The Occult and the Visual Arts

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE OCCULT AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Tessel M. Bauduin

INTRODUCTION

In 1969 German artist Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) created a large canvas with one black corner and a typed message reading 'Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecken Schwarz malen!' ('Higher beings command: paint the upper right corner black!').

The painting has variously been interpreted as satirical, ironical, humorous, or a critical commentary of contemporary artistic styles and culture. Suggesting the involvement of 'higher beings', the painting also refers to mediumistic and spiritualist art, or artworks made by mediums under the guidance of, it was claimed, spirits or similar entities. This practice was widespread in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The painting can further be said to refer more generally to the relationship with metaphysical, spiritual and occult thought that is a very significant, possibly even integral, part of modern art. Even as the art historians and critics of the 1960s attempted to write a history of modern art without any mention of anything spiritual or occult – or, indeed, of anything religious (Tuchman 1986b: 17–18) – in fact, artists such as Polke were not only deeply interested in occult sources and ideas themselves, but also very much aware of the occult interests of their direct predecessors. This chapter presents a brief overview of selected artists who, since the late nineteenth century, have shown some interest in occultism. It will first explore the relationship between Symbolism, Spiritualism and Theosophy in the late nineteenth century, and subsequently the modern European avant-gardes between the 1910s and 1940s, finally touching briefly upon artists since the 1950s and their relation to occultism. The main focus of discussion is the visual arts, principally, fine art painting. This is not, of course, to say that the other arts – such as literature, music and dance – were less involved with occultism. They were not.

While the discussion here is limited to those artists who have shown an interest in occultism, this is not intended to convey the notion that all modern artists looked favourably upon occultism (or were even familiar with it). Occultism is but one current (besides stylistic developments and other cultural influences) informing the various movements and individuals categorised under headings such as 'modern art'
Figure 44.1 Sigmar Polke, Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!, 1969. Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart. © The Estate of Sigmar Polke, Cologne, DACS 2014.

(from the second half of the nineteenth century up to the 1970s) and 'the historical avant-gardes' (from the turn of the twentieth century to the Second World War). Still, as occultism is quite closely tied to the experience of modernism, as Treitel (2004) and Owen (2004), among others, have argued, it is only to be expected that the movement left a distinct trail in modern art. Occult views, ideas, beliefs and practices permeated modernist artistic culture to a significant extent, and a great many artists in literature, music, dance, architecture and the visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, and film) drew on occult ideas and experiences to fuel their creativity. We should note that the interest in occultism varied considerably between individuals, groups and movements. It ranged from the briefest and most incidental of references to a single source, on the one hand, to active membership of occult organisations and full commitment to occult beliefs on the other. Most artists occupied a position somewhere in-between these two poles. Some artists became practicing occultists;
others attended lectures or read occult material; others eschewed any personal involvement in or even knowledge of occultism but still made occult topics the subject of works of art. With regard to works of art, the spectrum stretches between an artwork that employs the occult as subject, plot device, topos or atmospheric scheme – e.g. many of the works of Spanish artist Francisco Goya, for instance – to an artwork that functions foremost as an object of devotion or tool in spiritual praxis, as a traditional icon does. Such ‘occult art’, as it were, will not be discussed here. Still, while the focus here lies upon art that is foremost art – even if the artists themselves participate in occult milieus – it will nonetheless become clear that besides offering content and/or providing an inspirational worldview and spiritual concepts, occultism’s own visual culture (in particular that of Spiritualism and Theosophy) extended a considerable influence over modern art.

Finally, it should be noted that this chapter provides a brief overview, which barely penetrates the surface of modern art’s deep and complex interaction with occultism. The groundwork for a revaluation of the spirituality (including occultism) of modern art was laid with an important 1986 exhibition curated by Maurice Tuchman (1987). Other curators since then have followed in his footsteps and their catalogues are the starting point for any serious investigation of this topic (Lampe and de Loisy 2008; Loers 1995; Piaudier-Cabot and Faucherau 2011). As the (occult) spirituality of abstraction has been the initial driving force behind much research, the relationship between early abstract art and Theosophy and Anthroposophy has now become an accepted fact in art history. Only recently, however, has the considerable influence of Spiritualism, and its visual culture in particular, upon modern art been pointed out. Hence, this will be discussed more extensively below.

AROUND THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE

Mediumistic Art and Automatism

Let us return to Polke’s Höhere Wesen befahlen... (see Figure 44.1). Stylistically, it can be placed in one of modern art’s most famous traditions, abstract art. Already there was a strong connection to occultism. Lauded abstract artists such as Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Dutchman Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), and František Kupka (1871–1957), originally Czech – to name the most famous – were during their lifetime all interested in occult movements, particularly Theosophy (see below).

Regardless of whether the artist is being serious, playful or ironic, the painting’s title and apparent message about ‘higher beings’ refer, as stated, to a modern Western tradition of mediumistic art, also known as spirit or Spiritualist art, automatic art, or trance art, which stretches from the early days of French Spiritism in the 1850s to, at least, the invention of the category of art brut or outsider art in the 1950s. Relatively quickly after the dawning of Spiritualism, the means of spirit communication changed from raps and turning tables to mediumistic writing, aided by such inventions as the Ouija-board and planchette, and then to drawing as well. The actual techniques are frequently referred to as ‘automatic’ (e.g. ‘automatic writing’ and ‘automatic drawing’). This designation more or less sidesteps the rather thorny issue who (or what, perhaps) is actually doing the drawing – a spirit, a person’s subconscious, the
unconscious, or some alternate part of their personality. At the same time, it makes clear that the person drawing is in some way dissociated, operating like an automaton or ‘recording instrument’ (Edelman 1995; Shamdasani 1993; Will-Levaillant 1980).7

Spiritualism attracted many artists and intellectuals, and several began experimenting with automatic techniques. A well-known example is the French poet and novelist Victor Hugo (1802–85). During a series of séances he, his son and others produced various phrases, sentences, poems and drawings, in several cases apparently dictated or even authored by a spirit (Godeau 2012). Eventually, automatic creative techniques moved beyond drawing to watercolours, etching and even oil painting. Automatic artist and medium Hélène Smith (Catherine-Elise Müller, 1861–1929) was celebrated during her lifetime, and much admired by artists such as the Symbolists and Surrealists. From writing and speaking in tongues, her talents developed within a couple of years to drawing, water colouring and painting (Deonna 1932). Her works mirror her Spiritualistic endeavours. Martian Landscape (1896–99), for instance, is the result of her astral journeys to Mars under spirit guidance (see Figure 4.2).

Psychiatrist Théodore Flournoy, who participated in Smith’s séances and wrote several books about her (e.g., Flournoy 1994), considered all her creations to be automatic expressions of her (inventive and original) creative subconscious. This viewpoint was also current among the Surrealists and other artists (Morehead 2009: 77–80; Shamdasani 1994). This brings us to an essential point: artists were attracted to automatism because it appeared to be a means to achieve artistic freedom – that is to say, creative expression in a manner outside the borders of academic training. André Breton (1896–1966), the founder of Surrealism, is a good example of this. In an essay discussing mediumistic artists such as Fernand Desmoulin (1853–1914),

![Figure 4.2](image)

Hélène Smith, Paysage martien, 1896.
Victorien Sardou (1831–1908) and Augustin Lesage (1876–1954) — whose work is considered to be art brut or outsider art (Peiry 2008) — he commented that they worked in a manner ‘without any order’, without preparatory sketches, without composition or ‘final aim’, without apparent plan or proper technique, from the top to the bottom corner (such as Lesage), ‘everywhere at once’, or, even, ‘in the dark [blindfolded], upside down [and] obliquely’ (Breton 2007: 45). The aim was to paint in a manner completely contrary to the norm and therefore, from the viewpoint of many modern artists, in a manner more authentic and original.

Visual Culture of Spiritualism: Spirit Photography

Spiritualism, of course, was not an art movement (although writer Jules Bois wrote of a ‘spirit aesthetic’, Bois 1897), but we can certainly speak of a visual culture of Spiritualism. Besides automatic drawings by mediums, its main constituent was spirit photography.

Photography, newly invented, was embraced by Spiritualists and psychical researchers as ‘the ultimate documentary evidence’ of Spiritualist events (Keshavjee 2013: 43), based upon the understanding of photography as objective. Treated with special substances and sensitive as it was, the photographic plate was thought to be able to capture things the ordinary eye could not, but which were nevertheless present — such as spirits and ghosts, but also fluids, auras, ethereal energies and the like (Fischer 2005; Chéroux 2005). Science too confirmed that the human eye was a rather limited visual instrument, with the discovery of, for instance, X-rays, or infrared and ultraviolet (see also Natale 2011; Bauduin 2012). Photography was employed to capture ghostly phenomena materialising, a development startlingly paralleled by a new form of dance developed by French-American dancer Loïe Fuller (1862–1928). It incorporated dramatic and colourful lighting and the dancer appearing and disappearing amidst a continual swirl of veils, materialising in a sequence of fluid forms, as it were (Rousseau 2013: 169). Besides dance, Spiritualism’s visual culture similarly influenced Symbolist theatre, as Keshavjee (2009) has shown, including play writing, stage design and promotional material.

Towards the fin-de-siècle Spiritualism constituted a pervasive presence in artistic culture with a distinct visual impact. A typical example is American-British artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). As Jonathan Shirland (2013) has argued in a study of Whistler’s portraits from the 1860s to the 1890s, Spiritualism was not only a practice the artist participated in, but something that informed the technique, style and even subject of these paintings. Moreover, Spiritualism also functioned as the lense through which his audience received and perceived Whistler’s art (Shirland 2013: 82–87).

Symbolism and Occultism

Spiritualism’s visual culture left its mark upon Symbolism, the major artistic moment of the late nineteenth century, as Morehead (2009) and Keshavjee (2009) have shown. Other occult movements too are relevant, including Theosophy, and the particular blend of Rosicrucianism, other esoteric thought and fringe-Catholic mysticism evident in the work of Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), the founder of the French Mystical Order of the Rose+Croix and its Salons.
Péladan espoused a form of esoteric Catholicism mediated through a mystical art, in which the artist, as initiate, played a key role (Chaitow 2013; Pincus-Witten 1976; idem 1968). He promoted his ideas and movement through his prolific writings (e.g. Péladan 1888; idem 1894). Six Salons were organised in Paris between 1892 and 1897, and works by over 230 artists were included. The majority were Symbolists, such as Belgians Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) and Jean Delville (1867–1953), Dutch Jan Toorop (1858–1928), Swiss Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) and German Carlos Schwabe (1866–1926), who designed the promotional poster for the first Salon in typically Symbolist fashion (Da Silva 1991).

Connecting the works exhibited at these Salons was their (Symbolist) subject matter: myths, legends, mysticism and esotericism. Realism and naturalism were not permitted, nor were subjects to do with modern life. The Salons encompassed literature and music as well. For example, the composer Erik Satie (1866–1925) composed several pieces on the occasion of the opening of the first Salon.

While some artists became members of Péladan’s Rose+Croix order, others participated only once in the Salons and can hardly be associated with his ideas. It seems that Péladan’s direct influence upon art is mainly limited to the introduction of the motif of the androgyne, as Clerbois has shown (2002a). This is typical of the problem of defining ‘influence’. Although it can be shown that many artists moved in occult circles and were familiar with occult sources or individuals, it is questionable how much occultism can really be said to have played a defining role in their art – and even if some influence can be discerned, it is difficult to determine whether it constitutes intellectual inspiration, whether it features as content, or whether it leads directly to particular stylistic elements. Further complicating matters is the pronounced occult eclecticism of many artists, as Clerbois (2002b) and others have shown. For example, Jean Delville’s Salon d’Art Idéaliste, founded in 1886 in Belgium – successor of the Salon de la Rose+Croix in Brussels – combined Péladan’s ideas with Theosophy.

Les grands initiés (1889) by the French writer Édouard Schuré (1841–1929) became a key work in transmitting Theosophical concepts to the Symbolists. It expounds upon the notion of a lineage of world teachers ‘initiated’ into the ancient secret mysteries, including Plato, Orpheus, Buddha and Jesus (Schuré 2010). Delville’s painting, L’Ecole de Platon (1898), depicts an ‘initiated’ teacher who appears as a combination of Plato and Christ, but who also has, like Péladan, rather androgynous features. The triangular composition may reflect Theosophical ideas concerning sacred geometrical forms (Clerbois 2002a; idem 2002b; Welsh 1987).

The occult eclecticism and synthesis of artists reflects that of Theosophy and, indeed, of occultism per se. Esoteric Buddhism (1883) by Alfred Percy Sinnet formed the basis for Paul Ranson’s enigmatic painting Christ and Buddha (1880), which also builds upon the artist’s knowledge of Schuré’s Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions (1989). It shows a crucified Christ, based upon an original by Paul Gauguin, a seated Buddha, and a partial Buddha face (Welsh 1987: 73). Ranson was a member of a group known as the Nabis (the ‘prophets’ or ‘inspired’), whose frontman was Paul Sérusier (1864–1927). The latter’s deep and lifelong commitment to (French) Theosophical thought has been outlined by Davenport (2007) and certainly influenced other Nabis. However, Spiritualism as well as contemporary Christian mysticism interested the Nabis too; the last leaving a distinct trace in the
semi-ecclesiastical ‘Nabi costume’ they wore during their regular meetings, depicted in the portrait Sérisier painted of Ranson (1890). 17

**Visual Culture of Theosophy**

Many of the Symbolists moved in occult and in particular Theosophical circles, but it was the visual culture of Spiritualism we find reflected in some of their work, as argued above – even as subject matter might be inspired by Theosophy. This is an interesting development, as it shows that even though Theosophists and Spiritualists maintained a distinct distance from one another – indeed, construed their movements in opposition to one another – artists were susceptible to both and felt apparently no qualms about incorporating elements from either into their art.

Theosophy too developed its own visual culture, although it only took shape after the turn of the twentieth century, with the publications by Theosophists Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), such as *Thought-Forms* (1901), *Occult Chemistry* (1908) and *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902; by Leadbeater alone). The need to make the invisible visible, of which spirit photography was one result, was also prevalent in Theosophy and other occult currents. Besant and Leadbeater undertook a series of occult experiments in which they discovered through clairvoyance the astral, ethereal or otherwise occult form, shape and outlook – i.e., the appearance – of thought-forms and auras, but also chemical elements. In line with the well-established tradition of esoteric illustration, 18 they illustrated their books with schemata illustrating occult concepts. More importantly, the books also include depictions that, although they may appear abstract, should be considered more or less mimetic, that is, forms representing something seen (albeit clairvoyantly in this instance), such as auras with thought forms. 19 In all these forms elements such as form, line, colour and density were of particular importance as they convey intention and intensity of emotion on the supra-normal plane (Besant e.a. 2005: 16).

**THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

**Abstraction**

Even as the dominant styles of the time were figurative, already during the nineteenth century mediumistic automatic drawing led in a few cases, such as that of Georgiana Houghton (1814–84), to artistic results that might be qualified as ‘abstract’ (Oberter 2006: 221–23). 20 Several decades later, Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) also experimented with automatic drawing in a Spiritualist setting. Trained as a conventional artist of landscapes and flowers, she moved beyond that training by means of automatism. Indeed, I would argue that af Klint eventually employed the technique specifically to that end; thereby showing that automatism could indeed function as a means to achieve artistic change and innovation. She created several series of impressive paintings exploring spiritual or sacred concepts (Müller-Westerman 2013: 38, 41), developing a unique style that combined geometric and biomorphic form with a free line very reminiscent of (her and others’) automatic drawing. An example is *Old Age*, from a series exploring the ages of mankind (see Figure 4.3).
As we know that af Klint was deeply interested in Theosophy, and later Anthroposophy, we can assume that Theosophical and Anthroposophical concepts formed the inspiration for many of her works. While among the more renowned abstract artists of the first decades of the twentieth century af Klint may stand out for being a woman, her interest in Theosophy and involvement in contemporary occult movements are by no means exceptional. Today the interests of many abstract artists in Theosophy and Anthroposophy are well charted and generally accepted. Groundbreaking studies by Sixten Ringbom of Kandinsky have paved the way (Ringbom 1966; 1970; 1986).

Theosophy found an audience among the intelligentsia from all over Europe, artists prominently included among them. The Theosophical alliances of, for example, Mondrian and Kandinsky, illustrate well that an artist’s interest in Theosophical sources, integration of Theosophy into one’s life and worldview, and possible incorporation of Theosophical ideas into one’s art diverges considerably between individuals – the very complexity of ‘Theosophy’ as a movement, extending and changing over time as well, is mirrored in the complexity and idiosyncrasy of artists’ engagement of Theosophy in their own life and art. For instance, Mondrian was a lifelong member of the Dutch Theosophical Society and follower of Steiner, and hardly interested in other forms of occultism. He professed to be inspired primarily by the works of Theosophy’s founder, Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), such as Isis
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Unveiled (1877) and The Secret Doctrine (1888), and claimed his own art style Nieuwe Beelding, neoplasticism, to ‘exemplify theosophical art (in the true sense of the word)’ (Evelein 1996: 122). Kandinsky, for his part, was foremost inspired by the ideas of second-generation Theosophists Besant and Leadbeater, Thought-Forms (1901) in particular, but also deeply interested in other forms of occultism, besides, as well, Steiner. As he proclaimed in Concerning the Spiritual in Art (2004), art expressed a spiritual experience or need, it was a manifestation of inner necessity (see further Bauduin 2013).

Theosophy's visual culture (i.e. the illustrations from Besant and Leadbeater's books), with its aim to capture the invisible (emotions, spiritual concepts), in particular combinations of lines, forms and colours, resonated with many artists, not least Kandinsky (Alderton 2011; Ringbom 1970) and af Klint.

Continental artists in particular drew upon Theosophical ideas, such as, in Germany, Heinrich Nüßlein (1897–1947) and Bô Yin Râ (Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, 1876–1943), and Blue Rider artists such as Franz Marc (1880–1916), Hans (Jean) Arp (1886–1966), Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938), János Mattis Teutsch (1884–1960), and in particular Wilhelm Morgner (1891–1917); in France, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Constantin Brâncusi (1876–1956), and Kupka; and in the Netherlands, Mondrian's fellow De Stijl-members, such as Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), the architects Karel C.P. de Bazal (1869–1923) and Mathieu Lauweriks (1864–1932), Jacoba van Heemskerck (1876–1923), and several others. This list is by no means exhaustive but rather reflects the artists whose occult alliances have come under scrutiny recently (Bax 2006; Bax 1995; Huussen et al 2005; Faucherau 2011: 228ff.; Loers 1995: 240; Treitel 2004: 126–31; for more Lampe and de Loisy 2008; Loers 1995; Pijaudier-Cabot and Faucherau 2011).

Suprematism and Futurism

Theosophy had less of a following among the Russian avant-garde, Kandinsky excepted. Other forms of occultism, as well as (Christian) mystical thought, did find an artistic following; Suprematist artists such as Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935), Maria Ender (1897–1942) and Mikhail Matiouchine (1861–1934), for instance, were inspired by occult theories of time and space. Of particular relevance are the theories concerning the occult fourth dimension of Pjotr Ouspensky, set forth in The Fourth Dimension (1909) and Tertium Organum (1912), and further expanded upon and introduced to a non-Russian reading audience by Claude (Bragdon 1929; Ouspensky 1922; Wagner 2011: 259–61). Primer and Tertium Organum, together with a few earlier and other works discussing the occult fourth dimension, found a wide following in Europe among artists and intellectuals (Henderson 2010), including the Russian and Italian Futurists.22 Typical of the occult eclecticism we have also encountered with many Symbolists, the Futurists further showed an avid interest in Theosophical ideas concerning clairvoyance and the astral plane, as well as contemporary experiments of psychical research (Bauduin 2012: 36–40; Celant 1981; Henderson 1981).
Bauhaus, Klee

Kandinsky took his occult background and interests with him to the Bauhaus, where occult thought formed a large part of the collective Bauhaus-worldview. Many were familiar with Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and with nineteenth-century Freemasonry and esoteric-reformist thought besides (Wagner 2011: 261–63; see also Wagner 2005). Artists such as Walter Gropius (1883–1969), Johannes Itten (1888–1976), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983) and others can be counted among them. Mazdaznism, a modern form of Zoroastrianism, flourished at the Bauhaus, although mainly in the group around Itten – a figure whose occult interests and knowledge may have been instrumental for many, as Wagner (2009) has shown.

Although it sometimes appears as if occultism of the Theosophical kind is the main occult inspiration for twentieth-century artists, I would emphasise that Spiritualism and its visual culture (incorporating also the visual testimonies of psychical research) continued to be a source of inspiration for many. Take for instance Swiss artist Klee, whose idiosyncratic artistic trajectory took him from the Blue Rider to the Bauhaus and finally to French Surrealism. He was very much interested in Spiritualism and mediumistic phenomena, such as automatic writing, materialisations (of spirits, ectoplasm, etc.) and levitation, throughout his career. Partly or entirely materialised forms were the apparent subject of several drawings made in the 1910s and 1920s, entitled, for instance, *Incomplete Materialisation* (1915) or *Materialised Ghost* (1923) (Okuda 2011: 278–80). Towards the end of the 1930s he undertook several works incorporating ‘secret’ hieroglyphs and signs, which were clearly inspired by the Martian script of Hélène Smith. As this example illustrates, various aspects of Spiritualism – belief in the existence and manifestation of spirits, mediums and their practices, the techniques of automatism, the visual culture of spectral forms and thin, uncertain lines – continued to inspire art well into the twentieth century. Klee, for his part, found kindred spirits in French Surrealism, where, as I have detailed (Bauduin 2014), mediumism and automatism served as inspirational examples of artistic practice, while towards and during the 1940s, a deeper investment in occultism took place.

Postmodern and Contemporary Art

Occultism continued to inspire many artists after the Second World War. Only a very few can be mentioned here, but this does not mean that occultism was mainly a concern of modern artists; indeed, many postmodern and contemporary artists have shown not only a distinct interest in the occult – for instance in spirit photography – as well as a more general susceptibility to occulture, but their works often reflect upon modern art’s relation with occultism. Polke’s painting has already been mentioned. Joseph Beuys (1921–86) stands out because his spiritual search was hardly limited to occultism; shamanism, for instance, played a considerable role in his work (Taylor 2012). Americans Mark Rothko (1903–70), Barnet Newman (1905–70), Alfred Jensen (1903–81) and Frenchman Yves Klein (1928–62) also found subjects as well as inspiration in occultism (Kuspit 1986). Several postmodern artists have engaged occult currents or individuals that were significantly less prominent in the artistic culture of their own time, but went through a revival in the
counterculture of the 1960s. Experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927), for instance, has shown a consistent fascination for Crowley and his religion of Thelema in many of his works (Déjean 2008). Mention should also be made of British occultist Austin Osman Spare, for whom automatic drawing formed the core of his artistic practice.26

Contemporary art has occult, but also spectral and paranormal qualities, as Bang Larsen (2007) has pointed out. Again, therefore, we see a combination of (the legacy of) the visual culture of Spiritualism and psychical research, with occult currents such as Theosophy, as well as with occulture generally. Matthew Barney (b.1967), for example, has engaged the ritualistic and symbolic elements of occultism in the Cremaster Cycle (Taylor 2012). Goshka Macuga’s (b.1967) sculpture Mme Blavatsky, finally, reflects upon Theosophical heritage even as it playfully references the occulture of stage magic as well.

CONCLUSION: ART IN OCCULTISM

The interest of modern artists in occultism was not always reciprocated. For all that Theosophical ideas found fertile ground with continental artists already from the 1870s onwards, the Theosophical Society itself was rather late to catch on. The first exhibition organised under its auspices occurred only in 1905, on the occasion of the annual meeting of European branches of the TS in London, and included works by Theosophical artists as well as by ‘sympathetic non-member artists’ (Clerbois 2002a). Exhibitions were organised regularly after that. But while art, or better, the arts, were an important concern in Theosophical thought and for many Theosophists personally, and while a significant number of avant-garde artists were deeply interested in Theosophy and other forms of occult thought, the two parties never really collaborated.27

A handful of studies have investigated the artistic works of Steiner and his direct Anthroposophical circle (Howard 1998; Kries 2011; see also Kugler 1995). Art was of considerable importance to Steiner as a possibly universal language of spiritual truths. Art’s role as the vehicle of Anthroposophical ideas was embodied in the (first) Goetheanum, constructed in Dornach (Switzerland) and described by one researcher as ‘built, sculpted and painted Anthroposophy’ (Oberhuber 1995: 713). Steiner was closely involved in the construction of the Goetheanum and made many designs, such as a sketch for a design in the small cupola. It illustrates the position of humanity, here represented by a humanoid figure, between Lucifer above and Ahriman below.

Colourful and accomplished, the design is iconographically fairly conventional, which mirrors other Anthroposophical designs by Steiner and others for the Goetheanum and other Anthroposophical locations. Indeed, stylistically speaking many of the drawings and designs can be related to Symbolism, to Art Nouveau and styles favoured in the Vienna Secession, and the same can be said of Anthroposophical sculpture, architecture and furniture design (various essays in Kries 2011).28 Many of the blackboard drawings by Steiner that have been exhibited recently29 show similarities with the Theosophical illustrations made on the direction of Besant and Leadbeater. They confirm a Theosophical visual culture consisting in part of abstracted forms that should be considered representative.30 In other words, for all that Steiner could count important and innovative abstract artists among his
followers, his preferred style was figurative. The new language of abstract forms invented by the many artists inspired by Theosophy and Anthroposophy, abstract specifically so as to be better vehicles for spiritual truths and occult thought, was not employed within Anthroposophy – and neither was this case for Theosophy or other occult movements, for that matter.

Finally, of course this overview has only lightly scratched upon the surface of the deep interactions between occultism on the one hand, and modern art, movements and individual artists on the other. Even though the occult alliances of the canonical artists and movements such as Symbolism and abstraction are now largely charted, much more research into less famous artists and marginalised individuals such as af Klint and other women artists, as well as artists working in less valued media such as the applied arts and textiles, is still necessary. Moreover, Spiritualism and its attended visual culture is now coming to the forefront as much more influential than previously thought, a topic also deserving of more research.

NOTES

2 The modern artist's turn towards the occult should therefore not lead to the conclusion that artists and/or their art are anti-modern but should be viewed as an essential part of being modern and engaging modernism.
3 Categories such as 'occultism', 'spiritualism' and 'esotericism' are rather problematic with regards to modern, and especially avant-garde, art. See Kokkinen 2013 and the sources mentioned therein.
4 Furthermore, Cardinal and Lusardy 1999; Dichter et al. 2007; Entrée des médiums 2012; Martinez and Schroeder 2008.
5 The origins of abstract art lie in the nineteenth century, Rosenberg and Hollein 2007.
7 Despite frequent comments to the contrary, automatic writing originated as a spiritualist technique and was subsequently co-opted by dynamic psychiatry, the forerunner of modern psychiatry and psychology. In the latter context, it is some part of the medium's personality that authors the writing or drawing, while in the former case the author may be an angel, higher elemental being, spirit, etc. 'Dissociation' is not quite a neutral term in this context either (because pathological), but it serves to illustrate that the medium is not (considered to be) in a 'normal' state of consciousness. Crabtree 2003; on the question of authorship see Enns 2012.
8 More on Smith and automatism in Surrealism in Bauduin 2014.
9 For examples of works (and biographies) of these and other artists, see Cardinal et al. 1999; Entrée des médiums 2012; and the abcd (Art Brut Collection).
10 Strictly speaking the categories 'outsider art' and 'art brut' are not the same, but for our discussion here both terms are more or less interchangeable. Both include creators of art variously qualified as mediumistic, trance, automatic or spiritist. See Cardinal 1972; Cardinal & Lusardy 1999; Maclagan 2009; Peiry 2001; Thévoz 1999.
11 Find abundant examples in The Perfect Medium (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2005).
14 Claude Debussy, also associated with occultists (Godwin 1995: 170–73).
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19 Thought-Forms, including the many colour illustrations of particular thought forms and the colour interpretation scheme, is available online via Project Gutenberg: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16269/16269-h/16269-h.htm (accessed 22 September 2014).
20 Houghton participated as a medium in the photographs of spirit photographer Frederick Hudson, Fischer 2005: 30, 32.
21 She may have begun painting under the direction of spirits as a way to negotiate traditional gender roles (i.e. the understanding that artistic genius is beholden to the male); compare for instance another case detailed by Treitel 2004: 121–24.
22 Occultism is less relevant to Cubism as a whole (in spite of suggestions otherwise, but see Henderson 2010), but several individuals—not least Cubist leader Apollinaire—were familiar with occult thought (Henderson 2004: 450).
24 For an extensive overview, see the many essays in Lampe e.a. 2008: 261–418; Martinez e.a. 2008; Kuspit 1986.
25 See Art Journal 62 (3), fall 2003, on contemporary art and spirit photography.
27 Studies focusing on the artistic works created within the Theosophical Society and/or upon the role of art and aesthetics specifically within the Theosophical worldview are still lacking, with the exception of Kroon et al. 2005.
28 Several authors in Kries 2011 refer to an ‘anthroposophic style’, which seems generally to be Jugendstil and Secession in outlook.
30 In line with the illustrative tradition of Western esotericism as mentioned earlier; compare for instance the images in Kries 2011: 64–69.

References and Further Reading


Bragdon, Claude (1929 [1913]) A Primer of Higher Space: The Fourth Dimension, to Which is Added Man the Square, a Higher Space Parable, New York: Knopf.


Flournoy, Théodore (1994 [1899]) From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages, ed. by S. Shamdasani, Princeton: Princeton University Press.


