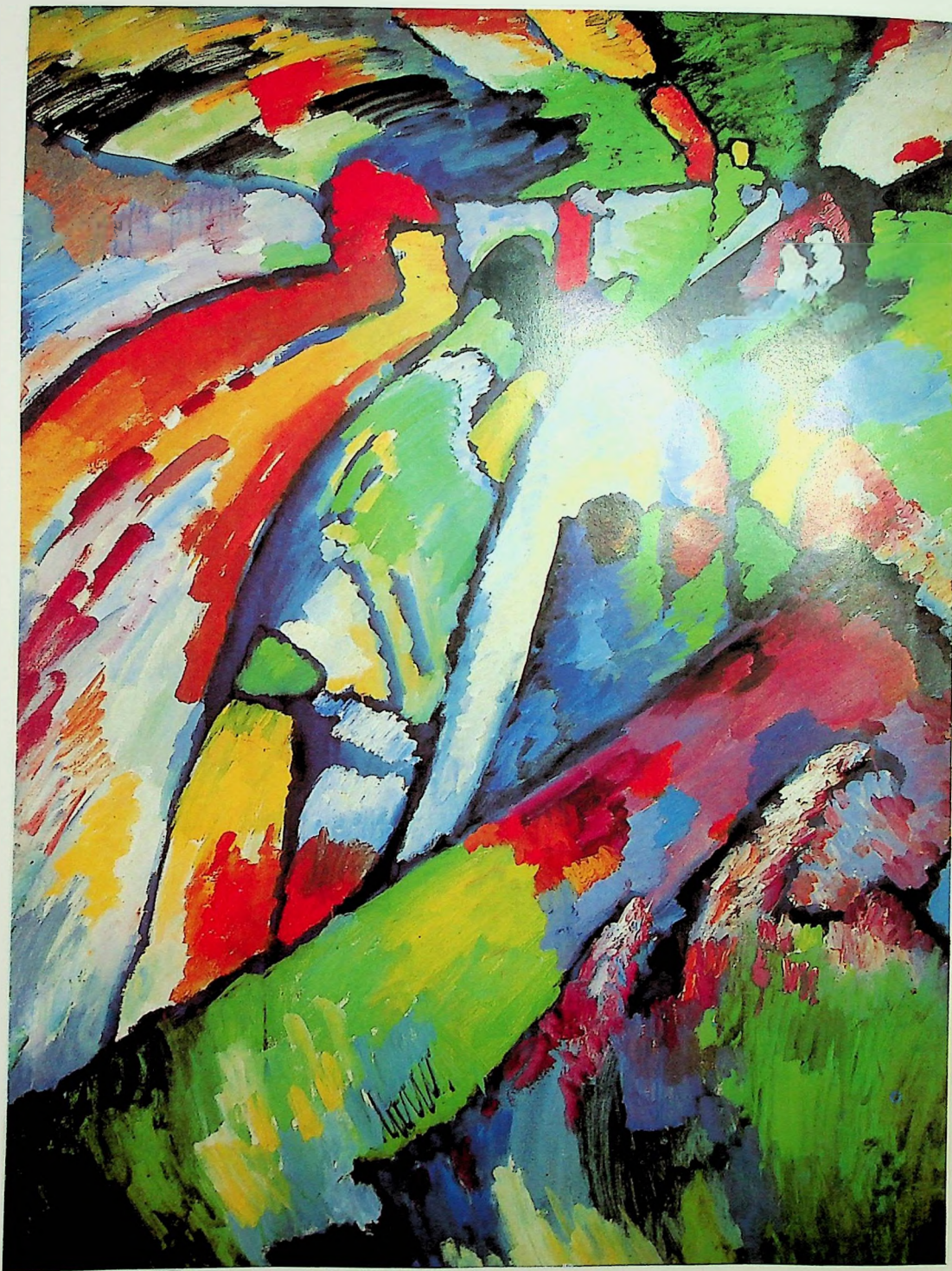


Af Klint was working in an unconscious automatic way without knowing what the results would be. Thus in her figurative paintings there are anatomical errors that, given her academic training, would not have been unlikely had she been conscious of her actions. She believed so extensively in the mediumistic result that she would not change or correct the error while conscious. In 1908 Klint met Rudolph Steiner, she did not analyse her work and found her inability to understand her own work the tragedy of her life. In spite of her acquaintance with Theosophy and Steiner's Anthroposophy she continued to work in her own spiritual way until 1915. In accordance with theosophical ideals she tried to depict the different planes of experience through horizontal divisions of the picture plane. These planes are represented, a lower plane, the underworld where elementary beings of lower nature actively try to disturb the physical and mental balance of man; a middle plane, the physical reality in which man strives to reach harmony in his inner and outer life, and a higher plane, the plane of grace, which is the astral world that helps man to fulfil his mission on earth and sustains him from above. Only the middle plane, physical reality, has forms that can be observed with the physical eye. Klint subsequently resumed her botanical studies by painting plants not only as they appear to the eye but also as they appear in the astral world. These procedures echo the 'spiritual flowers' of Georgiana Houghton. Clairvoyancy obviously lifted the limits of physical reality for both. She met Steiner again. He expanded Goethe's colour theory and worked out a technique whereby shadows and lines were eliminated. "Forms would occur within colour itself through layers of fluid, transparent paint, one layer on top of another." Steiner called this method 'painting out of colour'. The result would present a more mobile painting surface without fixed contours. She realised Steiner's art theory differed greatly from Theosophical thinking. Of special significance for her was Steiner's naming two fundamental sins in painting: the first, copying nature; the

second, fancying that one could depict the spiritual world directly. Steiner's prohibitions created a crisis for Klint, for two years she ceased to paint. When she resumed, her work was much more fluid and anthroposophical. As Klint considered the knowledge of duality to be the main theme or message of her work. She believed that the sexes of men and women all reversed in the astral world, and that this reversal provides a resolution of the duality within human existence. The struggle between male and female for Klint was the fundamental idea behind all creative power. In the (Swan) 1915 painting we see the wings of black and white swans embracing, forming diagonals by the wings. Around the beaks are symbols from the whole series: yellow and blue forms, a hook and eye representing male and female forces, a divided circle, and an intricate geometrical form describing the cube.

She died in 1944 and her will stated that her output of more than one thousand occult paintings should be kept together and should not be exhibited publicly for twenty years. She expected that towards the end of this century her work would face a responsive public. The later influences of Steiner, Bohme and other theosophists and esoteric writers on Kandinsky and others seem to form that climax which people like Houghton and Klint were experiencing prematurely.





13.

'IMPROVISATION 7' 1910 - OIL ON CANVAS - 131 X 97 cm

WASSILY KANDINSKY



## CHAPTER II

"The Great Epoch of the Spiritual which is already beginning, or in embryonic form, began already yesterday, provides and will provide the soil in which a kind of monumental work of art must come into fruition." (Kandinsky's words - 1910 - 1911 from Kandinsky - Complete Writings on Art ed. R.C. Lindsay and P. Vergo-Boston G. K. Hall 1982).

Kandinsky in Germany, Frantisek Kupka first in Czechoslovakia and later in France, Malevich and others of his circle in Russia and Piet Mondrian in the Netherlands created a pure abstract vision that embodied their involvement with esoteric thought. Their legacy was spread by many of their contemporaries to subsequent generations of artists who found new means to write about abstraction with concepts based in the occult, a fact that has been largely overlooked in much of the scholarship devoted to this period. Most people still consider abstract art as meaningless. Yet 'meaning' for the artists of the late 19th century and the early 20th century meant working to instill their work with different meaning in the process of abstraction of form. The genesis of abstract painting is inextricably tied with the spiritual ideas current in Europe at the time. Arthur Jerome Eddy, writing in 1914, and later Sheldon Cheney in the 1920s and 1930s were widely read in the artistic circles as Cheney reviewed connections between abstract art and music and later wrote a history of mystical thought. This literary support for abstraction did of course help strengthen its development but the 1930s saw a great decline in the support for the occult because of its political associations.

The Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy, for example, was indebted to various

versions of Theosophy such as Theozoology, which pertains to birth by electric shock into the astral ether and ariosophy which fuses ideas of karma, the ether and sun worship with idolatry of Aryan ancestry. Hitler's confidant Otto Wagner explained to him the 19th century occult writer Karl Von Reichenbach's theory of Odic force, according to which "every human being has an unknown source of power that produces rays". Hitler immediately applied these ideas to the potential revivification of society by the invisible strength transferred like an aura. Suspicion towards the occult because of its political association increased in the 1930s and 1940s.

Meyer Schapino advocated a more thoughtful, conceptual interpretation of art. In the late 1960s and 1970s serious art historical research on the genesis of abstract art and its connection to occult and mystical belief systems emerged. Studies by Sixton Ringbom on Kandinsky and R. P. Walsh on Mondrian and Theosophy paved the way. Robert Rosenblum and Otto Stelzer with the latter's Die Vorgeshichte der abstrakten Kunst (1964) helped develop a more receptive climate in the 1970s and encouraged investigation into artists' interest in mysticism and the occult. In the present context 'mysticism' refers to the search for the state of 'oneness' with ultimate reality. Occultism depends on secret, concealed phenomena that are accessible only to those who have been initiated. The occult is mysterious and is not readily available to ordinary understanding or scientific reason. Ideas common to both mysticism and occultism include the universe as single living substance, mind and matter also are one, all things evolve in dialectical opposition, everything corresponds to a universal analogy, imagination is real, self-realisation can come by illumination, accident or an induced state, the epiphany is suggested by heat, fire or light. Most mystical and occult groups sought enlightenment not only through the Bible and other holy books of conventional western religions but also through the

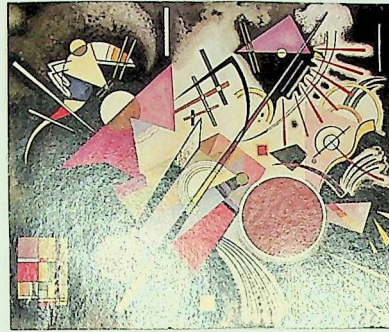
study of history that lay outside Judaism and Christianity, the inspired writings of mystics, previously heretical sects, and elements that had once been part of Judao-Christian practice but discarded in more recent times. Eastern philosophy and religion was also brought into the sphere of study and speculation. The mystical-occult believer has direct access to the 'source'. There is no need for intermediaries or authorities as in original religious institutions. Interest rose in Theosophy and other related philosophical and metaphysical systems because they represented attempts to make sense of all aspects of an individual's life, it projected an appealing vision of an afterlife - a notion no longer part of post-Darwinian rational belief, and stood outside institutional religion. James Webb noted the promise of reincarnation flourished too as an antidote to the growing failure of positivist and materialistic philosophies to explain existence. A lineage of thinkers attempting to define an occult cosmogony can be established from antiquity beginning with Plotinus and Hermes Tismegistius, to Paracelous, Robert Fludd, Jakob Bohme, Emanuel Swedenborg and through to Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe, Honore de Balzac, Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire in the first half of the 19th century.

The five underlying impulses within the spiritual, abstract nexus are cosmic imagery, vibration, synesthesia, duality, sacred geometry, in fact five structures that refer to underlying modes of thought identified by art historian Henri Focillon, in The Life of Forms of Art (1948). Two of the fundamental spiritual impulses, the interest in laws of duality and correspondences and in synesthesia, were hallmarks of symbolist painting. Paintings approximating to music and intermingling the senses came to the fore. Victor Hugo made many mandala like watercolour images in the 1850s and are related to his profound commitment to spiritualism, which apparently commenced after the death of his daughter in 1843. Georgiana Houghton also commenced her spirit drawings and works after the deaths of

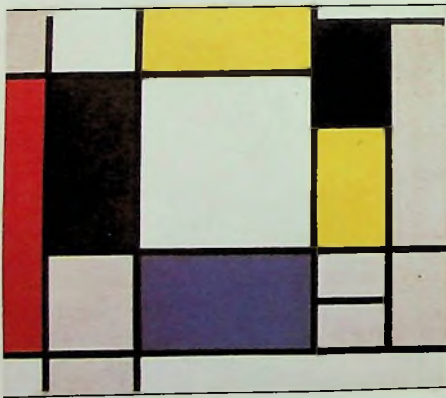




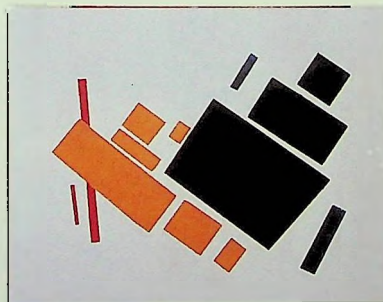
14.  
'BLACK RED' 1927  
WASSILY KANDINSKY  
LENBACHOUS MUSEUM MUNICH



15.  
'BLACK ACCOMPANIMENT' 1929  
WASSILY KANDINSKY  
MUSEE NAT D'ART MODERNE, PARIS



16.  
'COMPOSITION IN RED, YELLOW AND BLUE'  
1920 MONDRIAN



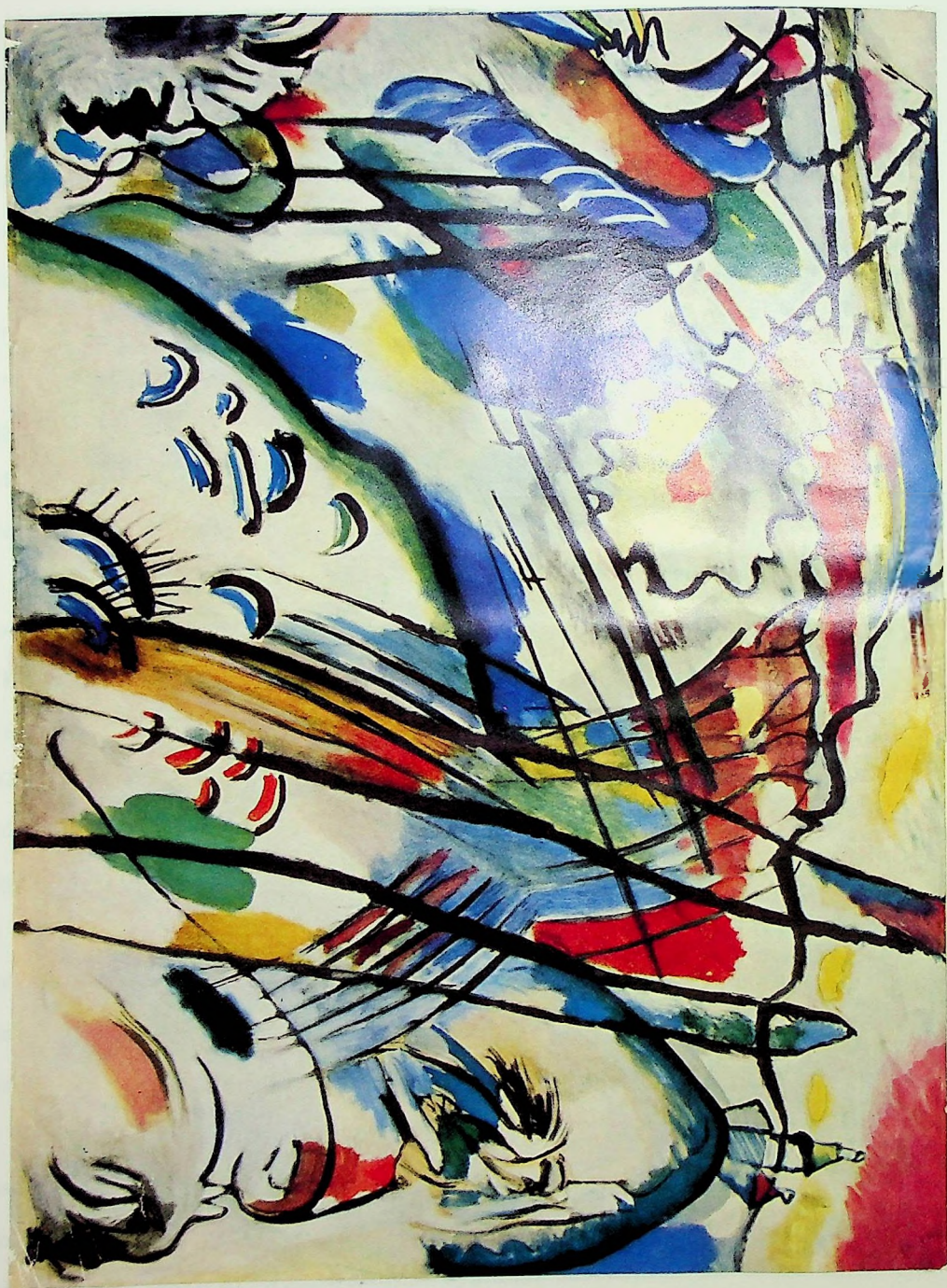
17.  
'FLIGHT OF AN AIRCRAFT' 1915  
MALEVICH

her loved ones. Hugo began to read Pythagorean theory and the writings of Swedenborg and Comte de Saint Simon and in 1852 he learned the doctrines of Cabala from Alexander Weil. Hugo performed seances but it remained for symbolism to attempt to express qualities in his paintings that had remained latent in Romanticism. Artists like Victor Hugo, Richard Wagner and Edvard Munch were people who before the arrival of Kandinsky had aimed to achieve the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (total work of art). Reference to the spiritual at that stage formed the backbone to modernism.

The historian T. J. Jackson Lears has recently argued that anti-modernism is the central notion unifying leading American thinkers from the Transcendentalists through Walt Whitman and William James. "Modernism was regarded as something to be fought because it was synonymous with the loss of spiritual values." In fact to heighten 'spiritual' awareness was their primary aim. Nourishing Kandinsky's eventual commitment to abstraction, which was indebted to his convictions about the spiritual was the time he spent in Paris (1906 - 07) and the lessons he learned from Jugendstil (Art Nouveau in Germany). Cubism was of little importance to his artistic evolution. His immersion in spiritual texts however seems to have established his rationale for abstraction.

From Theosophy, as Ringbom was the first to demonstrate thoroughly, Kandinsky derived his concept of vibration (directly connected with his use of the acoustic term 'Klang'). He believed that human emotion consists of vibrations of the soul, and that the soul is set into vibration by nature. S. Ringbom summarised, Kandinsky's expressed purposes as "to produce vibrations in the beholder and the work of art is the vehicle through which this purpose is served." Kandinsky's works from the Bauhaus and Paris years feature abstraction that may be associated equally with cosmic and celestial concerns as with vibration. Kandinsky's answer to the question





18.

'IMPROVISATION' 1912

WASSILY KANDINSKY

GUGGENHEIM: NEW YORK



of meaning was given by way of implication: "surely forms so laboriously conceived must be significant and meaningful even if they do not resemble or represent objects." Kandinsky expressly equated the artists' 'inner aspiration' with the content which peremptorily determines form. Is the missing object to be replaced with the artists' inner aspiration? - Not literally, for according to Sixten Ringbom Kandinsky never wanted to paint psychic states. Because of the impact of spiritualism and its literary strengths, Kandinsky felt what the artist aimed at with his inner experiences was a spiritual reality behind the corporeal forms, a cosmos of spiritual entities that Kandinsky felt was becoming increasingly important. The forms of the hard material object would be superseded by abstract form. In On the Spiritual in Art (1912) he praised the paths of the inner consciousness that were made known in the west by the Theosophical society. "Their methods, which are the complete opposite to those of the positivists, take their starting point from tradition, and are given relatively precise form." The credit for this precision was given to Rudolph Steiner whose book Theosophie (1904) and articles in the Lucifer Gnosis Journal are recommended by Kandinsky. In 1911 he pursued exercises in 'contemplation after Indian models'. His preoccupation with meditation and spiritual training can also be followed in the annotations and marginal comments that he made in occult publications in his library. Synesthesia as mentioned earlier interested Kandinsky a great deal - the ability to smell or taste colour for instance. An occult article by Dr. Franz Freudenberg describing a patient of his with highly developed synesthesia interested Kandinsky. He thought by screening off accidental impression a procedure that is the classical preliminary to mystical meditation one could learn to receive higher stimuli. Kandinsky studied Steiner's writings meticulously - particularly his instructions on how to develop higher faculties in a chapter called 'The Path to Knowledge'. Steiner had already answered the nagging question of the missing object by offering to teach his reader 'the

faculty of forming images even where no sensible objects are present.' "Enneads" by Plotinus was a classical mystical text that provided a philosophical basis for much of the subsequent mystical thinking, both Christian and non Christian. Neoplatonic thought adopted Plato's division of intellectual activity into levels of increasing truth and value - ranging from a child's naive acceptance of flim flam, the illusory to the philosopher's inquiry into the nature of ideas - and introduced the notion of mystical abstraction as a shortcut to the highest level. The visible forms occurring at the lower stages, in the material world, were represented by Plotinus as unwanted distractions on the path to truth. The insistence that true reality must be free from visible forms and the belief in the possibility of exploring the formless world by procedures involving training are themes that recur time and time again in later mystical tradition.

In medieval times the sense of sight was frequently defined in terms of a classification first proposed by St. Augustine. The lowest type is corporeal vision, direct perception of the material object, the second level is spiritual vision, based on recollection and imagination, and intellectual vision, the highest form is contemplative and discards all likenesses. "You have not gone a long way unless you are able by purity of mind to transcend the phantasms of corporeal images that rush in from all sides" preached St. Bernard, whose late medieval German followers distinguished between imaginative devotion and a state of imageless contemplation. In Hindu and Buddhist tantric teaching and meditation visual aids called 'yantras' are employed and may in fact be classed as early instances of non-representational art. According to Buddhist esotericism, the adept is to pass through seven successive levels, the four levels being called 'rupa' (form, body), the three higher 'arupa'



(formless, incorporeal). 'Arupa-dhyana', a state of complete freedom from forms and images, is the ultimate goal just as imageless, intellectual vision was the goal of the Christian mystics of the middle ages. This parallel between Eastern and Western mystical tradition, which was to become so important to the Theosophists has puzzled religious historians, - one of whom compared the doctrine of the 'arupa-dhyana' with the sayings of the German mystic Meister Eckhart who declared that "the spirit must transcend object and objectivity, form and formedness.'



19.

'SAMBHU'

YANTRA NEPAL 1760

USED IN TANTRIC TEACHINGS

It was in German theosophical circles that the Bhagavad Gita, the classical text of Indian transcendentalism, was systematically collated with classics of medieval mysticism as well as with writings by Meister Eckhart, Thomas a Kempis, and such later teachers as Paracelsus and Bohme. It was around the turn of the century that Steiner, as the German Theosophical leader



precipitated the return to Western mystical traditions. During the same period the distinction between the world of forms and the formless world was described with a growing amount of vivid detail by the English Theosophists A. Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater. This formless world witnessed by Hindu, Buddhist and Christian seers, became the principle subject of two lavishly illustrated books published at the turn of the century. Leadbeater's Man Visible and Invisible and Besant's and Leadbeater's Thought Forms. Steiner recommended both for Kandinsky's readings. The illustrations in the two books show the organisation of the world, the colourful auras, visible to the trained observer, and the 'thought forms' produced by vibrations in these auras, which once detached, move in spiritual atmosphere and exert influence on other people. Both books contain a colour chart Key to the Meanings of Colours. The clairvoyant ascending to the higher planes of nature perceives "higher octaves of colour", in the 'auras' and 'thought forms', the quality of 'thought' determines colour, whereas the nature of thought determines 'form'.



20.

WASSILY KANDINSKY  
'PICTURE WITH WHITE BORDER' 1913  
OIL ON CANVAS 140.3 X 200.3 cm  
SOLOMON R GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Kandinsky carefully listed the colour meanings in his Steiner annotations. At the culmination of his occult interests from 1908 - 1912, Kandinsky's art ceased to depict the forms of the visible world, replacing the missing object with a content that he referred to as being dictated by "inner aspiration". He felt that his capacity for continual observation was being channelled into another direction by his "improved powers of concentration". The direct and immediate impact of this new radical iconoclasm on abstract art was to be felt only decades later. His looser interpretation of the word 'formless' does not entail an absolute absence of form but merely the absence of physical shape. This offered and offers a virtually limitless freedom in the choice of line, shape and colour as long as the artist sees to it that representational forms are excluded. In numerous publications Theosophy provided artists with a wealth of aesthetically exploitable ideas and images. Theosophy envisioned a new realm of colour and form, at first in verbal descriptions and later by means of colour illuminations. In Theosophical aesthetics the work of art is in its own way a thought form, shaped by the artist's thought and vibrations and itself transmitting these vibrations to the beholder. Kandinsky took over this principle, and for him there were also other ways in which the theosophical idea of artistic creativity could be adapted to an aesthetic programme. Could artistic sensibility as such represent an alternative to meditation and similar exercises in the search for the spiritual? This possibility although not elaborated was occasionally suggested in theosophical literature, and it was also eagerly adapted by Mondrian, another of the abstract pioneers. Like Kandinsky, Mondrian believed that the theosophical conception of matter was being proved by modern science, but unlike Kandinsky he does not seem to have put much faith in individual exercise and meditation. Why did Mondrian end up with geometrical forms as being closer to the spirit than other forms? For Mondrian primary forms are the ones most removed from physical reality.



This is a platonic notion with which he probably became acquainted through Theosophy, where Plato was frequently quoted as saying "God geometrizes".

This idea that the penetration of the surface of visible reality will lead to abstract art was shared by several pioneers of abstraction: Kandinsky, Kupka, most of the Russian avant-garde, and many of Mondrian's 'De Stijl' colleagues. Among the ideas drawn from occultism is the idea that actions and thoughts on the normal physical level are paralleled on some higher plane. Such duplication is called 'parallel action' and the pictorial rendering of it 'parallel representation' says Ringbom. Kandinsky adopted the theosophical notion of 'spiritual atmosphere' which like the air can either be filled with foreign bodies: not only actions that can be observed, thoughts and feelings that can find external expression, secret actions, unexpressed feelings are all elements that constitute the spiritual atmosphere. He believed this spiritual atmosphere could be expressed by artistic means and here we have the correlation of the spiritual atmosphere with Richard Wagner's famous leitmotiv. To Kandinsky, the use of leitmotiv represented an attempt to characterise the hero not by theatrical props and contrivances but by a certain precise motif and by purely musical means. This motif is a kind of musically expressed spiritual atmosphere preceding the hero, which thus emanates from him at a distance. Kandinsky explained that such spiritual atmosphere accompanies 'not just heroes but every man' and is perceptible to some. In sketch after sketch he vacillated between theatrical props and pure colour patches as a means of enhancing the action of his protagonists. Similar devices were used by early German Expressionists. The technique of parallel representation therefore, constitutes one possible path to the complete elimination of visible reality of the two parallel renderings, the material one merely to be suppressed to make the image non-





21.

'EVOLUTION' 1910 - 1911

MONDRIAN



22.

'EVOLUTION AND DEVOLUTION'

COSMIC POEM 19TH C. RAJASTHAN

23.

'DYING CHRYSANTHEMUM'

MONDRIAN

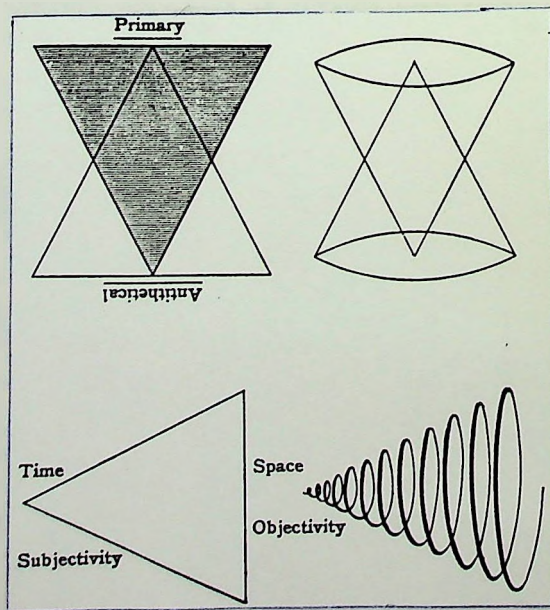
representational. Hilma Af Klint, the Swedish painter mentioned in relation to Georgiana Houghton, used this device. Her painting Silence (1907) the cross is a really appropriate motif, according to Blavatsky "it is a sign that the fall of man into matter is accomplished" (from *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985* Press 1986).) Af Klint worked in isolation yet her work developed like the emerging abstract art on the continent, though she was never opened up to seeing the art elsewhere. This alone demonstrates the visual potential of the theosophical teachings, which provided a rich source of pictorial devices. Schoenmackers, the Dutch theosophist who inspired Mondrian as well as other De Stijl members emphasised that his 'formative mathematics' based on exact "knowledge and exact images". He questioned the Eastern influence on Theosophy. "Western thinking can only be developed in a positive, exact and verifiable manner, and not through oriental - lovable, poetic softness" (from *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985* Press 1986). In this respect Mondrian and Schoenmackers are far different to Kandinsky and Steiner. They sought objective truths independent of feeling. Mondrian accepted the theosophical notion of matter as a denser variant of the spirit. As the advocates of non-representation moved their line of defence from abstraction to what soon came to be called "concrete art", dematerialisation lost favour. "In contrast to 'abstract' work which was distilled from visual reality, 'concrete' work was presented as existing in its own right" (from *The Spiritual in Art, Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985*).

In order to achieve this objective, the artist attempted the more direct approach of independent creation without any starting point in the object world. The artistic exploration of the inner side of nature also had a precedent in Besant and Leadbeater's second venture in clairvoyant observation: occult chemistry. The 'ultimate atom' composed entirely of spirals, which in turn consist of spirilla. This atom is the fundamental

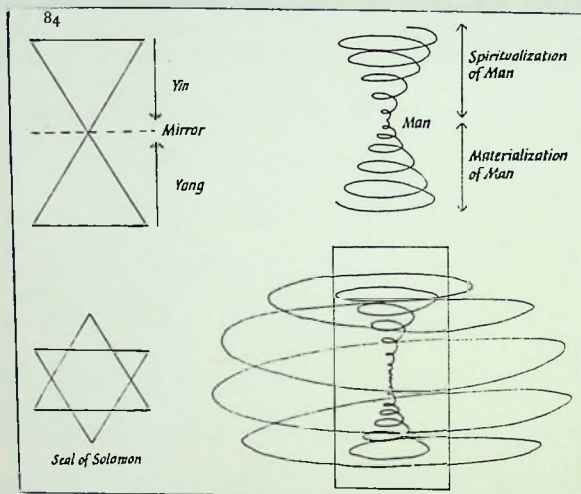


unit of which the physical universe, a heart-shaped form into which force is poured into the depression at the top. Besant and Leadbeater acknowledged that their conception of the ultimate atom was based on Edwin D. Babbitt's. Babbitt, in turn, seems to have modelled his heart-shaped atom on one of the fundamental diagrams of Rosicrucian imagery. Just as very simple theosophical symbols, dots, horizontals, crosses, elicited a whole complex of pictorial elaborations in Af Klint's art, so too the more elaborate occult chemical diagrams apparently enriched the artist's vocabulary of non-representational forms. the 'spiral' or 'mystic spiral' has had a prominent position throughout art history, and I include just a few symbols.

Jung's primary twofold division of the psyche include internal subjectivism, the direct response of intuition, and the extreme objectivism, the direct response of sensation. The celestial sphere is divided by vertical axis joining midheaven to the Nadir. This is the 'now' of concrete experience, which gives rise to the secondary inner faculty of feeling and the secondary outer faculty of thought (Fig. from J. Jacobi 'The Psychology of C. G. Jung' Routelage, London 1942).

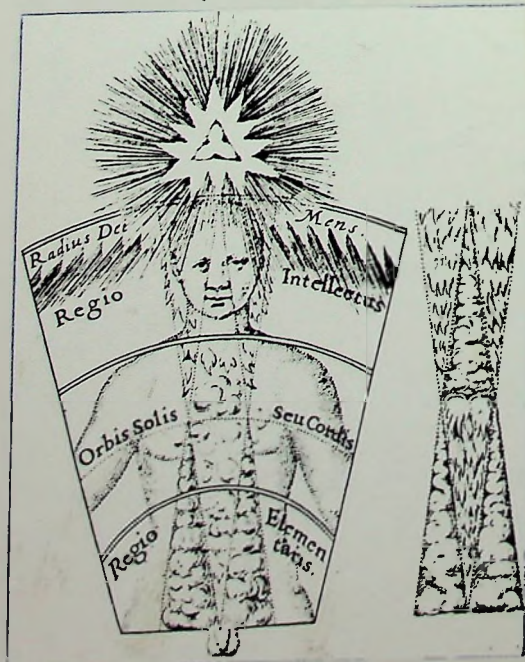


Man's role is to connect and balance heaven and earth. The descending gyre of heaven is the materialisation of spirit into matter 'naming the limit of contraction Adam' (Blake, Jerusalem, 73). The ascending spiral is man's expansion into spirit. The intersecting of these two vortices within the body, symbolised by the Seal of Solomon, shows man in a state of balance and equilibrium.



Each of W. B. Yeates' gyres is a complete lunar cycle. Macrocosmically this is the great year which turns into its opposite every 2,000 years. Two opposing gyres, intersecting and whirling in opposite directions through the body, form the basis of his meditation and the philosophical system of A Vision. He says "line and plane are combined in a gyre which must expand or contract according to whether mind grows in objectivity or subjectivity." (W. B. Yeates, A Vision, Macmillan London 1937).

The balanced intersecting gyres as triangles centred on the heart, form the Perfect Man. (Robert Fludd, Utriusque cosmi .... historia ll. 1619).



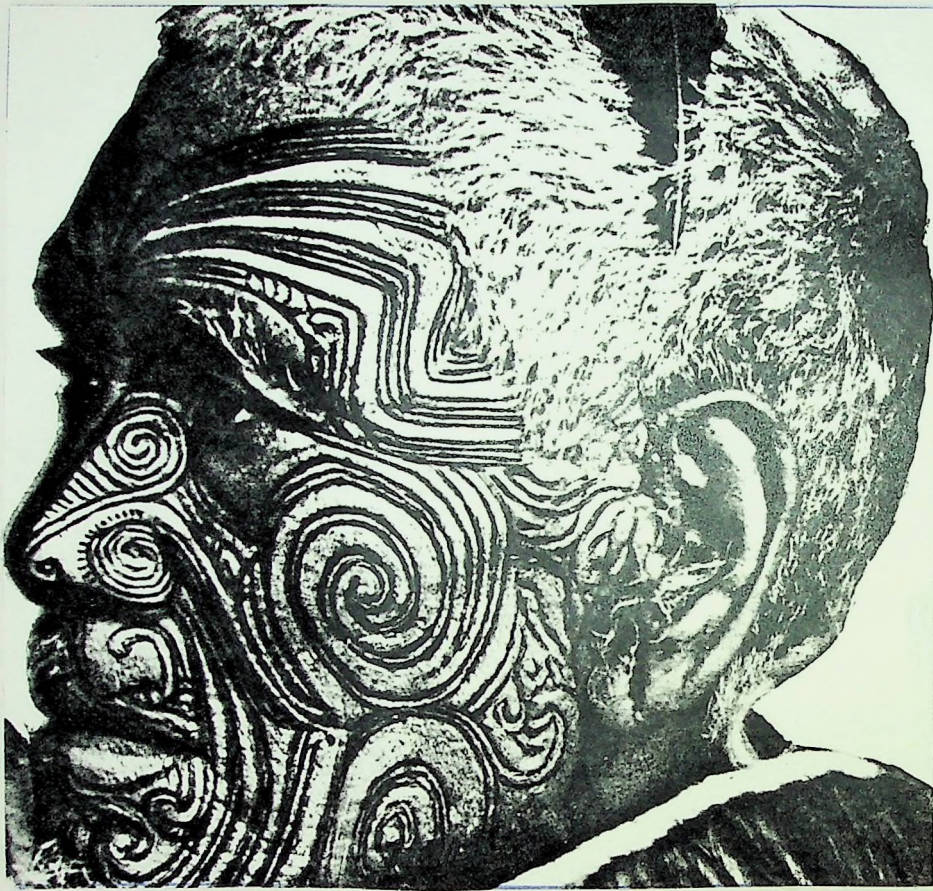


"Who knows, maybe all our 'abstract' forms are 'forms in nature'" Kandinsky declared in 1937. It seems according to Ringbom that he never quite came to grips with the question of the missing object. In his dread of the danger of ornament and "the dead semblance of stylised forms" he adopted occult claims that made non-representational painting not only an art movement but also an offshoot of mystical tradition. Kandinsky is the only major painter of the avant-garde who maintained a consistent and studious interest in the psychic phenomena arguing that any investigation into the creative process must be undertaken by the help of both scientists and occultists. The central concern of the Modernist artists in Russia was the exploration of non-objective painting, the Suprematism of Ivan Kluin and Kazimir Malevich, the painterly formula of P. Mansurov and the Constructivist works of A. Rodchenko. At the beginning of their careers they were certainly exposed to the spiritual in art as many facts of their culture according to Bowlit still reflected the esoteric concerns of symbolism. Consciously or unconsciously the avant-garde developed affirmatory, practicable systems from the often disparate thoughts the Symbolists. They asserted 'optimism' of feeling, and linked their art to everyday life, as with Nathalia Goncharova and Larionov's Neoprimitivism, or the utilitarian issues as with Malevich's and Tatlin's design projects. In 1906 Blok wrote "Religion is what will be, mysticism is what is and was" and the following year Blok wrote "Art has no meaning beyond a religious one." The grandiose commitment of the Russian avant-garde in the 1920s, from Malevich to Tatlin, the former's Suprematism the latter's glider of 1929 - 1932, might be interpreted as consequences of "religious rediscovery" and rediscovery and restoration of solid social and ethical values instead of the relativism of the Symbolist mystics. Many critics of the 1920s felt that religiosity, not constructivism was the common denominator of the Soviet arts. All the leading Symbolist philosophers, Bely, Berdiaev, Vircheslav Ivanov, repeated that the "arts are of a

temple, cultist origin, they derived from a certain organic unity in which all parts were subordinate to a religious centre". Kandinsky's interest in the forms of occultism, spiritualism, monism, the new Christianity, Theosophy and religion in its broadest sense is immediate. During Russia's spiritual regeneration between the late 1890s and circa 1910, the symbolist poets and philosophers formulated a vast conglomeration of ideas and ideologies.

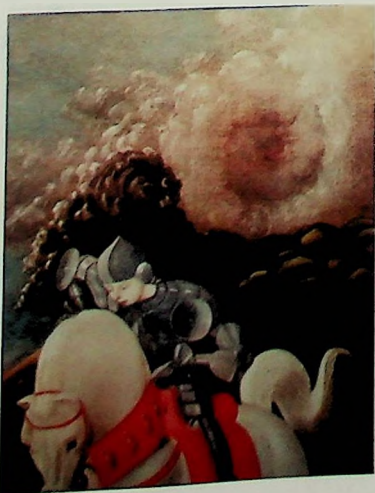
While rejecting the materialism of the 19th century, they anticipated audacious, experimental concerns and actions in the 20th century. The Symbolists investigated several areas of intellectual and metaphysical inquiry. Bely's study of Theosophy and investigation of Anthoprosophy, Blok's of Alcohol, Ivanov's of pagan ritual and V. Bruisov's of black magic. They concluded that the path to true illumination lay via intuition and cognition, not via objective knowledge and that the artist could tread this path only by discovery and using more appropriate means of communication. Blok wrote "the writers soul has - wearied of abstractions, it has grown sad in the laboratory of words." As far as the intermingling of the spiritual with the visual arts was concerned two Russian magazines played a major role. Iskusstvo, the forerunner of Zolotoe Runo, both had its negative attitude towards 19th century realism and its positive attitude towards modernism. The first issue established the aesthetic direction of the journal through its publication of Viktor Gofman's Chto est Iskunstvo (What is Art?). Gofman defined symbolism as the science of the individual, of the subjective 'I' of mystical intimism and deduced that symbolism was solid as an aesthetic and theurgic force. In following editions the critic advanced Kuznetsov and Vrubel as key exponents of Emotsializm v zhivopsi (Emotionalism in Painting), spoke of the 'musical emotions' of their painting. Articles were written and





27.

By inscribing on his own body what what later man incised on stone, ancient man enhanced and controlled the energy flow that vortices represented. Spirals represent the key to immortality. Maori tradition recounts how the soul after death meets a dreadful hag who devouring his spiral tatoos says "Pass from Maura, land of the living, to Bouro, land of the dead". Then by touching the soul's eyes, she gives it the 'vision of the spirits'. If she finds no tatoos she eats the eyeballs, blinding it for immortality. (Maori - New Zealand).



28.

The cosmic nature, creating order within and without is seen by the enormous spiralling cloud behind St. George's head. Don Juan calls 'raffirmation from the outside world'.

'ST. GEORGE & THE DRAGON' (DETAIL)

PAOLA UCCELLO ITALY 15TH CENTURY

photographically documented in Iskusstvo devoted to the art of Japan and Mexico. There was a growing tendency to document and research primitive and oriental cultures rather than to regard them as merely colourful phenomena, as in Bakst's interpretation of Scheherazada of 1910 or Somov's illustrations to One Thousand and One Nights. The Oriental aspect of early Russian modernism had valuable precedents to Kulbin's Buddhism of 1910, Gonchorovas' and Larionovs' praise of the East 1912 - 1913. It is known that Yakulov's simultaneist perception of space and light derived from his experiences in Manchuria in 1904 - 1905. Armenian, North African and Assyrian influences are part of the entire complex of the Russian orientalism, preparing the ground for the general assessment of the East as a receptacle of mystical truth and for the down-to-earth statements of the Neoprimitivists to the effect that "(We) aspire toward the East...(and) protest against servile subservience to the West". Zolotoc Runo appeared when Russia was recuperating from the troubles of the first Russian Revolution and the Russo Japanese War - stating 'Art is symbolic for it bears, within the symbol, the reflection of the Eternal in the temporal'. Blok published Slova i Kraski (Words and Colours) in which he argued that the child's primary medium of expression was colour, not words, implying that the art of children, as of primitive peoples, was more genuine than professional art. Chagall, Gonchorova, Larionov and Aleksander Shevchenko returned to this idea in 1910 - 1914. It was explored individually and institutionally in the 1920s. In another article 'Zhivopus i Revoluitsua' (Painting and Revolution) issued by D. Iimgardt the idea that the traditional aims of art had been exhausted vis a vis in the sociopolitical events of the world - and that new artistic criteria would have to be established. He asserted that the revolution would lie in the invention of "visual music and phonic painting without themes" - in other words ironically the artistic synthesis and abstraction that Kandinsky would



advocate three years later. By 1909 Symbolism was experiencing crisis as a creative force. Its' farewell editorial stated "that for the Renaissance of art it is essential to cross from purely negative, subjective individualism to a new, religious vitality." Reference to the popularisation of Theosophy, especially in the issues of 'Vestnik teosofi' is important because this journal and other analagous literature presented in schematic form, are concepts that Kulbin and others broadcast further and that seem to have resounded as far as Filonov, Malevich and Matiushin. One of these concepts is that of the artist as clairvoyant, a leitmotiv in the writings of Annie Besant, Blavatsky, Steiner, Bely, Blok and Ivanov which is repeated in a parrot fashion by artists like Kandinsky, Matiushin and Petrov - Vodkin. Unkovskaia formulated that the 'music of the spheres' is heard in the 'sounds of nature' and that there is an organic parallel between sounds and colours. yet another concept which sounds familiar. The striking point is not only the immediate reverberations of these rudimentary theosophical or symbolist ideas but also in the words of Bowlt "their subsequent application within the non objective movements and their appearance in contexts that are convertionally recognised as painterly and formal." Bowlt asserts that "we should beware of regarding the art of the avant garde as a pictorial counterpoint to the esoteric teachings of the time." Still, it is highly improbable that without this mosaic of ideas, without this mystical impetus, artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Matiushin would have created the innovations that they did or would have limited their abstractions with the work of the future. Malevich referred to the 'energies of black and white' and the energies of suprematist forms as if they contained a real, traceable, applicable force that could be harnessed to drive machines. This notion brings to mind the esoteric understandings of energy: Wilhelm Ostwalds' 'energetic imperative' and G. I. Gurdjieffs' psychic translocation of objects over distances and transference of telepathic power. It was the discovery of cosmic energy,

whatever its philosophical derivation, that provided Malevich with the conviction to explore the world of abstraction in the paintings from 1917 onwards.

By 1938 Kandinsky's willingness to designate his own paintings as "concrete" signalled a shift from his earlier interest in compositional tactics whereby the artist could create an impression of dematerialisation in the painting. 4. 5. 6. (from: Kandinsky - Complete Writings on Art ed. K. C. Lindsay in P. Vergo Boston G. K. Hall 1982). "Every genuine new work of art expresses a new world which has never before existed." Thus every genuine work constitutes a new discovery, "a world which was not known to this point takes its place alongside the world that we already know. Every genuine work of art must announce 'Here I am.'" (5). "Spiritual energies reveal themselves in discrete, materialised forms in nature, and the physical universe, which includes man's artifacts is the means through which the divine spirit may make itself manifest." (6). A veritable swarm of zoological forms and motifs based on illustrations and photographs of amoebas, embryos, larvae and marine invertebrates appear in his work. Jean Arp whom he had known since Munich (der Blaue Reiter) and Jean Miro, the Spanish artist, had influenced him greatly. Also surrealist Yves Tanguy, designated a style of biomorphic abstraction which was also influential. By choosing primal stages of animal development which are unicellular organisms he, like Arp, was able to suggest unlimited potential for individual materialisation without having to depict any particular end form of natural development. This was materialisation rather than dematerialisation one could say yet because of their anonymous existence, materialisation removed veiled. Goethe's pursuit of hypothetical 'Urformen' was characteristic of the German Romantic search for the fundamental structural principles and elements of the physical world, which could



reveal themselves to human intellect and intuition and then be interpreted as the manifestations of divine forces working throughout the universe. These ideas were at ease for Kandinsky. Klee, Arp, and Kandinsky shared the 20th century Romantic aesthetic that divine energies in the universe could find ever new formal possibilities for "self-revelation in nature and art" (Watts). The question of mystical revelation through nature leads beyond the Romantic movement itself, back to Jakob Bohme, a 17th century German mystic whose dialectical vision of the universe incorporated the most important components of Renaissance occult science and laid the foundation for Romantic aesthetics and metaphysics. A lot of artists followed Bohmes' philosophy.

According to Bohme, matter is subject to progressive transmutations, and without splitting the divine force can exist only as potential as "Urgrund", the Oneness that cannot be fathomed, delineated or perceived, even by itself. This fundamental dialectic 'Darkness was essential if the light was to be made manifest' was introduced in the "Aurora" (1612), a book in wide circulation among German intellectuals and European Symbolists at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1618 he had studied the 16th century doctor and alchemist Paracelsus. He elaborated a metaphysical structure that accommodated Renaissance astrological schemes of planetary opposition and interaction, most importantly the tradition of alchemy in which base matter, known to the alchemists as 'prima materia' is gradually transmuted into a higher level of corporeality.

The Marxist humanist philosopher Ernst Bloch proclaimed Bohme as the first thinker since Heroclitus to establish an objective dialectic in Western philosophy. Bloch in 1918 introduced Bohme's material dialectic to Marxist historical analysis, "that everywhere one thing opposes the other, not in enmity, but so that each thing be set in motion to make itself manifest."

The oscillation between contraries is a crucial bridge between the ideas of divinity as Unknowable pure spirit and divinity as made manifest in matter. The materialising cosmos sets itself into motion by the split into two and develops and perpetuates itself as divine corporeality in a dynamic oscillation between polar opposites. This oscillation is the living pulse of the universe, a pulse conveyed by Bohme as "Vibration". "Oscillation", "pulse", "vibrations" - all are terms for the divine energy that reveals itself in matter. The artists' perception of individual pulsations throughout the microcosm and macrocosm was described by Kandinsky in 1935. This inner "pulsation" of things is none other than that described in "On the Spiritual in Art" (1912) where Kandinsky characterised all of existence as a vast network of interacting and communicating vibrations in which even "dead matter" is alive. Kandinsky's 1913 description of the creative process reads like a paraphrase of Bohme's account of creation. "The art of painting is a thundering collision of different worlds, which are designated to create new worlds in their conflict with one another." Kandinsky's well-known metaphor in which colour, form and objects become the artist's hands striking the piano and setting the strings into vibration may have been taken from the initial two images in 'De Signatura rerum' with which Bohme illustrated the propagation of inner identity to outer form. The similarities are obviously present, Kandinsky's very direct influences are apparent, more directly from Steiner's works than Bohme's.

Even in Kandinsky's colour theory vocabulary, Steiner's direct influence is traceable. His description could fit perfectly in any Theosophical or esoteric text. Houghton's earlier theories would fit into a more doctrinal text but the spiritual aspect is very evident. Both Houghton and Kandinsky trace the 'poles' of light and dark, 'yellow' as described as expansive,





29.

'CHRIST AMONG THE DOCTORS'

BUTTRIONE C. 1500 OIL ON PANEL

25 X 22 cm (SPIRAL)

NATIONAL GALLERIES SCOTLAND.

30.

'IMPROVISATION IV' 1911

WASSILY KANDINSKY

'blue' as contractive echoing Bohme's oscillation between contractivities. Kandinsky uses terminology similar to Houghton as he describes 'white'. "White is a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls." He combines all the antithesis as a "circle between two poles, representing the life of colours between birth and death." He speaks of art's contribution to the world as "thickening the spiritual atmosphere which is necessary for the maturing of the finest feelings just as the hot air of a greenhouse is necessary for ripening certain fruits." This analogy between art and fruit rings familiarity in the 'spirit flowers' and

'fruits' of Houghton.

The 'hot air' of politics also helped him. Political upheaval in Russia offered 'Spiritualism' an appropriate foundation. In autumn 1917 the Socialists whom Kandinsky so despised took power in the country by revolution. Civic organisation was restored the following spring. Malevich was writing in the magazine "Anarkhia", "before us stands an enormous task: to build up a living conflagration in Russia and to ... raise art in the soul of the people." (from *The Spiritual in Art - Abstract. 1890-1985*). Normalcy dissolved into anarchy as the most basic supply systems and utilities collapsed. In mid 1919 Ouspensky wrote from Southern Russia to an English colleague "You ask how it is possible to live under such conditions. And this is the most occult aspect of the whole situation. I will answer for myself: I personally am still alive only because my boots and trousers ... are still holding together. When they end their existence, I shall evidently end mine." The spiritual now ironically depended on the material to survive. But the converse also applied, in the affective absence of the material world, the spirit represented security and reality. Chagall wrote to A. Benois "The Russians were prone to take everything to extremes." (4) The strengthening of the spiritual dimension in Suprematism, just like the polarisation of the external materialism led by Rodchenko against Kandinsky, owed their clarity to the desperate need to assert clarity amidst chaos. It was to precisely that ruthlessness that they owed their power as artistic paradigms in the West thereafter. Cooke asserts that of Rodchenko's work in "these first post-revolutionary years, it is hard to define the extent to which their motivation is expressive rather than formal". In language they are 'constructive' in the sense that Kandinsky and others has meant it as logically built up from elements whose properties and pictorial functions were clearly defined. The serial, combinatorial aspects of his paintings



of coloured circles, rectangles and triangles was likewise the formal exploration of a scientific and philosophical principle perceived to be characteristic of the 20th century spirit. As Schonberg for one had shown, the principle could serve expressive media as well as engineering. When Kandinsky proposed to young Rodchenko and his friends in 'Intuk' that the pursuit of colour theory implied 'addressing ourselves to the science of the occult, where we can find many valuable guidelines in the context of supersensory experiences' his leadership was over, the Russian avant garde ignores him, and his compatability with the New Russia too. Commisar Lunacharsky, now patron of the young artists in so much, had written in the Russian Press 1911 of Kandinsky at the Paris Salon des Independents as "one of the worst" ... "a person who is evidently in the lost stages of psychic disintegration." Ten years later, the freedom which Lunacharsky saw as the only possible justification for works like Kandinsky's "Moscow Lady" was more circumscribed. In a lecture in Petrograd December 1921 entitled "God is Not Cast Down" Malevich was cutting the Moscovites firmly down to size. "Thus two men see the universe differently, one sees in it a spiritual principle and sees something great above what the materialist sees, whilst the materialist sees the world as self-devouring matter. The greater 'significance' of the spiritual consists in the fact that the spiritual does not create for the sake of devouring itself but for its non-objectivity, the materialist, on the other hand, sees the creation of the same matter as the aim of self-devourment - he creates objects for his own appetite." Clearly the re-appraisal of the Spiritual had begun. This seems to have been the second revival, the first during the 19th century. Houghton and Af Klint are only two examples of the many unrecognised abstractionists, 'spiritual abstractionists' of that revival, and their philosophies were over half a century older than those of Kandinsky. The literature on Spiritualism was evidently by every means relevant to Kandinsky's own

artistic development. Another fertile element and aesthetic source for abstract artists' working in the first two decades of the 20th century was Symbolist painting and theory. Symbolism was the mystical wing of the Post-Impressionist generation and contained some of the seeds of abstract art. Abstraction was also catalysed by formal suggestions drawn from Fauvism as well as from Cubism.



31.

'DYNAMISM OF A SOCCER PLAYER'

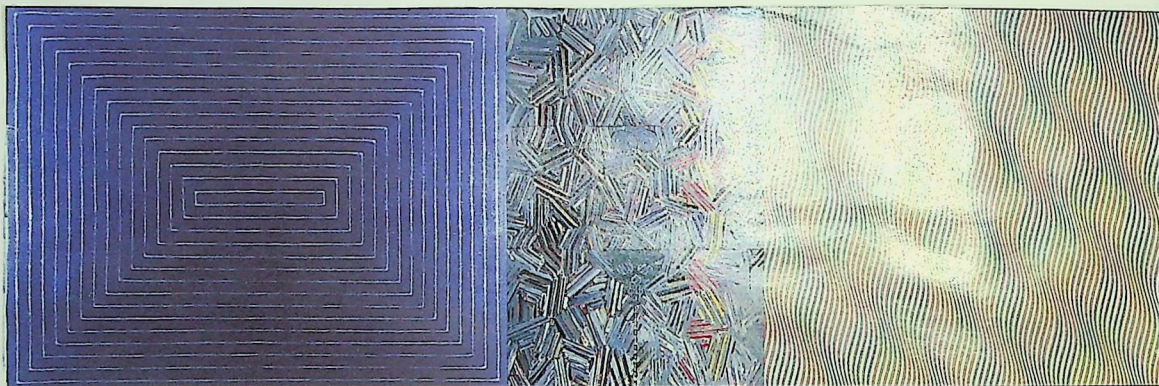
BOCCIONI (MOMA) NEW YORK



### CHAPTER III

In some of the spiritual movements that influenced 20th century artists, the bond between metaphysical ideas and science was an important element. Metaphysical thinkers were especially eager to learn about the advances in physics and chemistry. This new knowledge not only was adopted to confirm their beliefs but also allowed them to speculate about the invisible aspects of the material universe. Popularised beliefs about n dimensional geometry, a theory of geometry based on more than three dimensions were an essential basis for the Russian Futurist movement and the art of Malevich. In the writings of P. D. Ouspensky the properties of time and space were united in a concept of the fourth dimension. Malevich's art moved from the alogical representation of space to its final totally abstract forms. Suprematist works were intended to represent the concept of a body passing from ordinary three dimensional space into fourth dimension. The sources for the spiritual abstract nexus in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Paris, Munich and New York were limited in number strikingly similar and almost simultaneous. Vivekananda's lectures of 1893 were translated in Russian, William James into Russian and French, as were Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The more recondite branch of occultism often appeared in inexpensive paperback editions such as M. V. Lodyzhersky's 'Superconsciousness and Ways to Achieve It' (1911) which Malevich read, and 'Theories et symbols des Alchimistes' (1891) which influenced the work of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp created plastic metaphors from the literature of occult symbolism and insisted on the importance of the artist as parareligious leader in modern life. Few abstract artists in either Europe or America during the 1930s were involved with Spiritual issues at a time when artists rallied to become "art workers". An exception was the

"Dynaton" group founded by Wolfgang Paalen and Lee Mullican in 1951. This group was influenced by an understanding of philosophy and metaphysics through reading various literary and mystical texts such as Ouspensky's 'Tertrium Organum'. Dynaton was in a sense a west coast alternative to Abstract Expressionism, and was characterised by the central attention to Zen, the I Ching and the Tarot.



Frank Stella, *Tomlinson Court Park*, 1959-60 (Collection R A Rowan); Jasper Johns, *Tantric Detail II*, 1981 (Artist's Collection); Bridget Riley, *Clepsydra* 1976

32.

33.

34.

Emerson's writings became popular around this time. He admired Plato who used the expression 'God geometricises' and looked forward to geometric astronomic morals. St. Augustine's cardinal mystical concept of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and circumference nowhere influenced Emerson. This all prefigured the sentiments and cosmic images of abstract painters from Odilov Redon, Serusier, through Kupka, Georgia O'Keefe to Mark Rothko and Gordon Onslow Ford. Emerson believed that "Natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact", a work of art is a abstract or epitome of the world, a leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, makes an analogous impression on the mind.

If the 1940s and 1950s can be regarded as a period in which Romanticism came to a close as Brian O'Doherty has suggested then his insight that two concepts summarise ideas originally dramatised in the 19th century - the Quest, (search for transcendence) - the Void, occupied in part of



modernisms 'self-referential tactics', can illuminate the spiritual abstraction of this period. Art worked towards the idea of the quest as in the biomorphic abstraction formulated by Kandinsky and echoed by Rothko and others. An artist called Dirbenkorns return to abstraction in 1966 is an example of resonant abstraction, that which does not hinge on spiritual context. Ajit Mookeyees' publications 'Tantra Art' (1971), 'Yoga Art' (1975 and 'Tantra Magic' (1978) attracted contemporary sensibilities in the 1970s. Jasper Johns' acknowledges their impact on his cross-hatch-paintings. The abstract Expressionists began painting in an abstract style almost as if Mondrian and Kandinsky never did so. Barnett Newman, J. Pollock, A. Gottlieb and Rothko may not have shared the so-called spiritual terminology of the earlier anti-materialistic philosophies, but they seized upon according to Tuchmann "contemporary counterparts with a fervour fully equal to Mondrian's abiding respect for Blavatsky or Kandinsky's for Rudolph Steiner."

Rothko's works were intended to act as monolithic sources for spiritual contemplation. His works prior to a move towards colour abstraction reveal a similar interest to that of Pollock in a combination of surreal and primitive imagery to express what Rothko saw as 'basic psychological ideas'. Rothko was also interested in imagery to express what he saw as basic 'psychological ideas'. He was also interested in imagery inspired by and drawn from Greek myth and tragedy.

He claimed that only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. Rothko went on to reject the anecdotal quality of imagery (illustration no. 35) insisting "For me, art is the anecdote of the spirit", and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness. Rothko's sense of the transcendent in his



35.

'BROWN, BLUE, BROWN ON BLUE' 298.1 x 262.5 cm

MARK ROTHKO

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES)



painting was mixed with a sense of the tragis which was reflected in the change in abstract tonality towards the end of his career and ended with his suicide in 1972. His work seems very negative as opposed to Kandinsky's optimistic almost lyrical qualities. However, this negativity has at least set a firm contrasting ground to some of the perhaps over-optimistic notes of the works of Houghton, Af Klint and Kandinsky.

Rothko's avid interest in Greek mythology and tragedy and his early use of it as a source of inspiration contradicts the sentiments expressed by Kandinsky earlier, seeing as he did how impossible it is to paint a 'Greek classical' without actually living and being in that age. This aspect of the 'spritual' tuning-in is basically where they differ.

The nature of spirituality was much clearer for Kandinsky and others at the beginning of this century than it is for us today. For Kandinsky, the Spiritual was identified with "the search for the abstract in art" and it existed in opposition to the "nightmare of materialism". Art was unequivocally regarded as "one of the mightiest elements" in "the spiritual life ... a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forward and upwards." After three quarters of a century of abstract art that seems to have deliberately purged the spiritual "stimmung" atmosphere Kandinsky expected "abstraction to distill." "Frank Stella's work is an example of how abstraction has become materialistic" in the words of Donald Kuspit. According to Kuspit "the denial of the spiritual dimension of art, its conversation inot a purely formal, material, external enterprise has made it still another art for art's sake" a 'condition of art' that Kandinsky described as "vain squandering of artistic power", a neglect of inner meanings. It is indeed, as Marc wrote "terrible difficult to present one's contemporaries with spiritual gifts". The materialist character of Stella's work make them sterile for me. Meyer Schapiro describes the

message laden art of today 'arts of communication.' He recognises the pressures on artists to "create work in which he transmits an already prepared and complete message to a relatively indifferent and impersonal receiver." Abstract art is therefore no longer understood as a mystical inner construction, transmitting inner meanings 'through the quality of the whole' available only when 'the proper set of mind and feeling towards it' have been achieved. Kuspit calls it 'reproducible communication'. Some work struggles to resist this tendency. The enemy of today's art is the desire to enter the mainstream of societal communication itself that must be resisted, for it usurps 'inner necessity' in Kuspit's view. Individuality is also killed. The difficulty for abstract art today is to sustain the sense of 'stimmung' in the face of a society that assimilates abstract art as simply another kind of communication and so makes us insensitive and unresponsive to it. The most significant abstract art today reflects an inner conflict between the socially encouraged will to conventional communication and the personal will to spiritual experience. Schapiro recognises that the commercialisation of 'abstract art', more than any other art, is exposed 'to dangerous corruption' because of its 'concreteness'. Price can stamp the painting as an 'object of speculation', confusing the values of art. (from *The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting 1890-1985* - Press 1986). Ironically the spiritual in artistic form - "spiritual atmosphere as a surplus of indefinable uniqueness added to the materially unique works of art, further enhances the works' commercial value and social status" (Schapiro). Spirituality legitimises the abstract work's worldly success in other words. Obviously scepticism towards abstractions is widespread. Has this abstract work before me 'genuine' spiritual connections or is it a pretence. Unfortunately, this for me is the greatest tragedy of art today.



Kuspit sees the symbolic "pregnance" which the abstract work is experiencing as possessing perception to zero degree, appearance, on the order of Roland Barthes 'zero degree writing', the work as a whole is read spiritually rather than empirically. What this means was indicated by Max Kozloff who pointed out, writing about Mark Rothko's version of "silent paintings" that it is necessary "to find that lever of consciousness which will change a blank painted fabric into a glow perpetuating itself into memory". Without this lever there is no reason to "believe the suspicion that Rothko is but the creator of pigmented containers of emptiness". Michel Conil-Lacoste remarked that there are two readings of Rothko, "not only the technician of colour, but also the engaged heart of mysticism". Kozloff explains "that only when the spectator of a Rothko grows more intent on the colour vibrations, he learns to discount the surface so that the painting ceases to be, does the mystical 'spiritual' character its transcendental beauty become evident". When Marc spoke of the abstract work as a 'mystical inner construction' in effect he was speaking of its power to ecstatically convert the empirically given into the transcendent. For Ad Reinhardt the square, cruciform, unified absolutely clean mandala shape he utilised in his famous 'black' or negative paintings serves the same purpose as Rothko's 'disembodied chromatic sensations', namely to preserve the spiritual atmosphere. Many 'silent' painters who refuse their work an overt religious meaning are afraid that their art 'will be appropriated by a belief system', becoming a dispensable instrument of faith rather than an end in itself. Kuspit believes that it will lose the full power of its negativity. The question of religious belief is separate from the question of spiritual experience, which is what silent painting engages and I believe more artists should come to understand this vital difference.

Sixten Ringbom writes about the restrictive attitude which he had met many

times in connection with researching into the irrational roots of Modern Movement. A colleague of his while unravelling dubious material proved to be a deliberate affair and soon hit upon unexpected difficulties. A senior member of the art historical movement actually formulated this attitude in words saying that "Even if this were all true and fully documented, nonetheless, it had better be left unsaid." S. Ringbom sees that it must also be admitted that the apparent unwillingness to come to grips with the occult past of Modernism does not represent one of the major threats to the freedom of research. Are there other legitimate reasons for sweeping them under the carpet? He does not think so but there are inhibitions that may be placed under the following headings:

"The lack of respectability": Generally intellectuals tend to associate mysticism and occultism with fraudulence, sectarianism and religious cranks.

"The problem of supersensible claims": If the artist claims that his or her works are based on mystical experience and that true understanding of his or her works presupposes the acceptance of these claims, then the beholder as well as the historian is placed in an awkward position. Historians are not allowed to assume supernatural inspiration for works of art, for this reason art historians may prefer to avoid the whole issue and so ignore the question of occult inspiration.

One of the many aspects of medieval art, the specific type of representation known as the devotional image, is the direct outcome of mystical preoccupations and exercises. Two sculptures 'Andachtsbild', a Pieta and a pair of Christ - St. John 1320, do not tell a story as medieval pictures frequently do. Instead of showing the whole group of lamenting



followers of Christ, "the artist" says Ringbom, "abstracted the kernel of the image, noting the character's psychologically timeless and evocative renderings of sublime emotion." This represents the direct reflections of the mystics' need for closeness, presence and identification. He uses the term 'abstract' for this pictorial technique quite deliberately since in principle "we can here witness a process paralleling the emergence of abstract art in our century". When German art historians some sixty years ago, presented their conclusions about the mystical origins of the 'Andachtsbild' nobody became embarrassed or agitated. it did not occur to anyone that the mystical origins had better be left unexplored.

The Renaissance went a step further in courting the irrational. The medieval church had condemned magic, necromancy, astrology, divination, etc. whereas the Renaissance period saw a flourishing of all kinds of occult teachings and practices. The rise of Greek scholarship made available hitherto unknown ancient texts, which were eagerly received by the court circles of Florence, Ferrara, and other Italian cities. Not only Plato but neo-Platonic authors and obscure, anonymous treatises on ancient wisdom were brought to light and translated by the humanists. Behind Botticelli's wonderfully cool and detached interpretation of the birth of Venus is an abstruse neo-Platonic doctrine with strong ingredients of mysticism. Botticelli still seems to have served more or less as an instrument for his patrons and their humanist advisors who formulated the programme of the painting. Michaelangelo's naked youths of the Sistine ceiling are the direct outcome of the artist's preoccupation with neo-Platonic speculation. "Such figures had not" according to Ringbom "occured in earlier christian art, nor were they to recur in later painting, so personal was the concept that underlies Michaelangelo's paintings." Aby Warburg, a Florentine scholar, became increasingly preoccupied with the ultimate motives behind the revival of ancient art in 15th century Italy.





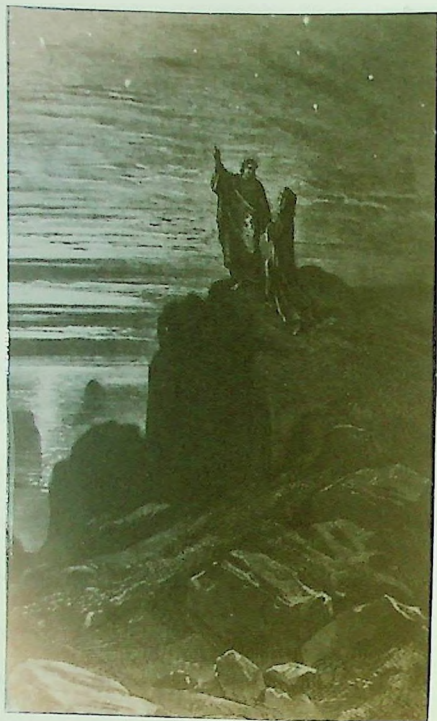
36.

Leonardo's knot is a mandala or contemplative diagram. Like the labyrinth or the Islamic arabesque, made up of a single thread. Claude Mellan writes "The spiral line, winding us to the tip of Christ's nose, recalls the sense of smell and verticalises time - refers to the linguistic connection between spiral, inspire and spirit." (Concatenation, School of Leonardo de Vinci, engraving, Italy c. 1510)



A turning point in Warburg's career was his deciphering of the enigmatic frescoes in a palace in Ferrara in 1909, three years later he presented his interpretation to the International Congress of the History of Art in Rome. Warburg investigated the Schifanoia frescoes and identified decans or ten-day rulers in the frescoes. For each sign of the zodiac, there were three decans, each governing one of the three days periods of a month. They belonged to oriental astrology, Indian and Persian astrology as much as to classical sources. By this Schifanoia discovery he came into contact with other obscure material which revised the popular conception of the Renaissance as the revival of serene culture, art and virtues of antiquity. Warburg was never blamed for having detracted from the greatness of the Renaissance masters just because he demonstrated their dependence on various, rather questionable, doctrines of astrology and magic. An occult doctrine, however preposterous in its substance, becomes respectable if it is associated with the names of Plato and Pythagoras. Quite conveniently according to Ringbom, the Renaissance mystics were Platonist, neo-Platonists and neo-Pythagoreans.

There is no single example from the Middle Ages of a visionary recording his or her own visions with pen and ink. In medieval art Hildegard of Bingen who lived in the 12th century was a mystic and her revelations were illustrated by professional painters according to her instructions. A pictorial record of her visions of the afterlife as features the cosmos divided into different zones by curved lines, and in various sectors souls suffer different punishments through fire, cold, horrible stench and so on. She remains a unique phenomenon not only in medieval art. In fact the only major artist to have produced visionary art in the strict sense seems to be William Blake. It is no coincidence that Blake was a master of the written word as well as the painted image.

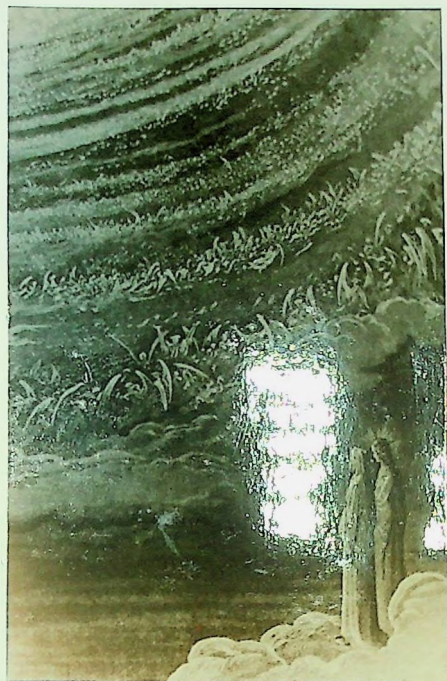


37.

'VIRGIL AND DANTE BEHOLD THE STARS'

WILLIAM BLAKE'S DIVING COMEDY 1824 - 1827

(DANTE)



38.

'GEORGRAPHY OF HEAVEN'

WILLIAM BLAKE'S DIVIN COMEDY

(DANTE)



39.

FERRYMAN OF DANTE'S INFERNO WHO  
CARRIES SOULS ACROSS THE FIRST  
RIVER OF HELL.



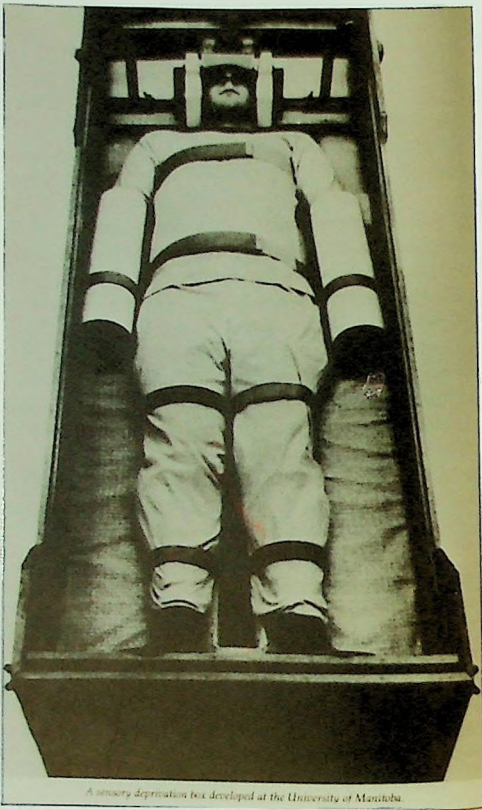
Towards the end of his life he had apparitions during seance-like sessions with John Varley who seems to have been the one to prompt Blake to this activity. The case of William Blake is in many ways problematic both to the museum goer and the professional art historian. To deny that Blake had contacts with the spiritual amounts to saying that he laboured under a delusion, a harmless one and a fruitful one, to be sure, but still a delusion. Divine intervention or supernatural powers are not allowed into the art historical machine. They have to assume that the similarity of Blake's Voltaire with the real Voltaire is due to Blake's familiarity with portraits of the French philosopher. Blake's mystical world view had received important elements from the theosophical speculation of a group of mystical teachers known as the Cambridge Platonists from the German 17th century mystic, Jakob Bohme and from his contemporary Swedenborg. With William Blake, Ringbom finds we have taken several steps towards our own era. It seems easier for us to accept his outlandish habits and preoccupations and to forgive him for his dependence on sources such as Jakob Bohme. But as we approach our own time the issue of respectability becomes more problematic as mentioned earlier.



40.

THE 3RD GIZEH PYRAMID WITH  
SUBSIDIARY PYRAMIDS TO THE LEFT.

As much as any people of any time the Egyptians regarded life on earth as a mere stepping stone, a temporary abode, in an existence which was to continue for millions of years. A considerable portion of their literary and artistic remains depict preparations for and travels in the next state of existence. They had thoroughly practical and concrete imaginations yet



*A sensory deprivation box developed at the University of Manitoba.*

41.

Dr. J. C. Lilly has found in psychoanalysis of study on solitude and confinement that in such 'deprivation' chambers the subject has altered states of consciousness, the subject is far more susceptible to hypnotic suggestion. Both are precursors of out-of-body experiences.

42.

The Sacrophagi in Egyptian pyramids limited the amount of oxygen available to the initiate. As Stanislaw Grof and Joan Halifax remark "It is well known that a limited supply of oxygen or an excess of carbon dioxide produces abnormal mental states. Experiments with the anoxic chamber have shown that lack of oxygen can induce unusual experiences quite similar to L.S.D.



*The granite sarcophagus in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid invites comparison with a contemporary sensory deprivation box.*

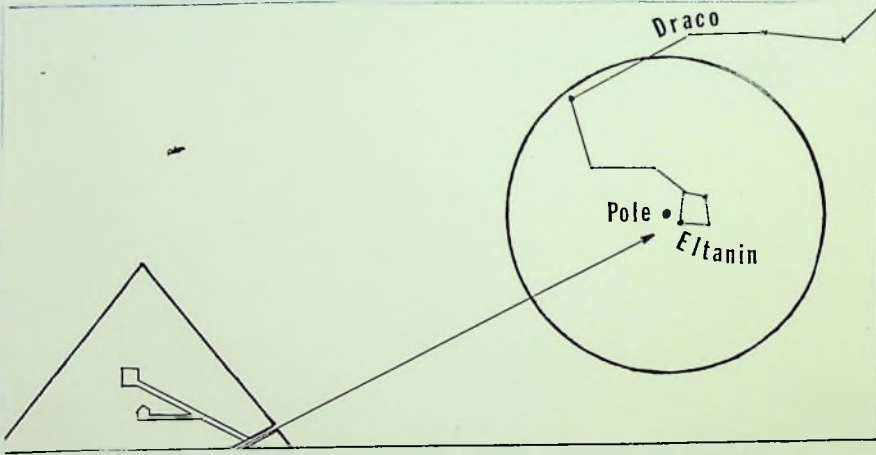


had such utter confidence in the 'other' world. Indeed, Lockyer has proved along with other Egyptologists that their confidence was so great that they produced tables, charts and maps of the heavens to guide them on their way. Astonishing evidence has been found which shows that their journeys into other realms were certainly not restricted to the dead. We gain valuable clues to the geography of their cosmos, a geography which seems to be the prototype of a universal pattern. Psychedelic research conducted in the last two decades has resulted in important phenomenological and neuro-physiological data indicating that experiences involving complex mythological religions and mystical sequences before, during and after death might well represent clinical reality. What is most remarkable is that the clinical reality of the actual maps of consciousness as Grof and Halifax call them, is not merely a mystical sequence, in some vague psychological system encountered by the soul after judgement. The extraordinary thing is that these maps of consciousness point to a great underlying pattern which is partly expressed in the physical, visible universe, in the outer world of the plants and the stars. In the modern accounts collected by Moody, Graf, Osis and others there are many parallels with the realms beyond described by the Egyptians, Hindus, Buddhists, Tibetans, Plato and Dante (Divine Comedy).

The longest of the utterances in the texts of Unas begins on the south wall of the Sarcophagus Chamber and continues on the east wall, hypnotic utterances, i.e.:

"He is not dead, this Unas is not dead:  
He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down:  
He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged.  
He judges - this Unas judges -  
Thy body is the body of this Unas,  
Thy flesh is the flesh of this Unas,  
Thy bones are the bones of this Unas,  
Thou goest, this Unas goes:  
This Unas goes, thou goest."

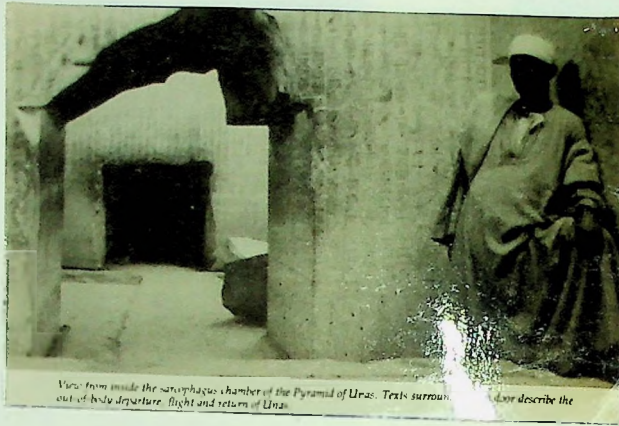
Recently, evidence has been discovered supporting the 10,500 B.C. construction date for the Great Pyramid first advanced by Edward Coyce. At the time the Pole Star was 'Eltanin', one of the eyes of the large constellation 'Draco'. Eltanin was respected by the Egyptians. Sir Norman Lockyer says "several Egyptian axial temples show evidence of alignments to Eltanin long after it ceased to be the Pole Star.



Detail from the Text of Unas.







This brief reference to Egyptology and the results of very recent investigations by Lockyer and other prominent scholars and researchers have clarified that out-of-body experience, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, telepathy and many other 'paranormal' events as we call them were very much part of 'normal' life. The text of Unas is described as an account of an ancient Egyptian's out-of-body flight. Initiation chambers are found in the Great Pyramids. Lockyer compares these flights as similar to those out-of-body experiences of the psychologist Carl G. Jung in his lifetime. These 'deprivation' chambers as Lockyer calls them because of their strong similarities with the sensory deprivation box developed at the University of Manitoba are found by researchers at various megalithic sites throughout Ireland, corresponding to the function of the sacrophagi in the Egyptian pyramids. These are the most recent conclusions drawn by Grof and Halifax. However, Michael Herity in 'Irish passage Graves' published as far back as 1974 concludes that these basins normally placed in the side chambers of cruciform tombs "appear to have been used in the ceremonial surrounding the disposal of the dead, the evidence from Loughcrew Cairn L. suggests that the cremated bones might have been placed in it during a burial ceremony."



46.



47.



48.

At Newgrange - granite basin stone 1.15 metres in diameter at East Chamber.





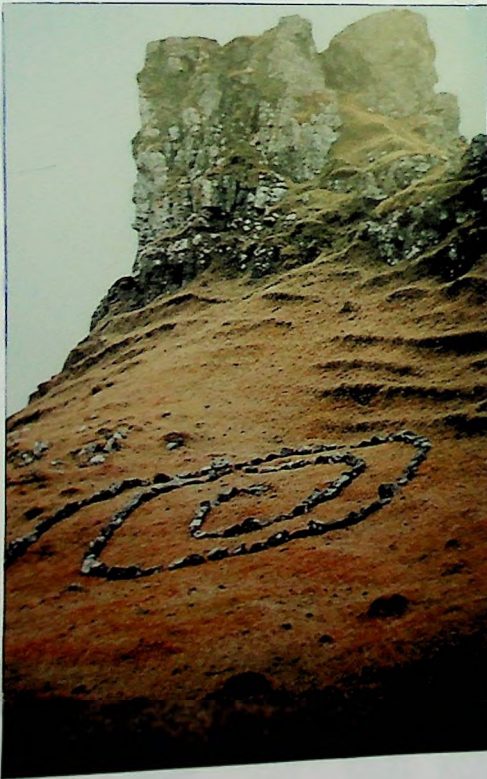
49.

Head facing the Polar Star Eltanin  
at the east of the Pyramid



50.

A Toltec Initiate's Voyage.  
Map of consciousness



51.

Megalithic stone spiral, Surrey, England.



52.

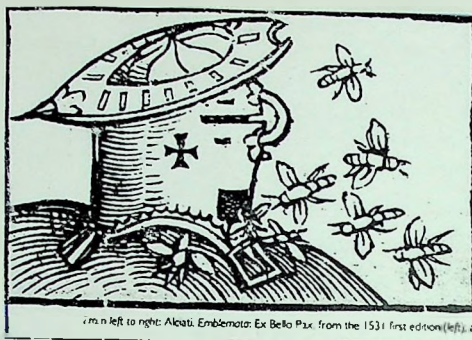
Early 12th century mural in the  
Church of St. Peter and Paul,  
Chaldon, Surrey. St. Micheal  
weighs souls with scales just as  
the Egyptians depicted judgement  
thousands of years earlier.





Such 'Ehrenrettingen' seems to have been most frequent in connection with Kandinsky, for some reason which is not quite apparent, the occult preoccupations of the other abstract pioneers of Mondrian for instance, have been more readily recognised. Ringbom sees at times that these apologies have assumed an almost desperate tenor reminiscent of that very magical attitude which the apologists are so anxious to disprove in the development of modern art. These defenders of the purity of modern art have tried to exorcise the "occult contamination" by thinking away the unwelcome facts. He believes that we still have much to learn from the example of Aby Warburg. "Instead of becoming agitated we should accept the fact that occult classics such as Edwin Babbitt, Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater are the Picateux, the Alcati and the Cesare Ripa of modern art" says Ringbom. It is interesting to compare a plate from Edwin Babbitt's 'The Principles of Light and Colour' (1878) with two of the Renaissance zodiacal representations explored by Aby Warburg. Babbitt's book was a pioneering work in the history of occult colour theory and it came to influence artists both directly and indirectly through various later teachings on colour, including the theosophical 'aural' illustrations.

The two zodiacal illustrations (nos. 54, 55) came from a 15th century astrological manuscript and a 1503 English Shepherd's Calendar. Two different ages, but in both cases there is that occult view of man and his world which seems to run through history like the proverbial scarlet thread. For whether created in the 15th century or in the 20th century, it is the work that counts not the sources. No-one would mistake the illustration from Besant's and Leadbeater's 'Thought Forms' for the Kandinsky it inspired, any more than we would confuse a Renaissance masterpiece with an astrological illustration.



54.



55.

Kuspit sees science and alchemy as both being already evident in Kandinsky and conveyed in his sense of 'total abstraction' and 'total realism' as different paths to the same goal. Kuspit defines 'total abstraction' as a kind of silence "the diverting support of reality has been removed from the abstract". 'Total realism' is a type of alchemy "the diverting idealisation of the abstract" (the artistic element) has been removed from the objective. 'Total abstraction' complete silence about the world and 'total realism' (alchemical transmutations of the object) involve the same process of reducing the artistic to a minimum. Art that seems to be 'pure' in its being results, it no longer represents, but 'presents' as a subjective indication of inner necessity and as a radical 'objectivity'. Thus for Kandinsky the sense of 'art's inner necessity' and the purity of the being it articulates converge in authentically spiritual abstraction.

The directing of art toward silence, the goal of radical abstraction in Kuspit's view is inseparable from the understanding of abstract art as a kind of iconoclasm, as Renato Poggioli noted. Poggioli connected iconoclasm "with the mystique of purity", and viewed silence, especially as Stephane Mallarme conveyed it as "purity's instrument". Paradoxically the absolutely abstract spirit becomes radically concrete being. According to Poggioli, the purity of silence implies that art can free itself "from the prison of things" (the noisy sound of reality).



Silence is also art's way of suggesting its transcendence, its 'self-created' quality which is another of Mallarme's definitions of art being "hyperbolic". Poggioli remarked that Amedee Ozenfant was correct in thinking that silence represents "the need for extreme liberty and extreme intensity of feeling"; absolute spiritual freedom. How to create this essential silence in abstract art today is the problem. Schapiro noted Kandinsky's shifting from gesture to geometry as a way of achieving silence. In 1931 Kandinsky wrote "The painter needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects". Many artists have increased silence by abandoning even geometry, except for the minimal geometry of the canvas shape, which is sometimes echoed in the order of a grid as in works by Sean Scully. The alchemical approach according to Kuspit, emphasises art's transformative power. "Art has not only the power of transforming materials by locating them in an aesthetic order of perception and understanding of different kinds of being by making explicit their hidden connection". Joseph Beuys said that "man does not consist of chemical processes but also of metaphysical occurrences." Alchemical abstract art can be understood as a place of major metaphysical occurrences, as a spiritual place. Abstract art as an alchemical spiritualising process, however, is a means, not of offering disguised imagistic support to religious dogmas.

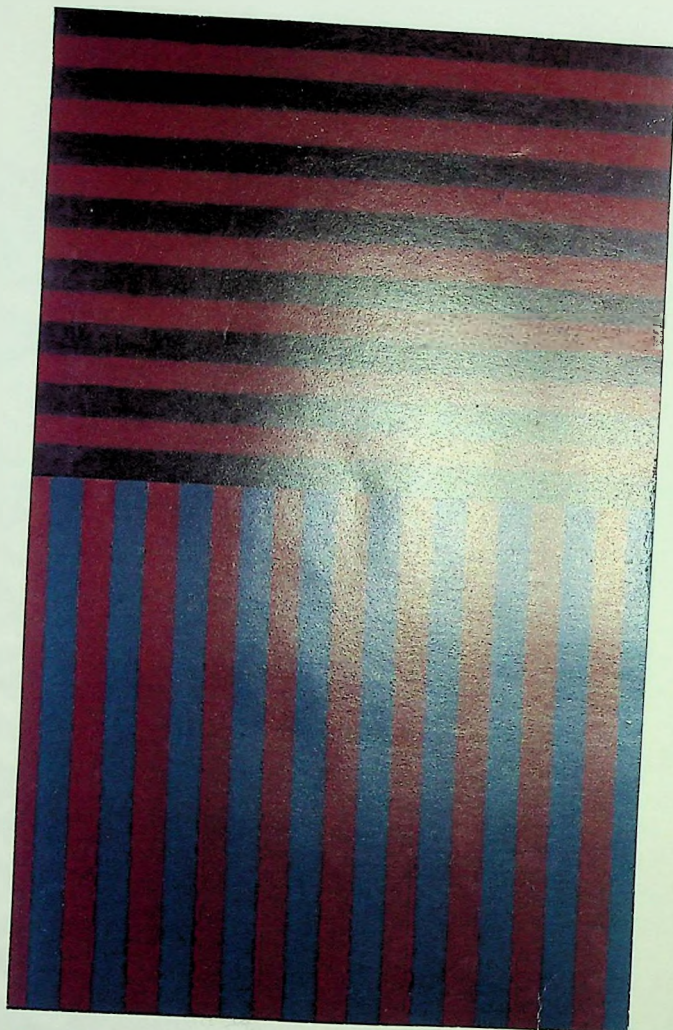
In 1973 the Irish born painter Sean Scully told William Feaver the first critic to take serious notice of this work, that his painting was about "presenting an extreme state of one kind of another". At that time he was doing large scale optically active colour grids, vivid and intricate overlapping which echo the interlacing and overlapping of Georgiana Houghton's work but certainly inflated Kenneth Noland's milder space lattices. By 1975 in the United States he abandoned Renaissance

illusionism for monochrome paintings made with an extraordinary "single mindedness" as Hunter calls it. This repetition of stripes, impassive surfaces evoke Minimalism, for me they sometimes appear narrowly dogmatic, however the deliberate inconsistencies of paint applications all leave room for sensibility and support an intuitive reading of the decision making process. Scully is convinced of the relevance of his fanatically single minded methods both to issues of personal freedom and to the inherent meanings of art itself. The force and clarity of his elucidations in these works, challenge popular cliches about highly formal art as a sterile cul-de-sac. Rothko, Reinhardt, Ryman, Morden influence him. His new formal strategies de-emphasise composition and modelling and work towards clarity, simplicity and a special kind of pictorial continuum.

Grid painting has its own prehistory. The Byzantines used this grid technique regardless of subject matter, as seen in the great mosaics, e.g. St. Apollinaire's - Nuovo in Ravenna, in the mosaics at the north side of nave. This grid motif influenced Scully a great deal in his early works. Scully who is a follower of Samuel Beckett made comparisons between the grid and the incantory repetition of lines and refrains in ancient Irish poetry. There is still also in the Romantic period, the dominance of repetition as a proto-existential theme of Kiekegaard who was widely read. "Repetition is a reality, and it is the seriousness of life" (Repetition - An Essay in Experimental Psychology, 1843). Kandinsky also observed that "repetition of the same tones thickens the spiritual milieu that is necessary for the maturity of the finest feelings", likening it to the effect of a greenhouse on plants.

The grey monochromes of his later years evoked the absolutist forms of Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian to Newman and Reinhardt. Ad Reinhardt chastised colour as something mindless and irresponsible. "Control and

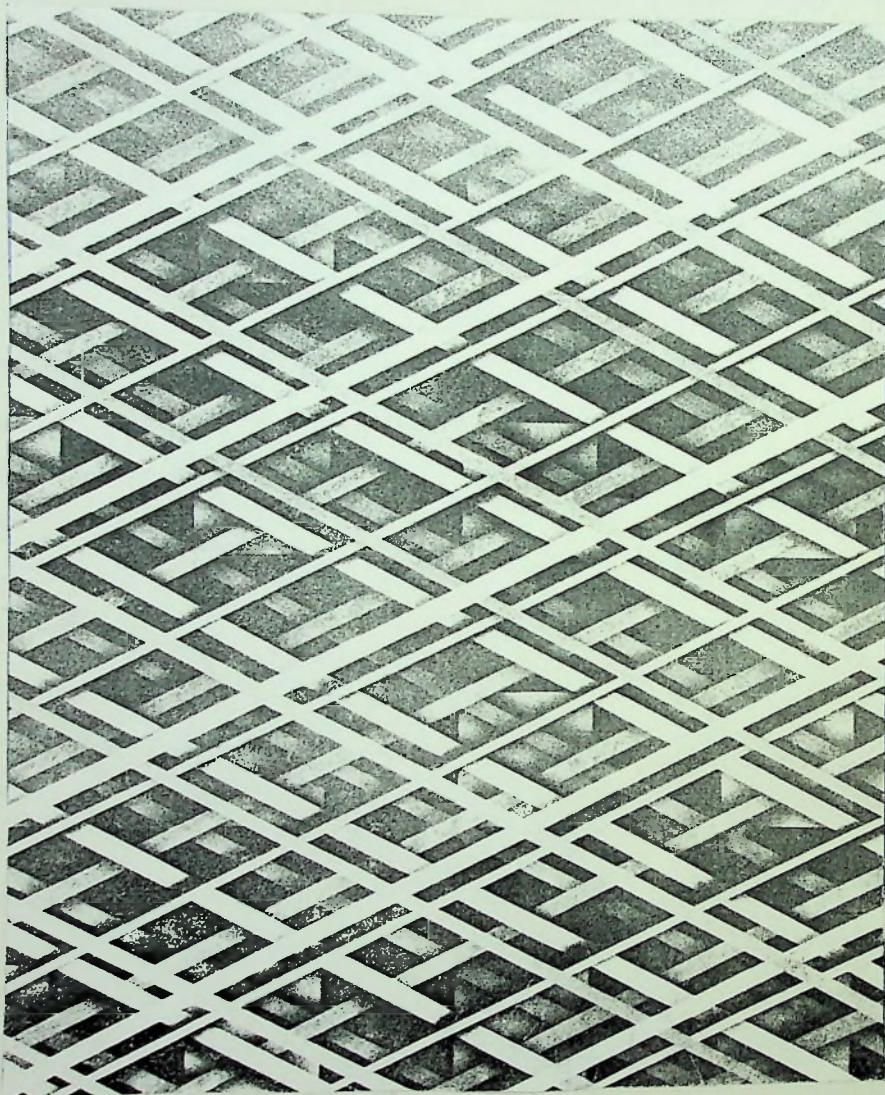




56.

SEAN SCULLY 1981

rationality are part of any morality." Scully certainly took this literally. He felt impelled to eliminate the Cubist grid, and Joseph Mashek quotes him "to free painting from interpretation and to create a more viable space" ... "because the surface is so complete the emotions are freed." In many respects I find this work very monotonous but if after all he is expressing the earlier Kiekegaard sentiments, the painting works. He seems to be testing the audience's fundamental commitment to art, and to confront the spectator with the same ambiguities that the artist



57.

SEAN SCULLY, 1972

encountered in the making of the work itself. He referred to his monochrome works as 'Zen' and took up karate as a physical discipline of



mind and body. "Only by marshalling all the rigour in myself can I free myself." By juxtaposing panels of differing lengths, Scully breaks the rectangular limitations of tradition and provides a rich array of possibilities. Matisse pointed out "Plastic art will inspire the most direct emotion possible by the simplest means." This I find partially evident in Scully's works. Matisse organises his colour by composing depictions. Scully creates images by dealing directly with stripes themselves.

The quotation below from Scully seems to solidify my own beliefs in painting, it also in many ways throws an optimistic light on painting in the eighties. Joseph Mashek thanks the importance of Minimal art which put sculpture in a position of dominance in the later 1960s and earlier 1970s, for the fact that the new painting of the 1970s seemed worse than threatened. Even artists and critics who had once loved painting would do the duty to starve it out. "At best, a guilty pleasure, at worst counter revolutionary, painting came to be tainted in a pseudo-moralistic way, as if those who still insisted on taking it seriously as the flower of culture were either fiddling while Rome burned or collaborating in a restoration of the Bourbons." However, Scully speaks vehemently "I think that painters must turn to painting because they are dumb-struck by the tragedy and splendour of life - and to paint is all that is left as a response. To paint abstractly, is to paint pure feeling and to try and let the spirit free in a totally direct way."

## CONCLUSION

So, in what light should we view the work of Georgiana Houghton and Af Klint in relation to Kandinsky? Primarily, Houghton and Af Klint were 'Spiritualists' by which is meant, they were direct mediums, using seance conditions. Kandinsky however was not a direct medium but was directly influenced by the Theosophical writings of Rudolph Steiner. Where does the difference lie? Dr. de Purucker in his book 'Studies in Occult Philosophy' includes his elucidation of the writings of various Theosophists such as Blavatsky, and the Theosophical attitude towards 'Spiritism'. He asserts that there are mediums who are "of a psychical constitution which is more or less unbalanced, not in equilibrium like the average man is" - "consequently they can do things or produce things which are unusual" - "but to say that these unusual things are the workings of spirits from the other side has never been proved". The rationalist will fully agree with de Purucker, and it is a healthy scepticism. Since the first manifestations at Hydeville, New York in 1848, how many natural truths, religious truths, scientific discoveries or offerings towards religious, philosophical or scientific values have spiritists revealed? - not one. Dr. de Purucker tries to explain in Theosophical terms what happens in the seance room. The astral world to which he will refer is the world immediately beyond the physical world, - "When the soul leaves the astral world, it leaves behind these astral corpses - it is these astral corpses which are attracted to seance rooms." "The spirit goes to its parent-star directly." He emphasises that sages of the past warned against these practices which Theosophists call necromancy or prophesying by means of the dead. Of course what proof have we of this either except of course the



fact that sages from the beginning of time have been telling us this and that there is in it the basic foundation of every doctrinal teaching. Each teaching interprets differently but the same philosophy is at the base. Dr. de Purucker describes Theosophy as "God-Wisdom", Buddhism its daughter, Christianity its daughter, Brahmanism its daughter, Taoism and all the religions of India, Persia, China, Egypt, of ancient Europe and the Americans. Its one source kept in the guardianship of the 'Mahatmans' or greatly evolved men, men similar to the highly evolved root races called the Atlanteans.

Arthus Koestler in Janus claims that the present day theories suggest that telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis and synchronicity are merely different manifestations under different conditions of the same universal principle, i.e. the integrative tendency operating through both causal and acausal agencies. How this is done is beyond our understanding, but at least he claims, we can fit the evidence for paranormal phenomena into the unified design. Validation of a scientific experiment has two basic requirements, its respectability and predictability, however rigorously controlled experiments in E.S.P. and P.K. have been rejected by sceptics because of the lack of these two basic requirements. Afterall, E.S.P. phenomena nearly always involve unconscious processes beyond voluntary control, beyond repeatability, beyond predictability.

Susanne Langer asserts that the worst enemy of artistic judgement is literal judgement - "Not blindness to significant form but blindedness due to the glaring evidence of familiar things, makes us miss artistic, mythical or sacred import. That might account for the fact that all very great artistic conceptions leave something of mysticism with the beholder; and mysticism as a metaphysic would then be the despair of implicit knowledge, as scepticism is the despair of discursive reason." (Langer -

Philosophy in a New Key).

This is further enforced by the nature of mystical experience. It is described in the Eastern tradition as a direct insight which lies outside the realm of the intellect and is obtained by watching rather than thinking, by looking inside oneself, by observation. Quantum theory in physics as described by Professor Davies reveals a basic "oneness with the universe" - it shows that we cannot decompose the world into independently smallest existing units. As we penetrate into matter, nature does not show us only isolated basic building blocks but rather appears as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of the whole. These relations always involve the observer in some way, an essential way. The human observer constitutes the final link in the chain of observational processes, and the properties of any atomic object can only be understood in terms of the objects' interaction with the observer. This concludes that the classical ideal of an objective description of nature is no longer valid.

Considering the work of Georgiana Houghton and Af Klint, being beyond repeatability and predictability, forces me to take their paintings for what they are visually. These works are undoubtedly 'abstract' and unrepresentational. 'Spiritism' is a very small part of 'Spiritualism' and does not discredit the relevance of its revival in relation to Kandinsky. Emerson and other spiritualistic writers had indeed influenced both Houghton and Af Klint. As Ringbom conclude<sup>d</sup> earlier that "while respectability is certainly an important consideration and a social fact, it should not determine historical research." The ghost photographs also discussed earlier reproduced in Aksakow's 'Amnismus Und Spiritismus' which provided Kandinsky with a starting point for his first attempt to render



the spiritual in art clarifies that the various attempts to clear the modern abstractionists of the suspicion of having drawn on occult sources appear a waste of time. Those historians who try to assert the purity of abstraction by "exorcising" the "contamination" of the occult, are just thinking away unwelcome facts, as proved by Aby Warburg. So why have people like Houghton and Af Klint been neglected by the pen of the historian? As mentioned earlier, the "lack of respectability" is one of the two reasons as generally intellectuals tend to associate mysticism and occultism with fraudulence, sectarianism and religious cranks. "The problem of supersensible claims" - If the artist claims that his or her works are based on mystical experience and that true understanding of his or her works presupposes the acceptance of these claims, then the beholder as well as the historian is placed in an awkward position. Historians are not allowed to assume supernatural inspiration for works of art, for this reason art historians may prefer to avoid the whole issue and so ignore the question of occult inspiration. To re-assess art criticism as in the case of Kandinsky's over-rated pedestal is to accept a degree of professional risk. In relation to scientific re-assessment Baldin, Harrison and Ramsden conclude that theories can be so framed as to enable considerations of scientists' anxieties about careerism and the banknote, to be set aside in evaluation of their informative content and their truth. It remains to be demonstrated how the same comment could be defended in respect of art historical enquiry, let alone art criticism. Symbolism was the mystical wing of the Post-Impressionists and contained some of the seeds of abstraction, so too it was also catalysed by formal suggestions drawn from Fauvism as well as from Cubism. However, the revival of Spiritualism most definitely accelerated premature forms of abstraction as seen in the works of Georgiana Houghton and Af Klint and has evidently been the strategic guideline of inspiration in the development of Kandinsky's work. The tendency to value the acceptance of 'mystery' as a humanising

characteristic in the professions of art and art history encourages idleness at best and evasiveness at worst in the face of that which may indeed be open to rational enquiry. The reluctance of art historians to admit to Kandinsky's very direct influences by the Spiritualist writings is a prime example of these accepted mysteries. So as a result the 'idlers' class his inspiration as a natural process of self-development while the rational inquisitionaries see his abstraction as a logical formal result of practice - linear development. Both avoid to reason with Spiritualism or to accept its invaluable affects - in fear of the professional risk.





## GLOSSARY

(from *The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985* - Alleville Press 1986, Tuchman, Freeman and Blotcamp).

Given that words can be defined differently within a changing mode of thinking or philosophy and have changed considerably from their original contexts, the explanations should not be seen as definitive.

### ABSTRACTION

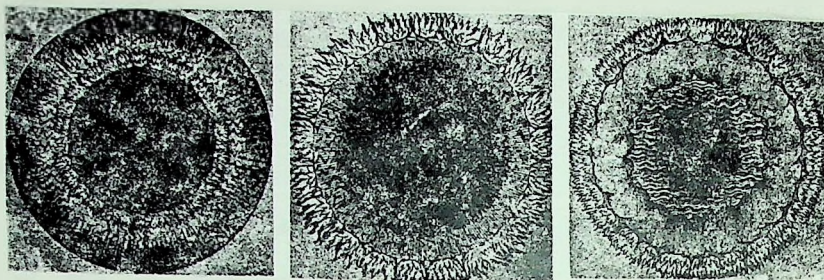
Is according to the compact edition of the Oxford Dictionary s.v. 'abstract' to 'withdraw', to disengage from to separate in mental conception, to consider apart from the material embodiment. These meanings can be documented as far back as the 16th century. Descriptions of the process of abstraction have ranged throughout the 20th century from 'secret removal' to the creation of something visionary. The association of abstraction in art with meaninglessness is derived in large measure from Wilhelm Warringer's 'Abstraction and Empathy', a contribution to the psychology of style (1908) in contrast to today's assertions by C. Greenberg. Warringer equated abstract with the angular and the antinaturalistic. Piet Mondrian in 1912 - 1914 elaborated 'One passes through a world of forms ascending from reality to abstraction. In this manner one approaches the spirit, or purity itself' (quoted in R. P. Walsh and J. M. Hoosten "Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912 - 1914 - Amsterdam, Muelonhoff 1969). Wassily Kandinsky similarly distinguished the abstract as a style of painting with few references to representational motifs, from the gegenstandlos literally without 'object' or 'objectless'. Art criticism from the 1940s through the 1970s has encouraged the association of abstraction with non-representation. There is presently a re-echo of Warringer's thoughts - 'the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great

inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world'.

## ANTHROPOSOLOGY

During the 16th and 17th centuries it was a term constructed from Greek roots meaning 'human wisdom'. It was the name adopted by Rudolph Steiner (1861 - 1925) for his system of occult teachings which he also called Geisteswissenschaft (spiritual science). Anthroposophy is both a body of teachings and an epistemology for attaining occult knowledge. It is meant to stand in pointed contrast to Theosophy. Steiner's independent teachings were at odds with the Theosophists' promotion of earthly masters (martryas) as vehicles for spiritual experience and in preference promoted the power of human cognition for individual spiritual experiences. He formed his own Anthroposophical Society in 1913 which carried out his Goethean teachings, esoteric Christianity, Rosicrucionism and some teachings of the Theosophists on karma and reincarnation, the stages of cosmic evolution and his own spiritual investigations. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had developed 'objective idealism' and from this Steiner argued that at a certain level, thinking becomes 'sense free' or intellectual, perception of a realm of pure concepts that have content of their own (intellektuelle Anschauung). He maintained the realm of physical reality is adequately comprehended by the physical sciences, the organic realm by the biological sciences, the cultural realm by the human sciences and the spiritual realm by the spiritual science 'Anthroposophy'. He described it as an 'experiential metaphysics'. He forcefully condemned 'Spiritualism's' use of trance states instead of clear consciousness and its quasi-materialistic pandering for the thirst for marvels and wonders. He insisted that the occult science 'has no secret to conceal from anyone who is prepared to seek for occult knowledge by the appropriate methods' (An outline translation - Rudolph Steiner - 'Occult Science' George and M. Adams 1910 London: Rudolph Steiner, Press 1963 2.6.N).





58.

COSMIC IMAGERY IS SUGGESTIVE OF THE MYSTICAL CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSE AS SINGLE LIVING SUBSTANCE - FROM ROBERT FLUDD - UTRUISQUE COSMI - (OPPENHEIM 1617) P. 58 PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH LIBRARY, MANLY - P. HALL COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES).



59.

CHAKRAS - CENTRES DISCUSSED IN TANTRIC YOGA TEXTS, CONCEPT FOUND IN MOHAMEDAN SUFISM, THEOSOPHIA PRACTICA OF JOHN GEORG GICHTEL, A PUPIL OF JAKOB BOHME. CHAKRAS ALSO APPEAR IN THE SCRIPTURES OF AMERICAN ZUNI INDIANS.

## ALCHEMY

Alchemy is connected with hermeticism and the spiritual. It is the act of transmutation. The intent may be to transmute base elements into precious metals or spiritually speaking transform the individual into spiritual gold, to achieve immortality. Alchemy is known in Chinese, Indian, Hellenistic, Arabic and Western forms. Alchemy reached its zenith in Europe during the Renaissance together with Hermeticism, both studied by Robert Newton and Robert Boyle. Paracelsus and his followers during the 16th century emphasised the medical and pharmaceutical applications of alchemy and devised a wide ranging chemical philosophy of nature. Robert Fludd sought the linkage between humanity and divinity through nature by describing at considerable length the intricate relationship between the microcosm (the human being as a miniature universe) and the macrocosm (the universe conceived as a greater being). Greek philosophical assumptions and redemptive processes were the roots of alchemical operations. The philosopher's stone was the produce of the perfect balancing of opposites sulphur and mercury, male and female, symbolised by the androgyne, the red lion, the white eagle and other images. Carl Gustav Jung, the psychologist, interpreted the 'alchemical' operation as a projection of the individuation process leading to the development of an integrated personality.

## CABALA

The cabala seeks to explain the nature of reality, the levels of being, the origin of evil, and ways of attaining knowledge of God. 'Sefirot' are the planes of God's power, and cabalistic texts depict the ten Sefirot arranged in a tree of life pattern, linked by twenty two paths corresponding to the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Cabalistic study, prayer and meditation is essentially a form of mysticism, entailing the forms of



[illegible]

DIAGRAM FROM JAKOB BOHME 'FORTY QUESTIONS OF THE SOUL'

## 82

dancing are preparations for mystical experience. In Western tradition a general tendency toward mysticism is noticeable in the 1st and 2nd centuries, hints of mysticism are detailed in the New Testament, in the Jewish Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. - A.D. 50), the Christian Origen (c. 183 A.D. - 253 A.D.), and certain hermetic and Gnostic texts. Plotinus - Porphyry in the 3rd century are indisputable neo-platonistic mystics. Catholic mysticism flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries, in Germany and England. The 17th century was perhaps as rich in mysticism as the 14th; the Lutheran Bohme in Germany, George Fox and the Quakers in England, the French Quietists, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, various spiritual alchemists, Cambridge Platonists, metaphysical poets of England especially Thomas Traherne. Mysticism was quite apparent in the poetry of English Romanticism and the philosophy of German idealism in the early 19th century. Of the 20th century the best known mystics have been Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton.



61.

A RENAISSANCE DEPICTION OF THE OTHERWORDLY VISION ASSOCIATED WITH THE  
BREAKTHROUGH IN PLANE.



## NEOPLATONISM

'Neoplatonism' is essentially a mystical version of the philosophy of Plato that originated in the 3rd century, six centuries after his death with Plotinus, who claimed simply to be restoring Plato's own doctrine. In general, Neoplatonism emphasises the aesthetic, cosmological and psychological aspects of Plato's thought at the expense of the political and ethical. For Plotinus, reality is a dynamic hierarchy of levels of being. Mystical experience required one not to delve into secret knowledge (gnosis) but to awaken from obsession with material needs and bodily desires, to turn inward and rediscover the inner self through rigorous, intellectual and moral preparation. Plotinus bequeathed to later Neoplatonists several major concepts; the hierarchical nature of reality, the material world as an organic whole animated by a world soul, and the soul's ability to ascend the levels of reality back to the One. During the Renaissance, Neoplatonism provided, in conjunction with Hermeticism and the Cabala, a cosmological framework for magic and astrology that made them intellectually respected, its theories are central to Western Occultism, especially to Theosophy.

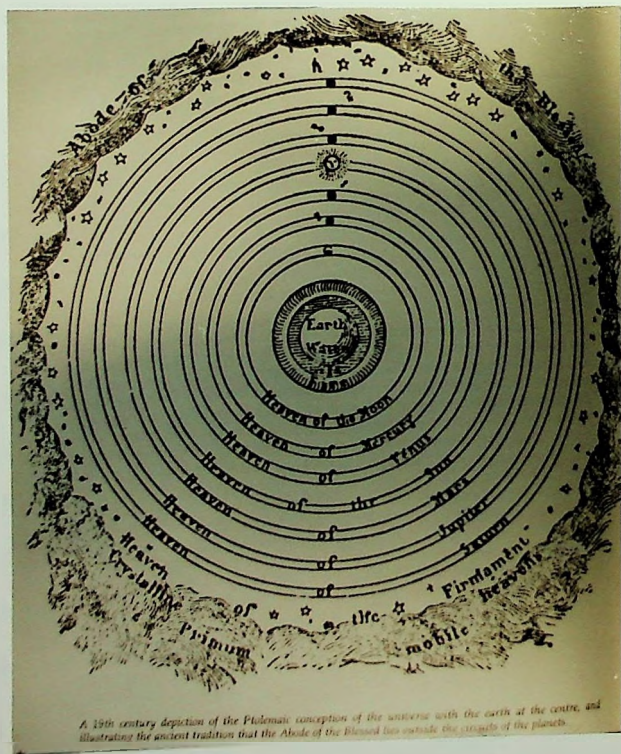
## OCCULT

Comes from Latin 'occultus' meaning 'hidden'. According to Galbreath it can be viewed as an attitude toward the world that emphasises the hidden, or secret aspects of reality. Omens, prophetic dreams, apparitions, miracles are matters which pertain to the occult, and became common during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Disciplines based on the deliberate cultivation of natural or acquired psychic abilities such as magic, alchemy, prediction, divination, the tarot, phrenology, etc. comes under 'Occultism'. Occult religions include the worship of deities, pagan as in Satanism, neo-paganism and spiritualism. Metaphysical occultism are systems of teachings and practices that lead the individual, by means of

occult modes of cognition, to personal empirical knowledge of principles and metaphysical truths as in Gnosticism and Rosicrucianism.

## SPIRITUALISM

Is based on two fundamental propositions, first that the human personality survives bodily death in some form, secondly that it is possible to communicate with the surviving personality or spirit, usually through a human medium. Its roots are found in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg



A 19th century depiction of the Ptolemaic conception of the universe with the earth at the centre, and illustrating the ancient tradition that the Abode of the Blessed lies outside the sphere of the planets.

62.



63.

This formless world, witnessed by Hindu, Buddhist and Christian seers, became the principal subject of two lavishly illustrated books published after the turn of the century - Leadbeater's 'Man Visible and Invisible' and Besant's and Leadbeater's 'Thought Forms'. Both were issued in German translations in 1903 - Kandinsky owned a copy of the latter. Steiner recommended both for Kandinsky's reading.



and Franz Anton Mesmer. In 1787 - 1788 a Swedenborgian group in Stockholm claimed success by making use of persons in a state of mesmeric trance as the medium for communication. Mesmer discovered a magnetic fluid in the body. He induced at time a sonambulist or hypnotic trance in a patient from this extra sensory perception and alleged communication with spirits occurred. After the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, spirit communication resumed in Germany, France and America. A spirit communication in Hydesville 1848 New York initiated an epidemic of spirit rapping in the States. In response to fraudulent exposures organisations such as the London Spiritual Alliance 1884, the Spiritualists' National Union (Great Britain, 1890) and the National Spiritualists' Association of Churches (U.S.A. 1893) were established, the latter to train and certify honest mediums. Prominent researchers were F. W. H. Myers, William James, H. Sidgwick and Sir D. Lodge, who failed to arrive at a consensus concerning the reality of survival after bodily death. They did assert that although the medium through whom the phenomena are channeled from the other world may be in a trance or employ clairvoyance, the phenomena themselves are perceptible to anyone in an ordinary state of consciousness. Swedenburg's idea of the human body corresponding to the exteriors and the natural world, the human mind to interiors and the spiritual world abbreviate his general philosophy. His visionary writings are cited as an example of Theosophy, commanding widespread attention in the late 19th century. His ideas had considerable impact on later Spiritualism, New Thought, and Christian Science, and influences such writers as William Blake, Honore de Balzac and Emerson.

## THEOSOPHY

A 17th century word coined from Greek roots meaning God wisdom or divine wisdom denotes metaphysical teachings and systems derived from personal

experiences and esoteric tradition, which are based on knowledge of nature, the human condition and upon knowledge of the divine nature of spiritual powers. Its primary aim is to enhance the awareness of the relationship between nature and spirit. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 in New York by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831 - 1891), Colonel H. Steel, Olcott (1832 - 1907) and others, becoming the most influential organisation for the public promotion of the Occult teachings in modern times. Galbreath summarises the society's early objectives, 'to combat materialism in science, dogmatism in religion, to investigate scientifically the laws of the universe including the spiritual realms and their inhabitants, to develop the latent powers of man, to make known the esoteric teachings of the oriental religions and to promote the brotherhood of humanity.'

The classical formulation of the society's teachings is Blavatsky's 'The Secret Doctrine' (1888). The world view presented by her is a mixture of Western occult traditions Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, the Cabala and other forms; 19th century American Spiritualism and oriental religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, all placed within an evolutionary framework that was derived from both scientific evolution and traditional Indian concepts of cosmic cycles.



64.

MADAM BLAVATSKY - PHOTOGRAPHED IN LONDON, JANUARY 1889 FROM 'WHEN DAYLIGHT COMES' BY HOWARD MURPHET.



The 'Secret Doctrine' recounts the evolution of the cosmos and humanity. It is presented in a form of a commentary on an ancient and otherwise unknown text called the 'stanzas of Dzyan'. The cosmos is depicted as being in a dynamic process of emanation and return through seven stages, three of descent from God into increasing materialisation, a middle stage of crystallisation, and three stages of ascent into spiritualisation and



65.

The interest in 'Esoteric Buddhism' led to an invitation being extended to a protege of Madam Blavatsky's, Mohme Chatterje to visit Dublin and expound the book's message in greater detail. This was in 1885 and Yeates had already read 'Isis Unveiled' by Madame Blavatsky.

reabsorption into God. Individual plants move successfully through seven stages of evolution. The human species is evolving through seven stages called root-races. The earliest root-races were primarily spiritual locked physical bodies, and functioned by means of mental powers, subsequent root-races, the Lemurians and Altanteans, acquired bodies and physical powers, the present root-race, the fifth is on the path toward the development of spiritual powers which will be fully and finally realised by the final two root-races. The human being is a complex of seven bodies, the physical body, etheral, astral (emotional), mental body, each of which are subject to physical and psychological laws. (The higher three called the Ego, are the causal (intelligence body), the spiritual soul (vehicle of the

universal spirit) and the spirit. These latter three constitute the immortal element, subject to karma, or re-incarnation. Many lifetimes are required to complete spiritual development. Those highly evolved individuals are known as Mahatmas (masters), leaders, mystics or occultists in history. They constitute the universal and hidden core of the world's great religions. The second generation of theosophical leaders, Annie Besant (1847 - 1933) and Charles W. Leadbeater (1847 - 1934) extended the society's activities into the investigation of 'Thought Forms', occult chemistry, past lives and involvement in Indian national politics, and the promotion of the young Hindu boy Krishnamurti as the human vehicle in whom 'Maitreya', 'Buddha', would be manifested. With his repudiation and the deaths of Besant and Leadbeater a few years later, the society declined in influence. The society is historically important for popularising ideas of re-incarnation, Buddhism, Hinduism, encouraging the comparative study of religion, and for persuading many that the essential teachings of the great religions are one. 'Thought Forms' are caused by each kind of thought or emotion causing corresponding vibrations in the substances of the mental and astral bodies accompanied by displays of colour. These free-floating forms charged with the energy of the mind creating them, are the thought forms. Zen Buddhism embraces the essence of enlightenment which is to experience the inner mind as the universal Buddha-mind, through good works and esoteric practices, without reliance on concepts of words, directly. Zen exerted little exposure until the 1960s. Zen featured strongly in the works of D. T. Suzuki, J. D. Salinger, the psychology of Erich Fromm and the writings of the Trappist, J. Merton.

## THEURGY

According to Oxford English Dictionary, theurgy was a system of magic practised by Egyptian Platonists to procure communication with beneficent spirits. In later times it is known as white magic. Adjective Theurgic

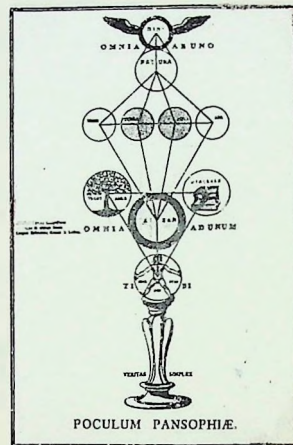


pertains to theurgy. Theurgist - one who practices or believes in Theurgy, e.g. a magician.



66.

The Tree of the Soul from Jakob Bohme. (The Works of Jakob Bohme vol. 2 London: M. Richardson 1764). Philosophical Research Library, Manly - P. Hall Collection, Los Angeles.



67.

The universe is conceived as being comprised of paired opposites (male - female, light - dark) in dialectical opposition.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Abstract Art and the Re-Discovery of the Spiritual edited by Andreas C. Papadakis, London - Art and Design - New York- distributed in the U.S.A. by St. Martin's Press, 1987.
2. Capra, Fruethjof The Tao of Physics published by Fontana, 1983.
3. Davies, Paul Professor The Cosmic Blueprint published and edited by Heineman, November 1987.
4. Existentialism and Human Emotion - New York - Philosophical Library translated by Bernard Frechtman and Hazel Barnes, 1957.
5. Fix, W. H. R. Star Maps - Maps of the unconscious and research in Egyptology - published in New York, 1987 - New York University Press.
6. Gottlieb, Carla Beyond Modern Art 1st Edition - New York Dutton c. 1976.
7. Herity, Michael Irish Passage Graves - Neolithic tomb builders in Ireland and Butoin 2,500 B. C. published 1974 - Irish University Press - Dublin, Chapter on p. 117 - 149 on Burials, Burial, Ritual and Symbolism.
8. Hunter, Sam - Catalogue of Sean Scully's Paintings 1971 - 1981 published 1981 - Warwick Arts' Trust London p. 4 - 15, 'Stripes and Strokes' on Scully's work.
9. Hunter, Sam - Catalogue on Sean Scully 'Absolute Paintings' p. 32 - 35
10. Hemming Instead of God - Towards a contemporary world view for men and women, published 1985.
11. Johnston, Roy on Sean Scully from Circa Art Journal no. 3 March/April 1982 p. 21 - 22, Arts Council Gallery Belfast Show 3 February - 27 February 1982.
12. Jung, C. J. Modern Man-in Search of a Soul translated by S. Dell and Carey F. Baynes - New York Harcourt, Brace and Ward, 1933.
13. Kandinsky, Wassily On the Spiritual in Art (1912) and Renaissance in Kandinsky - Complete Writings on Art edited by Kenneth C. Lindsay and P. Vergo (Boston) G. K. Hall, 1982.
14. Kramer, Hilton The Revenge of the Philistines Art and Culture 1972 - 1984, London, Secker and Warburg, 1986.
15. Langer, K. Susanne Philosophy in a New Key - A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art, 3rd Edition, Cambridge Mass - Harvard University Press, 1979.
16. Mashek, Joseph - Catalogue article Stripes and Strokes on Sean Scully's paintings, 1982.
17. Modern Painters - A quarterly Journal of the Fine Arts, Vol. 1, No. 2, summer 1988, published by Fine Art Journals Ltd., Chiswick, London, W.4. 4.PH, Article entitled 'British Abstract Paintings of the 1860s'



- The Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton by Tom Gibbons.

18. Pollock and After edited by Francis Frascina - Chapter 11 - Art History, Art Criticism and Explanation, p. 191 - 217.
19. Purucker de G. Studies in Occult Philosophy edited by Theosophical University press, Pasadena, California, renewed 1973.
20. Regier, Kathleen J., 1st Edition The Spiritual Image in Modern Art, Theosophical Publishing House, 1987, Quest Book.
21. Stadler, Ingrid Contemporary Art and its Philosophical Problems, Buffalo, New York, Prometheus Books, 1987 - Papers submitted for a seminar held at Wellesley College in spring, 1985.
22. Smith, W. S. The London Heretics, 1870 - 1914, London Theosophical University press.
23. Tuchman, M. The Spiritual in Art - Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985, L.A. County Museum of Art org. by M. Tuchman with Judi Freeman in collaboration with Carla Blotcamp, new York, 1986 - Articles by above with Bool, Bowlt, Douglas, Eldrege, Gallbreath, L. D. Henderson, R. C. Washon Long, S. Ringbom, W. Jackson Rushing, H. Watts and R. P. Welsh.