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## A GALLERY OF CHANGING GODS: CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE CULTURAL FASHION OF THE OCCULT

by **Marco Pasi**

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In 1948 Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905-1976), a British-born interior designer who had become highly appreciated and sought-after by Hollywood stars, published a book on modern art, *Mona Lisa's Mustache* [1]. In this book, he presented an original interpretation of modern art as being heavily influenced by “the occult”. It was in fact a long tirade against the main trends of modern art, including Gauguin’s post-impressionism, cubism, futurism, expressionism and surrealism. All these currents were seen by him as nothing more than an attempt to return to the primitive mentality of magic, in opposition to what he saw as the foundational values of western culture, that is “logic, order, truth, and reason” [2]. For Robsjohn-Gibbings “*Modern art is not modern at all*. It is a revival of one of the oldest systems for getting power. It is a revival of magic” [3].

Robsjohn-Gibbings’ claim, and its obvious political connotation, should be placed in the context of the peculiar atmosphere that was dominating in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Understandably, there was a pressing urge to turn the page, to move on and leave the tragic ghosts of the recent past behind, but also to try and understand why things had gone so wrong. In the same post-war years Theodor Adorno, in his famous *Theses against Occultism* (1949), was also making the same equation between occultism and fascism that is also one of the main points of Robsjohn-Gibbings’ book [4]. Magic and occultism were perceived as dangerous for a healthy progress of western culture, and for Robsjohn-Gibbings (unlike Adorno) what was at stake was the survival of middle-class values of order, rationality, and classical beauty (which were clearly embodied for him by the aesthetic of the interiors he designed). The irony of course is that while Robsjohn-Gibbings saw an inherent link between modern art and fascism, because they were both based on the revival of a primitive magical mentality, the target of his book was the very same art that had been collected and exhibited by the Nazis in 1937 under the disdainful label of “entartete Kunst” (“degenerate art”). Yet, in spite of the many exaggerations and of the somewhat hysterical tone of the book, Robsjohn-Gibbings had highlighted some aspects in the development of modern art that had some ground in reality and rather deserved attention.

In fact, even if the book was either ignored or ridiculed by reviewers and it was soon forgotten, it anticipated a view on modern art that would become much more fashionable some years later. In 1966 the Finnish critic and art historian Sixten Ringbom, with a famous article published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*,

opened the way for a new appreciation of the importance of occult and spiritual ideas in the shaping of modern art [5]. This appreciation was consecrated twenty years later in the exhibition held in Los Angeles in 1986, *The Spiritual in Art*, and has been since confirmed by a large number of monographs and exhibitions, which have significantly modified the way the history of modern art is understood today. Nowadays, it is far less controversial to argue that some of the most important authors and currents of modern art were inspired by esoteric, occult, or more generally “spiritual” ideas.

But it is not only in the avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that this fascination can be perceived. The ghostly presence of the occult and of the spiritual has become increasingly visible in the last ten years in contemporary art, even if its import, function, or consistency may still elude critics and observers [6]. Witness to that is a series of exhibitions that have tried to capture this renewed fascination of artists for the “Other Side”, to quote the title of the famous novel by Alfred Kubin. These shows, and the publications that have accompanied them, seem to be however only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

The reactions to this presence, that we may perhaps call a “cultural fashion” (to echo the title of a famous essay by Mircea Eliade [7]), vary. Some interpret it rather positively as a form of “resistance to the omnipotence of meaning”, whatever this may mean [8]. Others on the other hand, holding fast to the Enlightenment values of social and political engagement, see it as a disturbing return of that “murky netherworld of spells, mysteries, mirages and all kinds of ‘natural’ magic, which belongs to the decidedly anti-urban Romantic imagination, but also to the *ancien régime*, with its rituals and Rasputins, its opiate and its masses: religious services, that is, not people” [9]. Interestingly enough, here the tone and the rhetoric, if not the political implications, are not too distant from those of Robsjohn-Gibbins.

The variety of attitudes, often emotionally charged, points to an ambiguous relationship, which can be probably explained by the twofold face of the occult. The duplicity can be found also in popular stereotypes, but has some sort of historical basis to it. On the one hand the occult represents a world of values and behaviours that is perceived as “superstition”, because it hinders the social, political, and psychological emancipation of human beings from the illusion of a reality that does not belong to the here and now. In this sense, it is perceived as inherently *reactionary*. On the other hand the occult represents a world of values and behaviours that opposes the establishment and the powers that be, offering sometimes radically alternative ways of conceiving society, politics, and the self. In this sense, it is perceived as inherently *revolutionary*.

In its reactionary aspect, the occult can be easily subsumed under the more general category of religion, and share its unfortunate fate in contemporary art. Indeed, the relationship between contemporary art and religion is far from being easy [10]. Mainstream religion is hardly perceived today as an acceptable source of inspiration within the dominant discourse of contemporary art (I should point out here that by “contemporary art” I do not mean all the art that is produced today, which would appear to be obvious to the “uninitiated”, but those forms of art that is acknowledged as such by specific authoritative institutions, such as museums, galleries, journals, and/or individuals, such as art critics and curators). Whenever both mainstream religion and the occult are felt to be part of a same world of irrelevant transcendent reality, alien to the progressive, emancipatory role ascribed to contemporary art, they can be easily rejected together. But when the occult is able to play on its second keynote, the revolutionary one,

things are different. In that case, the distance between the occult and mainstream religion grows, and the clear distinction between the two allows to perceive the occult as much more attractive than religion, without a great cognitive dissonance. The reason is not too difficult to see. Contemporary art likes to present itself as a place of experimentation, of constant innovation, of challenge, of transgression of traditional aesthetic - but often also political and social - norms. In this context, religion is associated with stability, tradition, conservatism and old values. The occult, on the other hand, seems to offer many possibilities for experimentation (for instance as an exploration of the self and/or of the body), and shares with contemporary art a reputation for challenging all sorts of norms. Furthermore, it can also claim (it doesn't matter here whether rightly or not) to have been persecuted by dogmatic and institutional religion in the past. So the cultural and social criticism of both contemporary art and the occult can lead to a sort of odd alliance. In this perspective, the occult can be used by art for its highly charged cultural impact, without necessarily sharing its spiritual beliefs or indulging in emotional participation. And it is true that much of the esoteric discourse of contemporary art can be placed under the signs of irony, provocation, and playfulness (as it is exemplified – to mention but one example – by the California-based Center for Tactical Magic). However, not for all artists this seems to hold true. In other contemporary artists (such as Joachim Koester or Maria Loboda), there seems to be a seriousness of intents that even the use of a sophisticated conceptual language cannot hide. In this case, contemporary art seems to offer a space for explorations of hidden dimensions of reality, and especially of the self, which is perfectly consonant with the traditional purposes of esotericism and magic.

So one could wonder if art, in this context, has not become one of the outlets for the expression of spiritual practices and ideas that secularization had made unpalatable for the modern man. True, esotericism had already found its own ways to deal with modernity, for instance through the psychologization and naturalization of its discourse, and other analogous cultural strategies. However, the protective belt of a discourse based on unlimited experimentation, which places itself on a level not necessarily checked by rational, scientific thinking, has been able to find in art an alternative safe haven.

I see four main ways in which the relationship of the occult with (contemporary) art can present itself. The first one is the representation of esoteric symbols or of images associated with esotericism. This takes place of course at the most explicit level of visual language, and is based upon the legacy of visual esoteric lore, which has a very long, rich history of its own. We can find examples in of this in the masonic symbols and the initiatory scenes used by Matthew Barney in his films (particularly “Cremaster 3”, 2002, see for instance [here](#); or [here](#)). Other examples could be mentioned: Banks Violette’s playful reference to Eliphas Lévi’s famous image of the Baphomet in his Jägermeister Baphomet (2003, see [here](#)); or Joachim Koester’s photograph of John Dee’s magic mirror (2006, see [here](#)). In some cases, the reference is not to a symbol or to an object, but to a famous person associated with esotericism, such as Goshka Macuga’s subtly ambiguous “Madame Blavatsky” (2007, see [here](#)).

The second type is the production of artistic objects (a picture, a sculpture, an installation, or the like) that can be interpreted as talismans or fetishes, or as the result of manipulation of matter that can be associated to occult sciences such as alchemy or magic. In this case, the object is the final step of a magical procedure and/or is endowed with magical powers. An interesting example could be the “Beauty Mirror” of Latvian artist Gints Gabrāns (2007, see [here](#)) or Maria Loboda’s installation “The Grand

Conjuration of Lucifuge Rofocale”, based on the instructions for the evocation of a demon found in a grimoire (2006).

The third type is the artistic work as a means to induce extraordinary experiences, which can be interpreted as having spiritual/mystical/initiatory/shamanic/magical qualities. This has of course particular significance in the context of performance and body art. Some of the ingredients of extreme art performances, such as pain, fear, or narratives of death and rebirth, have also been traditionally associated with esoteric initiation and mystical experience. One of the most interesting examples, from an artist who belong to a generation already active in the 1960's is Hermann Nitsch's "actions", which have been often inspired by references to the ancient mysteries, to the Grail saga, or to other religious, spiritual, and mythical traditions. But several examples could be found also among a younger generation of artists such as Pawel Althamer (see for instance his videos based on his experiences with psychoactive substances, such as LSD, [here](#)), or Joachim Koester's videos inspired by the Italian popular tradition of Tarantism or by Carlos Castaneda's "magical passes" (2007 and 2009, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Finally, the fourth type is the artistic work as the result of direct inspiration/communication from spiritual entities or as the result of a visionary/mystical experience. The line between the third and the fourth type can appear to be blurred, and sometimes it can be so, but the distinction is important. In the latter case, the extraordinary experience is not the final goal of the artistic practice, but the initial source of the work to be produced. The artistic work is therefore the expression or the representation of what has been experienced through, for instance, spiritual communication, mystical vision, or, to use a more neutral language, an altered state of consciousness. Here again, we find examples where playfulness and sophisticated ambiguity are evident, as in Sigmar Polke's famous "Höhere Wesen befehlen" (1969, see [here](#)). But there are other examples where the artistic work seem to be based on a genuine exploration of the mystery of death, such as in Carl Michael von Hausswolff's work on Friedrich Jurgenson's archive of recorded voices from beyond the grave.

It shouldn't be necessary to emphasise here that these four categories are nothing more than ideal-types, whose only purpose is to help us classifying the relevant material offered by contemporary art. In reality, boundaries are much less sharp, and it is not hard to find artworks that fit more than one category at a time.

Before concluding, I would like to make a few remarks about the last category, which I believe to be the most interesting one, and perhaps also the most problematic. In western culture the interaction with spiritual, non-human entities has been constantly perceived as a sensitive issue. In a traditional Christian framework this interaction, unless it was sanctioned after careful examination and domesticated through ecclesiastical control, could easily lead to accusations of witchcraft and diabolism. On the other hand, in a secular, post-Enlightenment framework, the existence of such entities is simply denied, and the claim of interacting with them can only be interpreted as the result of delusion or mental disorder. There is therefore in western culture a continuity of extreme sensitivity towards, and marginalisation of, this kind of experiences. This situation is however also what makes the same experience attractive for those who develop forms of cultural criticism and resistance to dominant values. When it comes to the artistic domain, one of the most interesting phenomena is related to the beginnings of abstract art, something of which even Robsjohn-Gibbins was unaware, because it was simply still unknown in his time. It has already been known for a while that artists such

as Kandinsky and Mondrian were moved more by spiritual concerns than by pure formalist intentions. But in the last twenty years the rationalist narrative about the early development of abstract art has been challenged even more by the realization that the earliest forms of abstraction were created by the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), who claimed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that her art was directly inspired by spiritual entities [11]. So what should we think about the fact that one of the most celebrated developments in the history of modern art was not originally caused by rational, cold conceptualisations of elementary aesthetic problems, but by the direct communication of heavenly spirits? It seems clear that the immersion in an alternative reality (it does not matter here to determine whether purely psychological or otherwise), accessible through forms of altered consciousness, would push these artists to create an artistic language that would develop in extremely progressive directions. This language is very close to the “ambiguity and indeterminacy” described by Dario Gamboni in his illuminating book on “potential images”, which he sees as one of the recurring topoi of modern art [12]. Just like occultists at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were fond of idealistic philosophical theories, which dissolved the concreteness of material, objective reality and made it conceptually possible to imagine its magical manipulation, so spiritual abstract artists were dissolving the concreteness of figurative images in order to make them open to imaginative potentiality.

As Marina Warner has shown, secularisation has not killed the ghosts, which still pervade, one should perhaps rather say “haunt”, post-Enlightenment culture [13]. In fact the art of communicating with the spirits has not gone lost in contemporary art, and is still very much alive today, as we see for instance with artists such as Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Raimundas Malašauskas, Nico Dockx, and John Roach. But when we come to contemporary art the point is not so much the reception and the transmission of messages from beyond that would have deep, far-reaching spiritual import for humanity, as was the case with Hilma af Klint at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather the exploration of unknown, uncharted territories of the mind, sometimes carried out with an ironic smile of detachment. Sometimes.

Let me now conclude. Perhaps with some exceptions and with some hesitations, a secularist discourse has been predominant in contemporary art for quite some time. And yet, this recent emphasis on occult and spiritual dimensions seems to point to a new, different direction. Clearly, this trend is far from being representative of contemporary art as a whole, even though it cannot be considered as marginal or irrelevant. Is this trend an indication that contemporary art is perceived by some as possessing a religious, spiritual purpose? That it could even be a valid alternative for religion? After all, Max Weber had already seen this happening one hundred years ago, when he wrote the following: “Art now constitutes itself as a cosmos of ever more consciously grasped, free-standing autonomous values. It takes over the function of an inner-worldly redemption [...] in the face of the everyday [...]. But in making this claim it comes into direct competition with redemptory religion” [14]. And some artists who were active in the artistic avant-gardes in the same period when these words were written (carrying further an attitude that was already intrinsic in Romanticism, and which manifested itself with particular vigour in Symbolism) had precisely the same idea of what the role of art was in a modern society, and sometimes saw themselves as ministers of a new religion. These feelings and motivations seem to animate, perhaps less explicitly and pervasively, contemporary art as well. I do not believe that contemporary art will ever turn into a new religious movement. However, if we want to understand it fully as a complex cultural

phenomenon, I believe it will also be important not to neglect the religious, spiritual, and esoteric dimensions that a significant portion of it has come to display.

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[1] T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, *Mona Lisa's Mustache. A Dissection of Modern Art*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[4] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Theses against Occultism", in id., *The Stars down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, London - New York: Routledge, 1994. On this point see also Marco Pasi, "The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects", in: Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (eds.), *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, 59-74.

[5] Sixten Ringbom, "Art in the 'Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), pp. 386-418.

[6] For an interesting overview of the recent trend of interest for the occult in art, see Lars Bang Larsen, "The Other Side", *Frieze*, 106 (April 2007), pp. 114-119.

[7] Mircea Eliade, "Cultural Fashions and History of Religions", in: id., *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 1-17.

[8] Michel Gauthier, "Le temps des nécromants", in: *Fresh Théorie II. Black Album*, [Paris]: Editions Léo Scheer, 2006, p. 180.

[9] Dieter Roelstraete, "Great Transformations: On the Spiritual in Art, Again", *Afterall*, 20 (Spring 2009), p. 15.

[10] See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, New York - London: Routledge, 2004; James Elkins and David Morgan (eds.), *Re-Enchantment*, New York - London: Routledge, 2009; and Maria Hlavajova, Sven Lütticken, and Jill Winder (eds.), *The Return of Religion and Other Myths: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, Utrecht - Rotterdam: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst - post editions, 2009.

[11] Since 1986, when her paintings were exhibited for the first time after her death, there has been a growing interest in af Klint, which has resulted in a number of shows (with accompanying catalogues) and publications. See, among others, Åke Fant, "The Case of Hilma af Klint", in: *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, New York - London - Paris: Los Angeles County Museum of Art - Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, pp. 155-163; Gurli Lindén, *I Describe the Way and Meanwhile I Am Proceeding along It. A Short Introduction on Method and Intention in Hilma af Klint's Work from an Esoteric Perspective*, Hölö: Rosengårdens Förlag, 1998; *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin*, ed. by Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher, New York - New Haven - London: The Drawing Center - Yale University Press, 2005; *Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). Une modernité révélée*, Paris: Centre Culturel Suédois, 2008; *De geheime schilderijen van Hilma af Klint - The Secret Paintings*

of *Hilma af Klint*, ed. by Hedwig Saam and Miriam Windhausen, Arnhem: Museum voor Modern Kunst Arnhem, 2010.

[12] See Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images. Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

[13] See Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria. Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century*, Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[14] Max Weber, "Intermediate Reflection on the Economic Ethics of the World Religions", in: *The Essential Weber*, ed. by Sam Whimster, London - New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 231.

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