

Hopeless Stillness, Vibrating Colors and Forms of Hope

Elif Kamisli

The realm of color cannot be conquered by intellect;
it must be grasped through feeling.¹

Rudolf Steiner

Color is the soul element of nature and of the whole cosmos,
and we have a share in this soul element when we experience color.²

Rudolf Steiner

God always geometrizes.³

Plato

In 1914, the Austrian philosopher, social reformer, architect, esotericist, and founder of Anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner began the new edition of his book *Theosophy* (1910) with the following words:

These are agitated times, and my heart is moved as I write these lines prefacing this book's sixth edition. The printing had been completed up to page 192 when the destiny-laden events humanity is now experiencing broke in upon Europe. It did not seem right to write this Preface without acknowledging the storms breaking in upon our souls in times like these. (Berlin, September 7, 1914)⁴

After many turbulent years seared by major socio-economical changes, World War I broke out on July 28, 1914 and ended on November 11, 1918, leaving almost ten million dead.

Work on this beautiful exhibition, which has given me the opportunity to deepen my interest in spiritualism and its connection with abstract art, began in December 2015. Since then, our lives have changed a great deal. Terrifying violence is taking place in Turkey, the land where I was born, and events all over the world have left souls broken. Black was

¹ R. Steiner, *Colour* [1935] (East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992), pp. 49–50.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³ R. Miller Jones, "Note on Plutarch's *Moralia* 720C," in *Classical Philology* 7 (1912): 76.

⁴ R. Steiner, *Theosophy* [1904] (East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992), p. 6.

a color that Wassily Kandinsky⁵ associated early in the twentieth century with silence, grief and death, and from his perspective we could say that humanity is floating in a black monochrome once again. In his seminal book *Concerning The Spiritual In Art* (1911), Kandinsky put into words the vulnerability of his age:

Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness. This feeble light is but a presentiment, and the soul, when it sees it, trembles in doubt whether the light is not a dream, and the gulf of darkness reality.⁶

The nineteenth century was a transition period, when humanity in the West witnessed dramatic changes. The rise of industrial machines, the extolling of science and consequent questioning of religion, as well as the belief in constant progress, trapped the souls of ordinary people in a hopeless stillness. Those lost souls who did not know how to live within this grayness started to look for something more than the physical world that surrounded them, yet did not embrace them. Contrasting with the destruction they had experienced, spiritualism, with its emphasis on inner life, feelings, personal development and a cosmic unity, had a healing effect. In a moment of gray stillness, spiritualism opened up a world of colors and movement and gave hope to heavy souls.

In such a world, where meaning had vanished, Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, František Kupka, Edvard Munch, and Piet Mondrian among many other artists were attracted by spiritualism and Theosophy, hoping to recover long-lost meaning through this doctrine and its application in their practices.

The Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky with Henry Steel Olcott in 1875, in a time of political upheaval in Europe and Russia. Meaning “divine wisdom,” the term Theosophy comes from the Alexandrian philosophers, called lovers of truth: Philaletheians, from *phil* “loving” and *aletheia* “truth.”⁷ Rooted in Western esotericism and Eastern mysticism, Theosophy introduces three elements of the human: body, soul, and spirit. Through a diligent search for the truth and enrichment of the inner world, the spiritual life unveils itself in harmony. And in contradiction to the distinctions of the physical world, Theosophy proposes cosmic unification.

The following motto gives a glimpse of the theosophical philosophy: *There is no religion higher than truth*. For Blavatsky:

Theosophy, on earth, is like the white ray of the spectrum, and every religion only one of the seven prismatic colours. Ignoring all the others, and cursing them as

⁵ “A totally dead silence [...] a silence with no possibilities, has the inner harmony of black. Black is something burnt out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death [...]. Not without reason is white taken as symbolizing joy and spotless purity, and black grief

and death.” W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [1911] (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2008), p. 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London and New York: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Limited, 1889), pp. 1–2.

false, every special coloured ray claims not only priority, but to be that white ray itself, and anathematizes even its own tints from light to dark, as heresies. Yet, as the sun of truth rises higher and higher on the horizon of man's perception, and each coloured ray gradually fades out until it is finally re-absorbed in its turn, humanity will at last be cured no longer with artificial polarizations, but will find itself bathing in the pure colourless sunlight of eternal truth. And this will be Theosophia.⁸

According to Theosophy, there are three different realms: the physical world, the world of souls, and the world of spirits. All are real, but while the physical world can be perceived through the five senses, higher senses are required in order to see the soul and the spirit worlds. As Steiner wrote: "Feelings, impulses, instincts, thoughts and so on become perceptions for our spiritual organs. How these soul and spiritual phenomena become perceptions by means of our inner senses is analogous to how certain processes in space are perceived as colors."⁹ A person's aura—consisting of color and form—surrounds the physical body like an egg-shaped cloud, and "within the aura, streams of different colors present a true and ever-changing picture of our inner life in all its variability."¹⁰

These ideas embedded in Theosophy brought a turning point in the field of art, and spiritualism helped abstraction flourish while leaving conventional art forms behind. Af Klint and Kandinsky, as the pioneers of abstract art, without being aware of each other's works, produced a large number of paintings exploring the connection of color with feelings, thoughts and senses. In their practice, "art represents one of several paths to the inner truth."¹¹ The artists focused on the representation of the spiritual world rather than the physical. Symbols and geometry as the language of esotericism, and the symbolic use of colors as presented in Theosophy, became the signature of their practice. This form of spiritual abstraction—starting in the early twentieth century—would spread all around the old continent and would continue until the 1940s. Considering the brutality of the socio-political context in this period, the artists of the age seem destined to make this shift toward spirituality, where there remained hope for finding meaning. As Kandinsky beautifully put it, "every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions."¹²

Annie Besant, founder of the International Theosophical Society in Adyar and the second president of the Society from 1907 to 1933, was an exceptional personality, a reformer, women's rights activist and the author of more than 300 books, including one that had a significant impact on the artists of the age during their search for abstraction in art. *Thought-Forms*,¹³ published by Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater in 1905, had a place in the libraries of the spiritualist artists. Following *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902) by C. W. Leadbeater, which explored "aura" with a color chart based on the feelings of man, *Thought-Forms* introduces its readers to the manifestations of thought that are visible to

⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

⁹ Steiner, *Theosophy*, 1992, p.160.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 161.

¹¹ S. Ringbom, "Transcending The Visible. The Generations of The Abstract Pioneers," in *The*

Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985, ed. by E. Weisberger (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1986), p. 138.

¹² Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 2008, p. 22.

¹³ As Annie Besant mentions in the foreword of *Thought-Forms*, some of her ideas had been previously published in *Lucifer* magazine, vol. XIX (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, September 1896 – February 1897).

higher spirits. “Each definite thought produces a double effect,” writes Besant, “a radiating vibration and a floating form”¹⁴ in the spiritual atmosphere. She continues, “Every thought gives rise to a set of correlated vibrations in the matter of this body, accompanied with a marvellous play of colour, like that in the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it, raised to the nth degree of colour and vivid delicacy.”¹⁵ The two authors collaborated with four artists on the depiction of the thought forms that appear in response to different feelings and experiences. With an intention to make what is just visible in a higher world accessible to an ordinary person, the thought-forms drawings become the point of inspiration for creating *formless* forms full of colors and feelings.

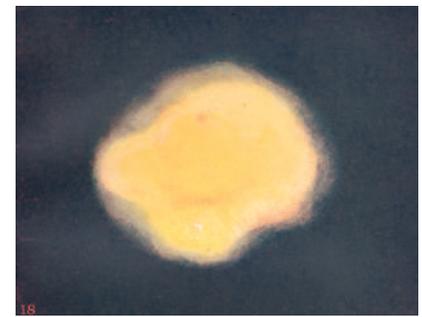
These notions of formless form—rooted in Plotinus’ ideas introduced in the *Enneads*—as well as the concept of inner experience play an important part in Eastern traditions.

The aspiration toward formless meditation is central to both Hindu and Buddhist tantric teaching. In tantric meditation visual aids are regularly employed, and these yantras (meditation images) may in fact be classed as early instances of nonrepresentational art [...] According to Buddhist esotericism, the adept is to pass through seven successive levels, the four lower levels being called *rupa* (form, body), the three higher, *arupa* (formless, incorporeal). *Arupa-dhyana*, a state of complete freedom from forms and images, is the ultimate goal, just as imageless, intellectual vision was the goal of the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages.¹⁶

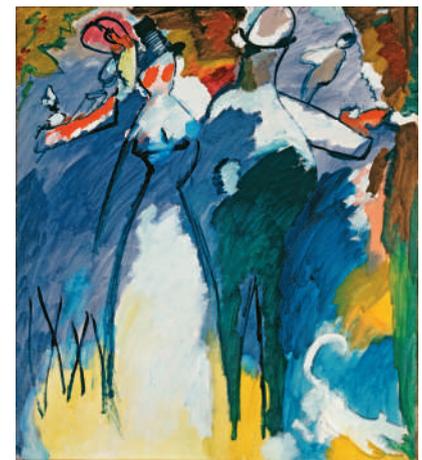
The followers of the Tantra doctrine have made Yantras and Tantra drawings from the seventeenth century to today as a part of their spiritual practice; youngsters learn from the elders first how to draw and then how to meditate with them. The images, depicting geometric symbols and abstract forms in color, have been repeated over and over again throughout the centuries, and have served as a key to the door of inner richness. Color has an essential role in Tantric art, since it is loaded with the meanings of the higher world. Yantras and Tantra drawings help the meditator to work on his spiritual development with the ideal of re-unification with the cosmic world.

During the early 1900s Steiner gave a series of lectures on color: their inner nature, their role in spiritual life, and how this reflects in art. He strongly advocated that artists should be able to feel colors and live with and within them, since this would give the work of art its eternal inner quality.

Living in color means that I let the paint dissolve in my paint pot and only when I have dipped my brush in it and spread it over the surface do I allow it to become fixed. But when I use a palette and mix the colors together on it where they already have a material quality and then daub them on the surface, I am not really living in



Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater
“Vague Intellectual Pleasure,”
in *Thought-Forms*, London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905

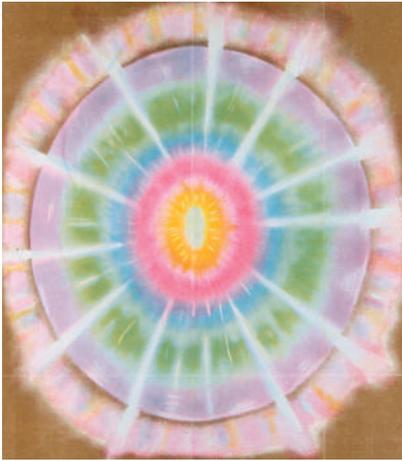


Wassily Kandinsky
Impression VI (Sunday), 1911
oil on canvas
107 x 95 cm
Courtesy Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich

¹⁴ A. Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* [1905] (London: The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., 1922), p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ Ringbom, “Transcending The Visible,” 1986, p. 133.



Charles W. Leadbeater
 “Causal Body of the Arhat,”
 in *Man Visible and Invisible*,
 London and Benares: Theosophical
 Publishing Society, 1902

color. I do not then live in color, but outside it. I live in color when I have to translate it from a liquid condition to a solid one [...] My soul must live with the color. I must rejoice with yellow, feel the seriousness and dignity of red; I must share with blue its soft, I might also say, tearful mood. I must spiritualize the color if I am to transform it into inner capacities. Without such a spiritual understanding of color I ought not to paint and especially not the lifeless, mineral kingdom.¹⁷

Finding limitations in Isaac Newton's color theory, *Opticks: Or, a Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (1704), Steiner believed that science would never be sufficient to explain the inner richness of the world of color. However, according to Steiner, Goethe's color theory (1810) provides a basic understanding of the aspects of color that are essential to artistic practice, such as the principles of the psychology of color: “We must follow Goethe's approach in a living way in our thinking so that we can continually go further. This can only be done through spiritual science.”¹⁸

Kandinsky strongly believed that one should be responsible for one's spiritual development in order to understand and to be a part of the cosmic universe, where we all exist as formless forms dancing in harmony. As the revolutionary painter of the age, he tried to strengthen his spiritual world through practices such as meditation and working on the relationship between the senses. To him, colors are the key to our inner life; they are the key to an invisible world that embraces us in a way that the physical world would never do.

Just as the body, if neglected, grows weaker and finally impotent, so the spirit perishes if untended. And for this reason it is necessary for the artist to know the starting point for the exercise of his spirit. The starting point is the study of color and its effects on men.¹⁹

He also spent a great deal of time understanding synesthesia (“joined perception,” from the Greek word *syn* meaning “join” and *aisthesis* meaning “perception”), which is an essential element in his artworks. He believed that one can develop synesthesia through diligent work; seeing the sound and hearing the colors would change the direction of his paintings in the early 1910s. His formidable 1911 work *Impression III (Concert)* came to life after listening to Arnold Schönberg's *Drei Klavierstücke, Op. 11* (1909). Still in 1911, he painted *Impression VI (Sunday)*, which is presented in this exhibition. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky wrote, “Generally speaking, color is a power which directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”²⁰

Af Klint's connection with spirituality started at an early age. During her training at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, she and four other female friends formed a

¹⁷ R. Steiner, “Lecture Three, Dornach, 8 May 1921, Colour in Matter—Painting Out of Colour,” in Steiner, *Colour*, 1992, p. 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 2008, p. 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

group called The Five. Getting together every Friday night to have sessions with “higher spirits,” they made automatic drawings through the messages they received. Over the years, af Klint developed a rich vocabulary of symbols, geometric forms and colors rooted in esotericism. Her notebooks, as a unique source for her artistic practice, unveil parts of her long-lasting communication with the otherworldly beings. A note dated November 7, 1906 introduces us to her exploration of synesthesia at a very early stage: “You H. [Hilma] when you are to interpret the color hearing and seeing tones: try to tune your mind into harmony and pray.”²¹ Like Kandinsky, af Klint was a life-long follower of Steiner, and her practice was strongly affected by his theories. Her first trip outside Sweden was to Austria to meet him, and these visits continued over the following years. This relationship developed af Klint’s practice, encouraging her to try out new techniques such as creating forms only with colors, eliminating outlines.

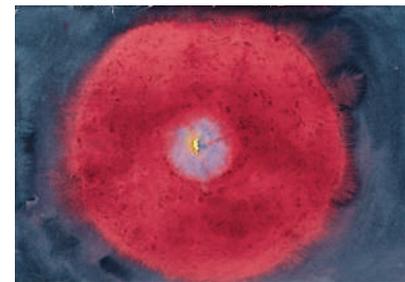
In his lectures, Steiner offers Goethe’s color theory as a beginning, suggesting that forms should be created with colors without the limitation of lines, thus liberating them from their motionless nature to become fluid. Like thought forms floating in the spiritual world:

Forms are taken hold of by the living world when they shine with color. Forms by themselves are of course stationary; they are motionless and they stay where they are. But the moment the form has color the inner movement of the color sets the form in motion and the world’s ripples, spiritual ripples, pass through it. If you color a form you immediately give it a soul quality of a universal kind, because the color belongs to more than just the form. The color individual form is given links it up with its surroundings; in fact it links it altogether to the world. You could say that when you color a form you should feel that what you are doing to the form is ensouling it. You are breathing soul into a dead form when you give it color.²²

The association between color and vitality, color and life, has been at the core of much artistic practice ever since the birth of abstraction in art.

The strong impact and presence of spiritualism and Theosophy in society and in artistic practice came to an end around the 1930s and 1940s, perhaps “because of their political associations, which were clear and well known. The Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy, for example, was indebted to various versions of Theosophy.”²³ It did not return, apart from in exceptional cases such as the work of Mark Rothko, until the late 1960s and 1970s, this time framed by psychedelia and the interest in Eastern traditions and utopias expressed by the hippie generation.

Prior to this exhibition, a number of other shows have investigated the relationship between color and the spiritual origins of abstraction. The most comprehensive exhibition



Hilma af Klint
*Birch, On the viewing of Flowers
and Trees, 1922*
watercolor
18 x 25 cm
Courtesy Moderna Museet,
Stockholm
Photo: Albin Dahlström

²¹ Å. Fant, “The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint,” in *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 1986, p. 157.

²² Steiner, *Colour*, 1992, p. 72.

²³ M. Tuchman, “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” in *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, 1986, p. 18.



Hilma af Klint
*Honeysuckle, On the viewing
of Flowers and Trees, 1922*
watercolor
26 x 35 cm
Courtesy Moderna Museet,
Stockholm
Photo: Albin Dahlström

on the subject, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. Maurice Tuchman, senior curator of twentieth-century art during the times, wrote that the exhibition

demonstrates that the genesis and development of abstract art were inextricably tied to spiritual ideas current in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An astonishingly high proportion of visual artists working in the past one hundred years have been involved with these ideas and belief systems, and their art reflects a desire to express spiritual, utopian, or metaphysical ideals that cannot be expressed in traditional pictorial terms.²⁴

After five years of detailed research, the exhibition presented almost 230 artworks produced between 1890 and 1985 and a selection of books that are known to have influenced mystical and occult thought, under five thematic headings: Cosmic Imagery, Duality, Vibration, Synesthesia, and Sacred Geometry. Here, af Klint's works became public for the first time after her death, presented alongside those of Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, and Mondrian.

Ten years later, in 1995, Veit Loers organized *Okkultismus und Avantgarde: Von Munch bis Mondrian, 1900–1915* at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The exhibition explored the strong impact of spiritualism in abstraction and the connection between occultism and avant-garde movements in the twentieth century, with more than 500 works. Hilma af Klint, Giacomo Balla, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Robert Delaunay, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Edvard Munch, Luigi Russolo, and Rudolf Steiner were some of the artists who were included.

In 2003–04, Pascal Rousseau, professor of Contemporary Art History at the Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, curated *At the Origins of Abstraction (1800–1914)* at the Musée d'Orsay. This first major exhibition in France of the sources of abstraction looked into the close relationship between science and art through an anthology of modern painting. It gave a prominent place to the dialogue between artworks and to an extensive documentary apparatus (color theories, “treatises of acoustics,” graphic methods). The exhibition unfolded along two main axes exploring the extent of vision, each covering the period 1800–1914. The first part, entitled “The Solar Eye,” examined the question of the boundaries of the visible. The second part, entitled “The Musical Eye,” tackled the visual translation of sound to analyze the crucial impact of the musical model in the sources of abstraction.²⁵ Through rich historical references, *At the Origins of Abstraction* gave a broader understanding and offered a new perspective on the subject.

Following these three major exhibitions investigating spirituality in abstraction, Ann Temkin organized *Color Chart. Reinventing Color 1950 to Today* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2008. This exhibition highlighted an important shift in the history of abstract art through a use of commercial color charts that approaches color as a

²⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁵ S. Lemoine and P. Rousseau, *Aux origines de l'abstraction: 1800–1914* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2003).

ready-made. *Color Chart* featured works by 44 artists including Bas Jan Ader, Alighiero Boetti, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Jim Lambie, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol. According to Temkin, in contrast to the symbolic meanings of color in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the hierarchical approach of color wheels, color charts liberate the artist, bringing colors back to daily life and the bodily world, away from the spiritual.

A recent exhibition, *Making Colour*, organized by Ashok Roy, Director of Collections, and Caroline Campbell, Head of the Curatorial Department and Curator of Italian Paintings before 1500, opened at the National Gallery, London, in 2014. Here, the curators looked back at material pigments and away from color charts that characterize the standardization of colors. The exhibition explored a wide range of living and non-living materials that are used for making pigments, and how theories of color have influenced painters' use of pigments, and their quest for new materials and colors. The exhibition was organized in color-themed rooms (from lapis lazuli to cobalt blue, ancient vermilion to bright cadmium red, etc.) and featured works by Sandro Botticelli, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Masaccio, Hans Memling, Pierre Mignard, Claude Monet, Anthony van Dyck, and selected objects such as William Turner's paint box.

Today, it seems relevant to re-explore emotional, affective, and perhaps even spiritual usages of color. Once again, some precedents of modern abstraction such as the theories of Goethe or Theosophy may provide new avenues.

When we continuously witness traumatic events and live in times of turbulence and portentous change, joy becomes ephemeral. Happiness occurs at tiny, delicate moments, always seeming to slip away from us. We keep these tiny moments in little crystal balls that are stored in the warmth of our hearts, and replicate them over and over again in our minds, producing forms of hope that can flourish in our souls.

Philosophical traditions bordering on the spiritual such as Theosophy invite us to a state of being where the limitations of the physical world disappear, where time extends to eternity and spirits appear to be connected on a cosmic level. These doctrines introduce a world of vibrating colors that move with the light and move us away from where we feel we are stuck. Similarly, hope moves a heavy soul, and as long as we hope, we live.

In 1889, Madame Blavatsky ended her book *The Key To Theosophy* with these words: "tell me, I say, if I go too far in asserting that earth will be a heaven in the twenty-first century in comparison with what it is now!"²⁶ Now, well into the twenty-first century, rather than being a heaven, the world seems bent on repeating a recurring pattern of destruction. Just as it did a hundred years ago, the future appears increasingly ominous, and sensitive souls have become chromatically detuned.

²⁶ Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 1889.