

TANGENT | Arts in Review

A MEMORY OF PERFECTION

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3 X ABSTRACTION: NEW METHODS OF DRAWING. CURATED BY CATHERINE DE ZEGHER AND HENDEL TEICHER, THE DRAWING CENTER, 35 WOOSTER STREET, NEW YORK, NY. CATALOGUE PUBLISHED BY THE DRAWING CENTER AND YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ACCORDING TO THE TEXTBOOK VERSION OF THE HISTORY OF ABSTRACT ART,

several heroic men—Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich most prominent among them—made the daring leap from pictorial representation to “pure art” in the early part of the last century. It comes as something of a revelation, then, when we learn that the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), under the theoretical influence of Rudolf Steiner, was experimenting with a form of automatic drawing as early as 1896. Her intriguing abstract drawings are included, along with equally important work by the celebrated Agnes Martin (1912-2004) and the much less well-known Emma Kunz (1892-1963), in Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher’s recent exhibition and accompanying catalogue.

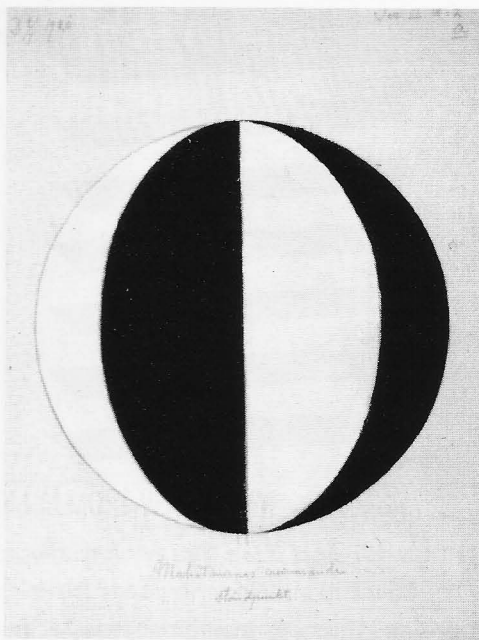
While Agnes Martin, who died in 2004 at the age of 92, has been called the *grande dame* of contemporary American painting, af Klint and Emma Kunz almost never (with the noteworthy exception of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s 1986 encyclopedic exhibition “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1895-1985”) manage to fit into canonical art-historical timelines. It’s for this reason, along with the fact that the drawings are all stunning, that The Drawing Center’s exhibition is so remarkable.

The granddaughter of Scottish pioneers who made their way to Western Canada in covered wagons, Agnes Martin quit the New York art world at the height of her abilities in 1967 in order to find a sense of quiet in the deserts of New Mexico. She transformed the landscape paintings she made early in her career partly through close readings of Lao-Tzu, D. T. Suzuki, and Jiddu Krishnamurti, and the resulting paintings and drawings are characterized by loose, grid-based compositions and pale gray, blue, pink, and white washes. The effect is visually quieting, as in the wonderfully subtle *UNTITLED* of 1960, a simple grid of graphite on paper. In Martin's hands, the most humble materials—in this case nothing more than a pencil and paper—are made to deliver up a slow-motion, pocket-sized sublimity. *NEW YORK TIMES* critic Hilton Kramer once described an Agnes Martin painting as being “like a religious utterance, almost a form of prayer.”

For Martin beauty is something perceived and aspired to by the artist, and while the goal of her art is a categorical, ideal beauty, it is an ideal which must be subjectively mediated. “I would like my work to be recognized as being in the classic tradition (Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese),” she wrote, “as representing the Ideal in the mind. Classical art cannot possibly be eclectic. One must see the Ideal in one’s own mind. It is like a memory of perfection.”¹ This stands in considerable contrast to the dominant strains of minimalist and formalist art that emerged in the 1960s and 70s when Martin was in her prime. Unlike, for example, the rigid formalism championed by the critic Clement Greenberg, according to which an autonomous subject-less art for art’s sake is realized only in an irreducible flatness, Martin’s paint-

ings and drawings seem to breathe with a quiet consciousness—upending any sense that they might be simple, rectangular objects of refined material or aesthetic value.

Unlike Agnes Martin, Emma Kunz did not consider herself an artist. As a result, she never came into contact with the



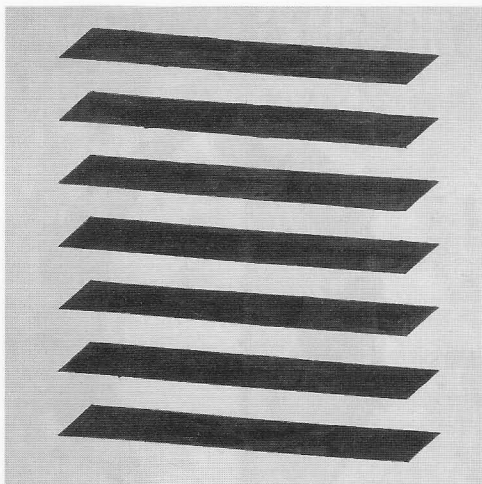
HILMA AF KLINT
THE MAHATMAS PRESENT STANDPOINT, 1920

clamoring of the commercial and critical artistic establishments. In fact, it was only through the posthumous intervention of an admirer that her drawings and diagrams, which often look like direct predecessors of Martin's, were preserved for posterity. Kunz spent her life serving her provincial Swiss community as a healer. Part medical doctor and part shaman, her entire living, including the house in which she lived, was provided through the free-will donations of her “patients,” and her drawings were made for the sole purpose of consulting.

By swinging a pendulum above a square sheet of graph paper and then

manually connecting the points traversed by the instrument with lines, color, and minimal embellishment, Kunz mapped out fantastic, variegated diagrams of her patients' psychic make-up.

Her drawings in many ways realize and embody goals merely suggested and dreamt of by such comparatively preten-



AGNES MARTIN
UNTITLED, 1960

tious and quasi-shamanic artists as Joseph Beuys and Yves Klein. Functional objects that they are, Kunz's drawings are concerned with one thing: making sense of unseen psychic phenomena, and so they cannot be made to answer to the aesthetic criteria of fine art. More fruitful comparisons might be made to information, or "graphic interface," design pioneered in the 1990s by Muriel Cooper of the MIT Media Lab, or the "Genomic cartography"—visualizations of data from the Human Genome Project—by Ben Fry, also of MIT.

Like Kunz's, Hilma af Klint's art emerges from and is motivated by a highly personal intuition of the transcendent. The religious sources of her stylistically diverse drawings are a complex mix. While she remained a lifelong member of

the Swedish Lutheran church, af Klint was fascinated from the age of seventeen by spiritualist practices, and distilled her earliest drawings and paintings from notes and sketches made during carefully organized sessions of automatic drawing and séances. She later came under the influence of Helena Blavatsky's *THE SECRET DOCTRINE* until she renounced Theosophy in favor of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. It was Steiner's advancement of Goethe's color theory that had the strongest effect on af Klint's most mature work. Steiner's suggestion that art should not copy nature led to her pioneering use of abstraction in such works as *NO. 14, THE SWAN* (1915). Having stipulated that her work not be made available to the public until twenty years after her death, it wasn't until the 1986 LACMA exhibition that anyone outside of a small circle of friends and associates in Sweden knew of this remarkable artist.

Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher's curatorial decision to present an artist of Agnes Martin's art-world stature with artists as thought-provoking and under-appreciated as Kunz and af Klint not only brings previously marginalized artists some much-deserved recognition, but expands the art-historical discussion of abstract art to include ideas that were of central importance at the time (both Kandinsky and Malevich were, like af Klint, students of Steiner), but are routinely overlooked as influences. It also serves to foreground the meaningful contrast between the vital, subjective, open-ended character of Martin, af Klint and Kunz's abstraction to the objective, often dogmatic teleology of formalist approaches to abstract art. ■

1Agnes Martin, *WRITINGS*, (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005) p. 19.