Hilma af Klint
Paintings for the Future

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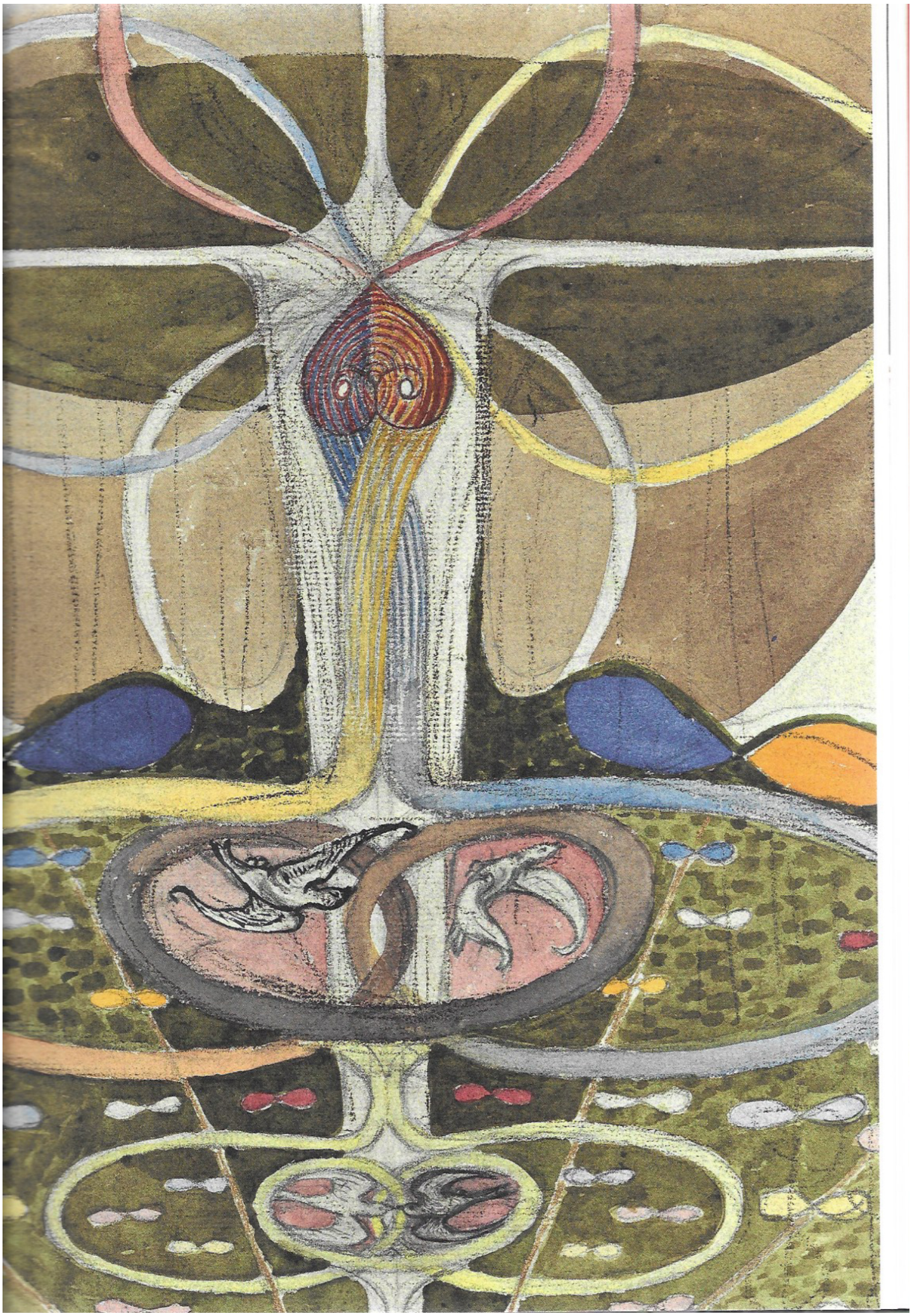

Art for Another Future: Learning from Hilma af Klint

A conversation among artists, curators, and art historians moderated by **Helen Molesworth** with **Christine Burgin**, **Leah Dickerman**, **Lisa Florman**, **Josiah McElheny**, **R. H. Quaytman**, and **Amy Sillman**

Transcribed from a meeting convened in Brooklyn, New York, in fall 2017 and edited for publication

HELEN MOLESWORTH There are a few areas I'm hoping our conversation will address. The first is, what is it about Hilma af Klint's work that seems so necessary, enlivening, and invigorating to artists and curators in the twenty-first century? The second is, how has af Klint's refusal to show her work until twenty years after she died, along with the prohibition against selling the work, affected our ability to narrativize her historically? And finally, does her oeuvre offer new ways of thinking about abstraction? Is it, for instance, a third term between geometry and biomorphism? How might we think about her relationship to language? And what do we make of her intense involvement with the realm of the spiritual, that which is not seen but is known?

R. H. QUAYTMAN I feel that her exclusion from the marketplace has really, deeply affected the reception of the work. It's amazing that the Guggenheim is bringing the work here. We've seen that when her work is shown it is very popular. The enthusiasm of the public is clear in packed galleries.

AMY SILLMAN Could you say what, exactly, the nonmarket terms are?

MOLESWORTH As I understand it, in her writings she made it very clear that she did not want the work to be shown until twenty years after her death. She felt she was painting for a future and that her contemporaries were not capable of understanding her

Detail of *Tree of Knowledge, No. 1*, 1913, from *The W Series* (p. 134)

work. Hilma and her compatriots, "The Five," always saw the large group of the first spiritual paintings as a coherent body of work, paintings for a theoretical "temple." And hence, they've long been under the stewardship of the family.

LISA FLORMAN So she thought of the spiritual paintings as one work?

JOSIAH MCELHENY I can pass on some details about that question, from what I've learned from Iris Müller-Westermann, the curator of af Klint's retrospective at the Moderna Museet—she is clearly the person most responsible for bringing af Klint's work into public view today.

Excluding the notebooks, Hilma af Klint made over a thousand works—I don't think that includes the collaborative works she did as part of The Five but I am not sure. That also doesn't include the conventional landscape paintings she made to make money, and I don't believe that that number accounts for all of the works she did as a biological illustrator. There were only a few of those in the retrospective and they are unusually beautiful for scientific works: highly animated compositions.

At the center of all this, there are 193 works that were made between 1906 and 1915, which were intended to be inviolately held together, *The Paintings for the Temple*. In the mid-1960s her nephew Erik—a naval military man who loved his aunt—took this work, which he had saved from her studio before it was torn down, just after she died, and which had been sitting in crates in his unheated attic—showed the work to a variety of museums in Sweden and they were totally uninterested. First of all, they were made by a woman…

MOLESWORTH May I interrupt you for a second? From a museum professional's standpoint, we are talking about hundreds of works. When someone comes to you and says, "Will you please take my hundred pieces of art by someone you have never heard of… Well?…" [*laughter*]

SILLMAN Did she photograph the work?

MCELHENY Yes. As I understand it, after spending almost her entire life working and living exclusively with women, toward the very end of her life she had a male secretary, Olof Sundström; together they annotated and numbered the notebooks, and in 1941 and 1942 they even created a typewritten transcription of her handwritten 1917 analysis of the key period of her art making. It's over 2,000 pages typed! But this was just a part of a decadelong effort she made to reassess her own work. One of the most beautiful results takes the form of something like a codex: the blue notebooks, which contain black-and-white photos of the paintings, augmented side by side with watercolor copies she made, so that people could understand the color symbology and the full meaning of the work without seeing the actual paintings.

SILLMAN So, she doesn't want the work to be broken up, and there are other stipulations, but by photographing it, she indicates that she wants the pictures to be understood, to be decoded. Did she let her works be reproduced so people could study them?

QUAYTMAN I think she made choices. She was savvy enough about the art system, the apparatus of exhibitions, that she chose certain work to show in certain places. She read journals with reproductions, and she chose a range of possibilities in how to participate in that. I think she was pretty insistent that she didn't want these works to be seen in an arbitrary way.

FLORMAN Kandinsky has some of the same anxieties. He theorized abstract painting long before he produced it, and the worry he expressed in *On the Spiritual in Art* is that there was no audience yet for the work. It seems to me that that's part of what's going on with Hilma. She anticipates that one day there will be an audience, but she's not willing to subject the work prematurely to an uncomprehending public. Ultimately, she desires comprehension—that's what I think the blue notebooks are about. I think it's less about secrecy than preparing the conditions for proper reception.

CHRISTINE BURGIN I think she really felt that she'd been given a special knowledge of the universe. The blue notebooks were one way of thinking it through. She learned through looking at her own work. She wrote a dictionary to her own work. It's not about art history, it's about other forms of knowledge, and she spent the rest of her life trying to understand what she'd been given. This interest in accessing the unconscious, which she accomplished through her studies as a medium, was in the air at the time. William James, for instance, was also writing about unseen forces.

LEAH DICKERMAN That's always been my instinct too. For instance, when she exhibits in 1914 in an exhibition that Kandinsky was in, she chooses another type of work altogether, not the spiritualist abstractions she's become most well-known for and that we are discussing now. She chose not to frame that second category of painting as artwork but rather as something else. And then the question is, "Okay. Well, what is that something else that she understands it to be, and how is that supposed to function?"

QUAYTMAN But I think we have to be so careful with this, because she was an artist, and she did know about modernism. She saw work by Munch and Kandinsky. She made paintings and drawings.

SILLMAN When I went to Stockholm to see her exhibition at the Moderna Museet, I was carrying the catalogue and I ran into an important teacher from the Royal Academy and he asked me, "Do you like that?" and I said, "Yeah, I love it," and he said, "Well, she's not an artist. She's some sort of mystic." I am interested in the issue of secrecy/privacy/withdrawal as a tactic for her to prepare for the reception of the work. It's important to know that she didn't want the work to fall on deaf ears or be cheapened. For instance, we know that she was selling landscape paintings, so she knew what sales were.

DICKERMAN She made ambitious, Symbolist art. And it's strange not to give her some volition in terms of framing her work within a certain apparatus. I'm not saying she's not an artist; of course she is. But she doesn't seem, to me, to be framing her work—these expressions of occult knowledge—through the public apparatus of art making.

In fact, with these images she's choosing not to, even as she's putting other images out into that sphere.

MOLESWORTH Politically, I think it's important to insist upon her identity as an artist because women artists have been historically disallowed that identity. On the other hand, if one of the things that might be at stake in her practice is an alternative way of working, the idea that some of what she made she framed as art, such as the selling of landscape pictures, and some of what she made she did not frame that way, then as vulnerable as it may be, from an institutional standpoint, it seems like we could see this as an opening. One can be an artist and make something that looks and behaves a lot like a painting but it might also be functioning as something else as well.

FLORMAN It's interesting to me that she's taking a kind of image that exists, that predates her, even, in science or in medieval manuscripts, images that exist largely through print culture, and then she turns them into wild, huge paintings.

MOLESWORTH It's pretty clear she makes these on the floor. Is anyone else, at that time, that we know of, making things on the floor in that way? Because it seems to me, if you're a landscape painter in a Swedish academy…

QUAYTMAN You've got it on an easel.

MOLESWORTH Right, and then you make something that's enormous, planar, and diagrammatic on the floor. What does that do to whether or not it's "art"?

QUAYTMAN I think this is the coolest thing. It's like she's using the hyperbolic language of diagram.

BURGIN They also feel like scientific charts. She's using scientific methods of analysis. She's using linguistic methods of analysis.

MCELHENY It's important to remember that she was granted a free studio through the Royal Academy, at the King's Garden no less, which had great windows, for twenty years.

SILLMAN Did she make her private work in that public studio?

MCELHENY Yes. She led a very peripatetic life. She had no winter home in Stockholm except for her parents' home. Later in life, she slept on the couches of her female friends and cousins. Her family, of course, owned a summer home on an island—basically, every bourgeois Swede has a summer home. I was told that the *Ten Largest* paintings were made at her summer home, but there are so many myths and mistakes regarding Hilma: it seems that simply through reading her notes carefully, we now know that they were painted at her studio in Stockholm. In any case, they were made during a two-month period with no preparation, with one female assistant who was not part of the group of five women who had been meeting for over a decade making automatic drawings. Later she built a studio on another island, on borrowed land—that's where the organizing and annotation of her work late in life happened.

MOLESWORTH Did she receive the academic accolades and the studio because of the landscape paintings?

MCELHENY Yes—for her drafting skills in general. This is the studio where she has her horrible studio visit with Rudolf Steiner. He sees the paintings about evolution in her studio, points to a really strange painting with seven flowerlike petals, and says in this patronizing way about that painting, "This is your self-portrait."

FLORMAN He had a great deal of skepticism about her mediumistic practice, right?

QUAYTMAN The way I've had it explained to me is that he was very skeptical about her serving as a medium for these spirits and that he basically directed her more in the direction of his own interests, essentially toward a kind of mysticism based in medieval Christianity, esoteric Christianity, the Rosicrucians, and that kind of thing. Soon after his visit she took a long break, and when she returned to the paintings, we see a sharp change in her work.

SILLMAN The worst studio visit of all time! But what was his beef? I don't understand the difference between his spirituality and hers.

QUAYTMAN I think he was shocked, frankly.

MCELHENY And jealous...

MOLESWORTH Was it jealousy or was he not a particularly visually literate person?

FLORMAN Probably some of both. My sense is that he was simply trying to bring her project in line with his own spiritual/metaphysical views. I'd also like to insist that many artists' projects at that time were explicitly metaphysical—Kandinsky, Mondrian. Their metaphysics are different, but for them it's not just about making paintings for the market, they're deeply invested in the kind of statement about the world at large that their paintings are making.

DICKERMAN I think there is a big distinction between someone like Kandinsky, who in *On the Spiritual in Art* was developing a sustained theory of representation, and af Klint's version of the spiritual. What I understand about af Klint's work is that her message was received directly from a spirit and she was saying, "I didn't even fully understand it myself." That is an almost antirepresentational stance. It's a manifestation of something else.

SILLMAN Is this part of the different model you mentioned, Helen? I feel like if you're dealing with sexism, which clearly would have been the case in the early 1900s, you're always being minimized and marginalized. I get the feeling that Hilma turned that into a productive form of privacy, and her mysticism is a flip on modernism: she says, "I received this," rather than, "I invented this."

DICKERMAN I want to be careful about being too simplistic in aligning public and male, and private and female, because the public conversation about abstraction had many

female key players, including Elisabeth Epstein and Sonia Delaunay, and the Russian women—Natalia Goncharova and Liubov Popova. The public conversation was a mixed conversation.

BURGIN My work on the notebooks leads me to believe that this is not a person who feels like she's not in charge or is victimized in any way. The notebooks suggest that she is very much in charge of what she is doing and that she is trying to access something that may not be rational or scientific or accessible in any other way. For instance, she made an inventory of all of her work. She very carefully photographed and annotated it, and then she tries to explain to Steiner how she's seen all this. She transcribes her notebook for him. She makes a dictionary to define how words and colors are used in the work. To me, it feels as if she's really trying to understand something profound and not like she's choosing a private route because she doesn't have the power to be public.

MOLESWORTH It seems like she is making pictures of how things are interrelated. She is trying to make a picture that draws on disparate fields of knowledge in a synthetic manner. She is producing a picture that is both image and diagram. Her pictures are like a set of instructions that then need other instructions. And that, to me, feels like a vulnerable place to be, because you are opting out of an enlightenment model of discrete and bounded areas of expertise to say, "Actually, really, this is all interconnected." In essence, she's offering a Gaia-like theory of radical holistic interconnectivity.

BURGIN This is what strikes me as being so wildly creative. She's jumping disciplinary boundaries and creating an image that says, "This is our portal to knowledge." And she does this by creating a synthetic image, with the help of the spirits perhaps whispering in her ear, and she brings this image into the field of painting and it gets so big and bold and the palette is so wild, and that medium shift, from drawing to painting, along with the disciplinary shift still seems so startling.

MOLESWORTH If you stand up and say, "I really believe that everything we all do is completely implicated in everything everyone else is doing," that's a radical concept that disallows a certain kind of individual subjectivity.

MCELHENY When I first saw the *Ten Largest* paintings, my first question was, how could any one person make these? They were made in just over sixty days, with no preparatory plan or design of any kind. If I were that creative for sixty days straight, I would—I don't know that I would survive it. [*laughter*]

I think it's really important for us to remember that she spent years and years with four other women, drawing and talking and thinking together. It's really clear to me that these works are the result of a community effort that she coalesced and synthesized.

BURGIN I want to get back to Steiner for a minute. Steiner is somebody who went out in the world and said, "This is my theory. This is *the* theory." Whereas Hilma's asking questions. She's not only presenting the answer.

QUAYTMAN That's my instinct too. It's as if the paintings bear traces of scientific method. She's spent time doing empirical scientific studies and botanical studies.

MCELHENY And *The Atom Series* appears exactly when questions about atoms and the deep, invisible structure of the world are being discussed in popular culture. She's listening to what's happening around her.

FLORMAN Also, there's all the navigation in her family—the family first became known for naval architecture, and then there were several generations of naval officers—including her nephew who saved her work. I always thought her work was kind of about navigation.

MOLESWORTH Can I ask an unhip question, then? We know that she was an extremely talented botanical draftsperson, a naturalist, and that her father was a mathematician. We assume she is comfortable in the realm of tools, charts, and diagrams, and further we assume that she believes in the rational world. We know she was trained in a way that allowed her to perform the act of translating the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional plane. Is it possible that her pictures are images of how the world appeared to her? Is this what she saw during that two-month painting session? My question is this: If this is her picture of the world, then what is its relationship to abstraction? Is this her mildly hallucinogenic realization about the difference between what the world looks like and how it is in its actuality?

DICKERMAN The work has all of the ambitions of the diagram—an image that can contain, map, and create vectors of forces that somehow chart a topography. It seems to me she has taken the diagrammatic project to huge extremes.

MCELHENY The question is not how the world looks, it's how the world is.

SILLMAN That reminds me of what Howard Hodgkin once said. He said he was a representational painter, but not of appearances—of emotional situations.

QUAYTMAN I don't know about this. I don't know the answer to this, but does she talk about a meditative or trancelike state or some kind of psychic state that accompanies her working?

FLORMAN That's what The Five were practicing over this ten-year period.

BURGIN The drawings done by The Five—some are by her, some are by other people—are made during a period when they're studying how to do this. They're very careful; they're afraid that if you go too far, you won't be able to come back...

MOLESWORTH Come back from...

SILLMAN From the crazy state?

MOLESWORTH From the crazy state? Or come back from an image that is utterly abstract?

BURGIN They're not concerned with making images. The notebooks are really notations as to what happened during the time they spent together.

QUAYTMAN When she is image making, does she talk about an altered state or a psychic break?

MCELHENY I don't think it's like that at all. It was really a communitarian practice. The five of them agreed to meet regularly, sometimes once a week, sometimes once a month. They made a room with an altar, and there was a tea table in a corner, with a couch on two sides and a chair on the other, if I remember correctly. And I assume that then the five of them sat around it; sometimes they drew. As I understand their spiritual practice, there was safety in numbers. You're there together, and if the higher powers speak through you, you had other people around you to ground you. Then, in 1904 or 1905, I think it was often on a Friday, this thing happens and the spirits say something like, "In a year or so, one of you will make a great work." Basically, the question becomes, "Who is that going be?" And, ultimately, as I understand it, when Hilma is asked directly in 1906, following this nerve-wracking pronouncement, she effectively responds, "Okay, I'll do it." After first making the schematic *Primordial Chaos* works, then in her main art studio she creates these giant paintings, *The Ten Largest*. She has one female assistant—who was not one of The Five—who I assume is helping her glue these gigantic pieces of paper together and mix paint.

BURGIN Do you think the communal thing also has to do with finding a way to free yourself from your own ego?

MCELHENY I would think so.

DICKERMAN I assume, then, that the coming back refers to coming back to yourself. I think the mediumistic part is important here, because she's not purporting to speak for herself. These aren't expressions of herself, but they are diagrams of something.

BURGIN Much of the imagery in *The Paintings for the Temple* combines botanical imagery and words, and the words themselves become images. Do we think she cares about making abstract art?

DICKERMAN I wonder. Is that the reason she didn't exhibit these works, because she thought of them as a different form of knowledge, something other than art knowledge?

BURGIN I mean, art is fine, it's just the abstract thing that bothers me. I'm not sure her goal was to make something abstract.

MOLESWORTH Clearly, *we* think they're abstract. But if they're a diagram about how the world hangs together or is interrelated, maybe she didn't see them as abstract, and then maybe I don't have to see them as abstract.

DICKERMAN What's interesting is that sometime in the beginning of the twentieth century—one can argue about when the day was—the idea of a picture that's not a

picture of a thing is impossible to conceive, but by 1915, there's a language for that new kind of image and many artists know how to deploy that language. And in between those two moments is this really interesting zone when an idea is in formation.

MCELHENY Maybe this is a really naive question, but I've never understood this idea that an abstract picture is a picture of nothing; that's never, ever made any sense to me.

DICKERMAN It's not a picture of nothing. Abstract pictures have meaning and they signify in all different kinds of ways, but the early theorists of abstraction will tell you that the aspiration is not a picture of a thing, of an object. The idea of nonobjectivity in Russian is *bespredmetnost*, literally the quality of being "without object." How do you make a picture that's not a picture of a thing, is the question.

MCELHENY I brought that up because what makes her work so useful and powerful today is that so much of what I understand early abstraction to be is connected to political economy, by which I mean that early abstraction is often pictures of ideas around progress, the future, society, violence, or the structure of the world—but those pictures are so qualitatively different from hers.

Her abstraction is picturing something about how the world works and how the world is functioning, even if it's not a picture of an object. The kind of world she's trying to depict, or what aspects of the world she's trying to depict, is so fundamentally different from what we're familiar with as early abstraction.

FLORMAN I'm hesitant about saying that her ambitions aren't artistic, because they are, but I think the frame of reference here is to an art world very different from the one she actually lives in, so the idea of creating a temple, you know, it's something like the medieval temple, where that is the situation of art, and where the tympanum is nothing if not a depiction of a whole cosmology—

QUAYTMAN *Cosmology* is the word I always think of...

FLORMAN What I think she's trying to do is to sort of think of art in a much larger framework. It's just that that framework doesn't exist in the present.

SILLMAN Maybe her pictures are a negation of the form her artwork took up until this point; these big diagram paintings are a negation of landscape as a genre. What I mean by a negation is that it's an abandonment of the landscape format, and a rejection of the more literal work. She is overturning her own work with the new work.

BURGIN I think her botanical studies were like having a tool, like a microscope or a telescope. It allowed her to see, as Helen and Josiah were saying, the way in which everything in the world is connected. I feel like she got a glimpse of the way everything goes together and it's this fragile little thing and she can just capture it. And that it's a tool rather than a rejection...

SILLMAN I just mean that part of what she is modeling is just refusal in general, that making those big diagrammatic paintings is a kind of refutation.

MOLESWORTH Perhaps because I have such a literal cast of mind I disagree a bit. I think these are pictures of the world—not the world you see with your eyes, which is the landscape—but the world as it appears in a more hallucinatory way (and I take—I say the word *hallucinatory* in its fullness, as in, one of the great joys of taking a lot of hallucinogens is... [*laughter*] that I sometimes felt like I understood how it all worked). They were fleeting, scary, sublime moments. I don't get this sense from the botanical drawings, but I do get it in the *Ten Largest* works, and I don't feel like she felt she had to make a choice...

BURGIN She goes back always to the lichens and the mosses to see what they can show her.

MOLESWORTH Her church is the earth. She believes in the knowledge that the earth produces.

SILLMAN I don't see it quite that way. I feel the tremendous stubbornness and resistance and negation in the whole project. I think that may be part of their euphoric quality.

FLORMAN In terms of thinking about negation, which might be Steiner's project as well, I think hers is a little bit different from the more conventional dialectical synthesis of the scientific and the spiritual. She's taking those botanical drawings, with their empirical scientific bent, and letting them inform the paintings. Or there is the spiral motif, which clearly has some resonance between both sets, but the resultant paintings represent this larger synthesis of the spiritual, the *Geistige*, and the natural world.

BURGIN She applies the vocabulary she learns in these hallucinogenic plants and applies it back again to her actual plants. She uses the knowledge she gets in one world and brings it to another world.

MOLESWORTH Which is another way of talking about what a medium is, because a medium is literally a translator between realms of experience and/or realms of knowledge.

MCELHENY She grew up in an era where the idea of one single human being synthesizing a new view of the world wasn't that uncommon. You have Edgar Allan Poe going around doing this giant performance called *Eureka*, his own "scientific" cosmology. Or the military leader Auguste Blanqui is telling the whole history of the universe in *Eternity Through the Stars* while in prison during the Paris Commune. This kind of boundary crossing was possible at that time. I don't think people then thought it was so strange to synthesize a vision of the world. Perhaps she is threatening to Steiner because she has a better synthesis than he does.

BURGIN One of the things that seems to be most radical is that medium shift, that she chooses painting.

MCELHENY That's a really good point.

BURGIN Suddenly she turns the knowledge into a painting, and by pushing it into that zone she's doing something new, and it's huge.

MOLESWORTH May I redirect us slightly? Now that we know these paintings exist, now that they have been introduced into the field—in a very complicated, nonchronological way—does anyone have ideas about what we do now? For instance, if you were teaching the history of abstraction in the twentieth century, would you introduce her in 1906? Or 1944? Or do you have to wait until 1986, when Maurice Tuchman puts her in his exhibition at LACMA? How do we cope with her disturbance of a chronological, art-historical narrative in this regard?

FLORMAN One of the things I'd want to say is that she was right about needing to wait for an audience—and it clearly took a little longer than the twenty years she imagined. I think it's an interesting moment within art history, because whether we are Renaissance scholars or modernists, we find ourselves interested in these moments of achronicity. She'd be a very interesting artist to teach because I want to insist that there are ways in which she's very much of her moment—that you can't understand her without understanding the Theosophical interest and the ambitions of that era—but I think her importance for painting is clearly only now being realized.

BURGIN It is really important when the work is being shown to do it correctly. It was very upsetting to go to the New Museum and see that they just took willy-nilly two series and didn't install them sequentially. She's given us tools that we have to respect. If there's a work that's a series and they're numbered, then clearly you are meant to look at them in that order. To exhibit them and just say, "Okay. Here's abstraction before abstraction," that's a total dead end for what she has to offer.

DICKERMAN One thing that's interesting about abstraction is that it isn't proposed one time. It's proposed many times over. I think it's misleading to try and choose a first or to say it began here or began here. That's a bit of a red herring. Because really you would need to parse: First at what?

What I think she pulls together in a really interesting way is that the gateway for thinking about a new model of modern abstraction, or a new type of picture making, was often, on the one hand, the diagram, and on the other, the applied arts. If you look at many of the people making abstract or even "abstract-ish" paintings early on, they're pulling on the logic of thinking in those two areas, as she does in very interesting ways.

There's still such an emphasis on trying to think about things in terms of individual genius, about who is first, when, in fact, creativity is never fully original. It's about taking strands of things and combining them and recombining them. It's always seemed to me that it's more interesting to try and trace how an artist understands her project, what her ambitions are, and how she thinks of it as discursive in her own time. These are the interesting questions for me.

MOLESWORTH I agree completely. One of the things that I think the work puts on the table, in a complicated way, is that art history without biography may be a fallacy. The

specificity of who people were, and who they were with, and who they were talking to, is profoundly crucial.

QUAYTMAN But it's always women artists who get the biographical treatment.

MOLESWORTH I totally accept that. Why strip the women of their biographies rather than insist upon Jackson Pollock's biography before speaking about his paintings?

MCELHENY But isn't it the case that many of the historical biographical descriptions of famous artists are completely at odds with what we might now say is the truth?

DICKERMAN I do think it's important to know a few facts about Malevich to understand the work.

MCELHENY I'm not saying it's not important to know that, I'm just saying that those facts are totally subjective and subject to reinvention. One generation decides what Malevich's biography was, and then a generation later we discover new facts or emphasize other information, meaning that biography is not a stable thing.

FLORMAN I want to insist that Hilma went to pretty great pains to indicate that this work wasn't about her biography.

MOLESWORTH But she also went to great lengths to meet together with these four women for a decade or two, to develop a language that allowed her to disavow solo authorship. It seems to me that that part of the biographical narrative is crucial lest we inscribe her in the pantheon of geniuses who came up with something on their own. I mean this to harken back to Leah's point about how abstraction emerges over and over again, that modernism itself has an iterative quality. So, is there a way in which her work models a third term in which you might have to know someone's biography in order to know that the work doesn't come from them as an individual as such?

SILLMAN Well, biographically speaking, Hilma's keeping her work hidden because she has a master plan just makes me want to know *more* about her life and her intentions in order to understand these issues, even if they become their own mythos, which could be wrong.

Like the studio visit with Steiner: it sounds like Steiner was a disappointment. But she went to the trouble of having a studio visit. She obviously sought his eye. What if he had said, "Wow, these are amazing. I have to show these to Vasily." And then what if Vasily had said, "These are fucking great. I have to put these in front of my friend blah-blah." I mean, what if she had a great studio visit? The whole project seems to emerge from a crappy studio visit.

MCELHENY I think you're right, the facts seem to suggest exactly that: She gets the commission, as it were, in 1906 or so, she completes the first works in 1906, and by 1907 these really crazy, huge paintings. Then she goes back to making things that are more comprehensible, the *Evolution* works, which are relatively easily digestible in compari-

son. Then she has this horrible studio visit and stops for four years, and only returns to the "commissioned works" for a short while. She's in the exhibit with Kandinsky, albeit with her "public" work, and a year later in effect announces, "Done with that. The spirits are no longer speaking to me. All my work from now on is my own."

The rest of her life she does the things that artists with no resources and support do. She worked small. She had huge ambitions for the work, but a lot of it takes place in notebook form. I think her biography jibes exactly with what you're saying.

DICKERMAN I think it's important that she didn't have a network. She chose not to have a network. She chose not to be a part of that world.

MOLESWORTH To go back to Leah's notion of biography being partly how an artist conceives of their own ambitions or intentions, I want to know how seriously we take, right here in this room, her claims to mysticism. How seriously can we take her understanding of herself as a medium?

BURGIN I believe that she believed that and that she understood the project in those terms.

MCELHENY I think it's really important to note that she had amazing self-confidence, as well as an incredible investigatory impulse. She was making work connected to, or directed by, something beyond herself for a very short period, from 1906 to 1915, with a break between 1908 and 1912, seven years out of a decade, total, and then basically everything after that was her own idea. I think you can say that her later work attempts to explain the whole world: from depicting subatomic particles to explaining the way that all organic growth is a system connecting the world together, to claiming that all religions are interconnected. She went to great lengths to create iconic images that represent these ideas, and that's all her.

QUAYTMAN And science was like that too. Science was bound to God just as much as she was at that time and still is, probably.

FLORMAN Among a certain intellectual class, claims of being a medium were not all that rare at the time. I don't think the statement in 1908 would have been as outrageous as it feels now.

SILLMAN But what's different about her is that she is making art that is supposedly receptive rather than productive.

QUAYTMAN But I think we have to ask ourselves, what are we going to talk about in this work if we take out spiritualism. What is left?

BURGIN Why are we taking out spiritualism?

QUAYTMAN To emphasize other aspects of her work. Because that ground can be dangerous or overdone sometimes. I feel it does a disservice to the work to not understand how it's functioning with other kinds of conceptual strategies, such as science, for instance.

SILLMAN You are describing her in a way I didn't think of before, as a kind of translator: maybe the greatest translator of all time. This means it's not really possible to isolate her functions as "religious" or "innovative," or whatever. She's the go-between. Maybe what I meant earlier by *negation* is not negation exactly but a form of cross-pollinating transformer. She takes a message from God, changes it into a linguistic-aesthetic diagram, makes it an innovative form of art. The mysticism is a kind of translation.

QUAYTMAN I think it's a deep-seated disciplinary problem in art history that has not been thought through. Mysticism, or the spiritual, has been repeatedly repressed and denied, probably because of Marxism, or because the Frankfurt School was terrified that spiritualism was connected to the irrationality of World War II.

MOLESWORTH What was it Meyer Schapiro said? That the discipline of art history was a bunch of Jews explaining the meaning of Catholicism to WASPs. [*laughter*]

I think questions of biography and intention are really about who gets to have interpretive power. Part of the desire to have a picture be autonomous is bound up with being able to have rhetorical control over it. In this art-historical model, one has to unhook the picture from a lot of information, from biography, from intentionality, from the sociopolitical field, from its reception, from gender, etc. And I think collectively "we" have done that... we unhooked pictures from a lot of information and then had fantasies that they could talk to us on their own. For me, this is a kind of interpretive narcissism that was intellectualized under the rubric of autonomy.

QUAYTMAN There's a lot of privilege in the idea that you can walk in and see a work and immediately receive the message without any other knowledge.

BURGIN While I've been working on her notebooks, I've been consumed with the idea of how can I not get in her way, how can I let her ideas be visible? It's different from saying, "Here's this picture, free of everything." Instead, you have to figure it out.

FLORMAN It's about what comes first, though, and I do think I'd like to defend the idea of having this encounter with the painting first so that you're making sure that when you go back and look at the biography and you look at the statements of intention, that they're responsive to what the work itself is, and I'll say that, "the work itself." There's nothing harder than seeing correctly. Seeing without projecting your expectations of the work onto it. And so, that's where I'd say, "Yes, read the biography. Yes, read what she's saying," but do it after you've looked at the paintings so that you know what the work is doing.

QUAYTMAN Because if you opened this book and didn't know anything, you'd think these paintings were made ten or twenty years ago. You would not know how old they were. And what's so thrilling about her work, I find, is how contemporary it feels.

MCELHENY When I think about the issues of our contemporary moment, I think about duration, particularly the duration of looking. I think this is where the idea of the spiritual becomes really useful, because how we frame supposedly "nonpurposeful" experiences, things one might describe as openness, receptivity, looking and waiting for something to move you, these are qualities of the spiritual. I think that's why it's important to see her work in person. I've spent quite a number of hours with these works; they unfold over time, as do all great artworks. They are most effective when experienced by a human body, in physical space, for a period of time—and that type of looking can't really be completely explained by the analysis of an image using art-historical methods. Obviously, this is one of the traditional rationales for museums, because they can offer us the potential to return and to experience, again and again, how moments become duration and how the contemporary is timeless.

Editor's Note

During the production of this catalogue, after the preceding conversation took place, new research by Julia Voss uncovered that af Klint exhibited selections from *The Paintings for the Temple* (1906–15) at an Anthroposophical conference in London in 1928. Notwithstanding, af Klint stipulated in a notebook from 1932 (HaK 1049) that her work should remain untouched until twenty years after her death. See Voss's essay in this publication.