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# THEOSOPHY AND THE IMPACT OF ORIENTAL TEACHING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT ART

## INTRODUCTION

This article directs attention to a marginal topic that has attracted little attention in art history to date – the great interest that the avant-garde artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century showed in the occult sciences (especially theosophy) that were popular at the time and the impact of these occult sciences on the development of modern art, and primarily non-representational, abstract art. When discussing this topic, it is important to deal with the relationship between modern art and religion and the process that is generally called secularisation.

Although the influence of the occult sciences on modern art has been written about already in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>, it is only in the last few years that interest in the topic has again risen to the fore. The phenomenon that had been of interest to only a few art historians until recently attracted great attention at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013, with the title "The Encyclopedic Palace. Il Palazzo Enciclopedico".<sup>2</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, the curator of the Biennale, chose the extreme diversity of knowledge as the general theme, by inviting the viewers to see the complicated mechanisms and undercurrents that our selective cultural memory constantly ignores.

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Translation by Juta Ristsoo

1 Pascal Rousseau, "Premonitory Abstraction – Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint", *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*, ed. by Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widoff (Ostfildern: Hatje Gantz Verlag, 2013), 161-223, 161.

2 53. The Venice Art Biennale was open from 1 June 2013 to 25 November 2013.

The ideological axis of the Biennale was comprised of Carl Gustav Jung's illustrations for "The Red Book"<sup>3</sup>, the drawings and diagrams that made Rudolf Steiner during his lectures<sup>4</sup> and Hilma af Klint's paintings. A exhibition of Hilma af Klint oeuvre that opened at the Moderna Museet in February 2013 will be travelling to various European museums for almost three years.<sup>5</sup> This topic was supplemented by the large exhibition titled "Design for Everyday – Rudolf Steiner", which ran from February to May 2014 at the EMMA – the Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo, which provided a comprehensive survey of Steiner's wide-ranging influence that he exerted on culture, including in art and architecture.<sup>6</sup>

The broader analysis of how interest in this topic developed is not within the scope of this article. On the one hand, it may have developed as the result of a set of concurrent events (the publication of "The Red Book", the first public showing of most of Hilma af Klint's works, etc.); or in the continued interest in Modernism as an extremely contradictory and complicated period. Or maybe faced by so many dead ends and questions in culture and society, patterns of interest from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are being repeated.

In light of this question, the author has been intrigued, first of all, by the paradoxical conflict during the heyday of Modernism – how did nonfigurative art, the most radical art form of the day, utilise esotericism

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3 Carl Gustav Jung starting making entries into his notebook in 1913, which were based on his own psychological disorders. Jung make notes for 16 years. Later he transcribed his notes and bound them with red leather, therefore the name of the book. Two-third of the book contained Jung's illustrations. The book, which is in his family's possession, was not digitalised and published until 2009: Carl Gustav Jung, Sonu Shamdasani (ed.), *The Red Book. Liber Novus* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

4 Rudolf Steiner, *Wandtafelzeichnungen zum Vortragswerk*, Bd. I-XXX (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1991 -2003). Rudolf Steiner illustrated his lectures by drawing visual images on a blackboard. Later black paper was placed on the board making it possible to collect and preserve Steiner's drawings. A selection of Steiner's drawings was first made public in Cologne in 1992.

5 An exhibition of Hilma af Klint's work will open at the Art Museum of Estonia's Kumu Art Museum in early 2015.

6 The impact of Steiner's ideas on contemporary art and architecture has also been seriously examined by earlier exhibitions, for example, an exhibition called "Rudolf Steiner – die Alchemie des Alltags", which ran from October 2011 to May 2012 at the Vitra Design Museum. The exhibition also directed attention to Steiner's close relations with his famous contemporaries – Franz Kafka, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, etc. For more information, see: <http://www.vitra.com/de-de/magazine/details/alchemy-of-the-everyday> (22.07.2014)

and transcendentalism to establish itself in the heart of this rational, positivist ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, this article examines, and has tried to collect fragments of information about the interest shown by Estonian artists in the Far East and Christianity, which started at turn of the 1970s and flourished in the middle of that decade. A hypothesis related a spiritual vacuum in the culture could be proposed in this regard. Therefore, it is possible that these two periods are connected by the need for spiritual inquiry in complicated situations. In one case, Christianity, as the religion that had spiritually led Western society, was being rejected in the course of social change, and in the other case, Christianity (as a spiritual teaching that transcends politics) was prohibited due to the social situation.

The association of Abstract Art with the interest in the occult sciences does not change much in global art history, and it does not change the general picture of Estonian art history. Yet, in the context of our art history, which is essentially subject to a teleological approach, we must not totally ignore the individual spiritual searches of the artists. This is something that cannot be subordinated to analysis but which, in turn, is capable of creating phenomena that change alter the picture of art history, as happened in Estonian art at the turn of the 1970s.

### MODERNISM AND GOD(S)

Modernism as a great narrative of art history is contradictory. The history of Modernism is not comprised of a consistent flow of changes, which can be simply defined by some fundamental concepts, but rather a history of the merging and diverging of various ideas and practices. Our understanding largely depends on which viewpoint we chose. It is difficult to separate modernist culture and the modernisation of the society; along with appreciating the achievements of the natural sciences, entirely different ideas also become more and then less topical.<sup>8</sup>

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7 I formulated this question, which has interested me for a long time, into a serious academic lecture as professor of liberal arts at the University of Tartu in 2012/2013. This, in turn, was the incentive for making a presentation on the same topic at the Art and Religion Conference at the University of Tartu (10-11 October 2013), for a survey of the conference see: Krista Andreson, "Art and Religion", *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 6 (2013), 191-203.

8 For instance, Romanticism, which developed and became significant and contrasted with a society that was developing and technologising ever more rapidly.

From the standpoint of this article, it is important to emphasize the dualist nature of Modernism, in which the unilateral idea of progress is often opposed by a contrary force, especially when the problems and tensions of modern society have become acute or the new society too complicated.

The topic dealt with below ensues from these oppositional processes within modern times, the impact of which is not decisive or definitive, but which is part of cultural history, not only because it exists historically, but because it is often closely intertwined with cultural phenomena.

Since it was based on an ordered experience, the new worldview could not unconditionally accept anything that was authoritatively offered by the church. However, the collapse of the influence of the sole authority of the Christian religion, as well as the church as a super-organisation and aesthetic centre, did not occur only because of a belief in the rationality of the measurable world. Below, I will point out some aspects of the process that have been important from the art viewpoint.

Firstly, we have to remember that it would be wrong to write about Europe abandoning religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Interest in religion as such continued in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it expanded to include the study of Far-Eastern and Middle-East religious and philosophical systems. This was fashionable in philosophy and it existed in modern art. This interest was supported by the translation of many oriental texts. According to Helmut Zander, the *Bhagavadgītā* was already translated in 1780<sup>9</sup>; and, thanks to the translations, a large number of Buddhist texts became available in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cultural understanding of religious texts was also broadened by excavations in Middle-East in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the deciphering of the texts that were found there. Therefore, one cannot claim that art removed itself from religion, although one can say that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity started to be treated in the cultural sphere as a purely cultural phenomenon and not longer as the centre of absolute truth and morality.

Secondly, the irrefutable nature of Christianity was destroyed by the altered concept of time. During the Enlightenment, the old understand-

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9 “There Is No Religion Higher Than Truth. A Conversation between Helmut Zander and Iris Müller-Westermann on Spiritualism, Theosophy and Anthroposophy”, *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*, 114.

In Estonian for the first time: “Bhagavadgītā”, *Loomingu Raamatukogu*, 40-41, edited and annotated by Linnart Mäll (Tallinn: Perioodika, 1980).

ing of the present was revised. In the Middle Ages, but also during the Renaissance, the concept of time and history was naturally connected to the idea of the end of the world. The significantly less religious Enlightenment era added the assumption of history as an open-ended and possibly limitless future. The concept of “modern” started to define that which was recent or new and most progressive. The abandonment of the past by the avant-garde that emerged in Modernism and an approach to art that focused on the new would not have been possible if the approach to history had not been altered.

Thirdly, science and technology undoubtedly influenced the revolution in art, which, in turn, was related to the perception of time. The fine arts have definitely been changed by photography and cinema, as opportunities increased for playing with time, making time a more flexible concept with no beginning or end; which could be wound backwards or forwards and which was no longer unidirectional. From the viewpoint of religions, one should not forget the discovery made by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, which resulted in the hidden parts of things losing their mystery.<sup>10</sup> Suddenly, it was possible to see things that the human eye could not see otherwise. Clairvoyance was no longer a trick or an improbability.

Therefore, art has new powerful tools at its disposal – freeing itself from the Christian definition of God created a spiritual space with room for both the empirical experiences altered by the discoveries of modern science, as well as for the knowledge about different religious systems. The Christian system and state of knowledge that had been developed through the centuries was confronted by a disorderly flood of new information. For the first time, turn-of-the-century art stood face to face with the concept of emptiness.<sup>11</sup>

The question of why art should (and did) speak about this new world, and in what idiom, is one of the most important research subjects of the history of modernist art. The emergence of Abstract Art is considered to

10 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “X Rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp, and the Cubists”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Revising Cubism (Winter, 1988), 323-340.

11 The concept of emptiness appears in the following text in two meanings. Firstly, as raised by Kandinsky, who posed a question about missing objects: Wassily Kandinsky, “Reminiscences”, *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 370. And secondly, in the meaning found in Buddhist teaching; see, for example, “Lao-Zi, „Daodejing. Kulgemise väe raamat”, *Loomingu Raamatukogu*, 27, trans. Linnart Mäll (Tallinn: Perioodika, 1979).

have been the most radical form of Modernism, which not only rejected figurativeness and scenarios, but also involved art analysis, psychology, colour theory, form theory and which finally, through the agency of Clement Greenberg, was declared to be the culmination of global art.

At the same time, the sharpest questions in Abstract Art were provoked by the means of depicting reality, as well as the forgotten role of the oneness of God in this reality. If all that is left is colour, line and form, is this sufficient? In 1913, Wassily Kandinsky described his own dilemma as follows: “And most important of all: what is to replace the missing object? /---/ It took a very long time before I arrived at the correct answer to the question: What is to replace the object? I sometimes look back at the past and despair at how long this solution took me.”<sup>12</sup>

#### OCCULT SCIENCES – FASHION TREND OF THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Europe’s spiritual life has never been devoid of the occult sciences, which were also not lacking pragmatic purposes, for instance, in the form of alchemy. This has true of oriental culture since the beginning of time and the Christian church has never entirely excluded such spiritual exercises.<sup>13</sup>

The goal here is not to describe all the reasons for the development of the occult sciences in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although, from the viewpoint of art, along with the diminished popularity of Christianity, the excessive pressure exerted by a materialistic worldview and limitations of positivist aesthetics should be mentioned. Thus, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spiritualism<sup>14</sup>, occultism<sup>15</sup>, and especially theosophy, which

<sup>12</sup> Kandinsky, “Reminiscences”, 370.

<sup>13</sup> For example, medieval or 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century mystics.

<sup>14</sup> The year 1848 can be considered to mark the beginning of the broader popularity of spiritualism, which spread primarily in England and the U.S. between 1850 and 1860. In a way, spiritualism also had a scientific background, which was related to the discovery of both Morse code and photography. The influence of spiritualism is demonstrated by involvement of a large number of creative people, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle was a serious spiritualist who collected photos that documented his encounters with ghosts. Spiritualism aspired to scientific experiments and technological development; spiritualist séances were organised like laboratory experiments; minutes were taken and the participants were ready and able to repeat the experiments. The first abstract photos have been made in the context of spiritualism. Spiritualism tried to explain so-called “paranormal” phenomena within the framework of empiric science. See also: “There Is No Religion Higher than Truth“, 113-128.  
<sup>15</sup> The 1830s is considered to be the time when occultism got its start and the phenomenon is related to the cult of the Virgin Mary (the appearance of the Virgin Mary to religious believers).

was a mixture of philosophical, religious and scientific views that was turned into systematic teachings, spread and became extremely popular in rapidly modernising Europe and North America.

In the 1890s theosophy replaced spiritualism. The Theosophical Society founded in New York by Helena Blavatsky in 1875, was mainly comprised of spiritualists. Theosophy tried to preserve spiritualism's claim of being scientific; the basis was various Gnostic tests, including Esoteric Christianity. Eastern teachings and religious systems also became an important source of inspiration, which, especially in German theosophical circles, were compared to the writings of medieval mystics, such as Paracelsus and Jakob Böhme. Blavatsky herself increasingly turned to Eastern teachings and the religions of India became every greater sources of inspiration in theosophy. This interest and movement increased even more during Blavatsky's successor's Annie Besant's day.<sup>16</sup> Theosophy advocated a religion that was above it all and transcended all the known religions (Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism).

Theosophy created quite a strong organisational base and there were theosophical societies in many countries, whereas many of the theoretical questions espoused by these societies could differ to a great degree. Thus, Rudolf Steiner saw the solution in Esoteric Christianity (in his later writings he replaced the concept of theosophy with anthroposophy). Annie Besant, who became the president of the society in 1907, believed that theosophy differed from country to country and different societies had to find their own approach to theosophy.

Theosophy was especially fashionable among creative intellectuals. However, it cannot be confirmed that academic circles shared their enthusiasm for theosophy.<sup>17</sup> However, artists, composers and writers did not require scientific verification for their work, but needed to answer the question of how to manage without the support of God, or how and with what to replace it.

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16 Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers", *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchmann, Judi Freeman, Carel Blotkamp (Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1986), 131-153, 134.

17 For example, Johan Huizinga alludes ironically to Blavatsky's role in the spread of Buddhism: Johan Huizinga, *Kultuuriajaloo ülesanne. Valik artikleid, esseid, kõnesid*, ed. Joep Leerssen (Tallinn: Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2013), 36.



## THEOSOPHY AND ABSTRACT ART

The question of how theosophy and the occult sciences influenced modern art does not have a very long history. Poetically, one could say that history hesitated for quite a while before starting to see the connection between the esoteric, spiritual and transcendental, on the one hand, and nonfigurative or abstract painting, on the other.

In the mid-1960s, two innovative art historians started writing about this subject, which was marginal at the time; one was Robert Welsh (who was studying the work of Piet Mondrian) and the other was Sixten Ringbom (who dealt with the subject in his articles about Wassily Kandinsky).<sup>18</sup> In their writings, the authors paid special attention to the decisive impact of theosophy on the avant-garde, and also examined and confirmed the logical ties between the symbolism of the 1880s and the avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> This approach culminated in an exhibition called "Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" in Los Angeles.<sup>20</sup>

However, the connection between Abstract Art and the mystical and occult<sup>21</sup> sciences was not a secret in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was written about at that time.<sup>22</sup> In the 1930s, people were dissuaded from dealing with the subject because of the interest shown in the occult sciences by the German National Socialists. Thereby such concepts as spiritualism, theosophy and discussions about invisible spiritual forces became extremely sensitive and not very respected. Already in the late 1930s, the interest of the intellectuals focused on Modernism as a teleological system. The most brilliant example of this is the diagram on the

18 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*, Vol. 29 (1966), 386-418; Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy", *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944: Centennial Exhibition*, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971); Rousseau, *Premonitory Abstraction*, 16; also see: Sixten Ringbom, „Nähtavat ületamas. Abstraktse kunsti teerajajatest“, *Kunst* 1/1992, trans. Raimo Seljamaa (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1992), 13-25.

19 About the part played by symbolism in the development of abstract art, and also the impact of oriental teachings on symbolism, see, for example: Kimmo Pasanen, "Musta neliö, zaum ja tyhjyys/ The Black Square, Zaum and Emptiness", *Kazimir Malevitsh: Henkisyys ja Muoto = Kazimir Malevitsh: Spirituality and Form* (Espoo: EMMA (Espoon modernin taiteen museo) 2006), 23 -35.

20 *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 - 1985*. (Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1986).

21 The given terms are used in this text in an art history context and do not coincide with the meanings that they have in theological literature.

22 Maurice Tuchman, „Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art“, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 -1985*, 17.



development of modern art drawn up by Alfred Barr Jr. in 1936, when he was the director of MoMA (Museum of Modern Art in New York). In Estonia during the 1960s and 1970s, it was also not very popular to speak out loud about your Christian views or interest in oriental teachings. Thanks to Linnart Mäll's extremely persistence and background in academic translation, which was especially important in the context of the times, he significantly altered the relationship with the teachings from the Far East.

Why have the ties between early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Abstract Art and the occult sciences attracted more attention? And what advantages does non-figurative painting, for instance, has over 19<sup>th</sup>-century symbolism? As we know from history, starting from the Antique period many of Europe's spiritual movements and teachings have made use of abstract images, so-called "formless forms", for the pictorial expression of spiritual meaning.<sup>23</sup> This is just as discernable in the Eastern tradition, in both Buddhist and Hindu teachings. Therefore, the abstract means of expression and the association of the visual idiom of many teachings with the nonrepresentational art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not an original idea. Why should we assume that the development of Abstract Art in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century context was influenced by the occult sciences?

Firstly, it is important to direct attention to fact that in most historical cultures, the illustrative visuals of religious teachings (stories of the Old and New Testament, etc.) are not considered to be art. That means that the functions of pictorial expression were meant to fulfil goals that were not related to providing the viewer with an aesthetic experience. The Renaissance did significantly alter the relationship of the church to high culture, especially in Italy. However, transforming esoteric symbols and occult sciences into works of art did not occur until the Modernism – the modern world – developed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, starting with the era of Romanticism and Symbolism in art.

Modernism significantly expanded the definition of art works. Although esoteric teachings and systems were important to many generations of artists, the interest in the occult sciences that rapidly spread through 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture becomes especially important for art history. The synthesis and concurrent development of this interest with Abstract Art turned out to be decisive. If Romanticism and Symbolism

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23 Ringbom, "Nähtavat ületamas", 13.

still dealt with imagined scenarios and flights of fantasy, in Abstract Art, we see the coexistence of both a spiritual and material structure in the works of art. How much more important the esoteric sciences were compared to the other influential factors in the development of Abstract Art is difficult to determine. However, Kandinsky, František Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, as well as Piet Mondrian and many of the founder of modern art were not only familiar with theosophical, spiritual texts or esoteric teachings, but also based their work on them, and believed that they could fill their abstract visions with esoteric meaning.

With their oeuvre, these artists crossed the tenuous border between the religious visual idiom (non-aesthetic) and uninhibited (aesthetic) creation. The abstract means of representation, the content of which is the communication of certain esoteric messages, giving it an aesthetic dimension, and presenting it as a category of art in the European art tradition only became possible thanks to the modernist art revolution and the fundamental changes that took place at the turn and start of century; and thanks to the avant-garde utopias of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, we can also test the opposite logic – the radical changes at the turn of the century largely supported the teachings such as theosophy and the oriental religions that stood apart from the philosophical mainstream of the day. Today, every textbook on Modernism points out the influence of African wooden sculptures in Picasso's work, but it is quite uncommon to have an introduction of Mondrian's work start with a survey of Helena Blavatsky's or Rudolf Steiner's theories.

#### THEOSOPHY AS THE SUBJECT MATTER FOR ABSTRACT ART

The list of artists who were strongly influenced by esoteric teachings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is quite long. For instance, we can name such artists as František Kupka, Robert Delaunay, Giacomo Balla, Francis Pisabia, Theo van Doesburg etc. Below, the relations of three artists – Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Hilma af Klint – with theosophical teachings are briefly discussed. Of them, the first two have undoubtedly created (different) systems that Abstract Art has continued to acknowledge; the meaning of Hilma af Klint's system is still being studied.

In 1912, Kandinsky published a book called "Concerning the Spiritual in Art"<sup>24</sup>, which was the first text written by an artist to justify Abstract Art, and in it he praised the ideas introduced to him by the Theosophy Society.<sup>25</sup> It has been believed that Kandinsky did not see delving into the mystical as a goal unto itself, but rather as a means of reaching artistic goals.<sup>26</sup> However, it is also known that he eagerly studied theosophical writings, the articles by Blavatsky and especially Rudolf Steiner. Being Russian Orthodox, Kandinsky was interested in mixing various religious experiences. Between 1908 and 1911, Kandinsky read and encapsulated Steiner's books, and made relevant notes.<sup>27</sup> The positions presented by the adherents of theosophy were similar to Kandinsky's own inquiries related to the depiction of the spiritual.

In 1908, Kandinsky, who was searching for the power of colours and forms to enrich the soul, had become acquainted with a book called "Thought Forms" by Anne Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, English-Indian followers of theosophy,<sup>28</sup> which was illustrated with cloud-shaped forms. Kandinsky used similar forms in his watercolours in 1913.<sup>29</sup>

Although his attitude toward theosophy later changed, the emotional aspect of art remained important to him, which in the period following World War I also led him to geometrical abstraction.

Mondrian formulated his positions into a theory that he called Neoplasticism. Mondrian's uncompromising position, his system, which was based on orthogonal composition and primary colours, was inspired by the theosophical texts that he studied for more than ten years. Mondrian joined the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909.<sup>30</sup> The society in the Netherlands was distinguished by the fact that mathematics, which was treated as a collection of knowledge in the cosmic order, played a special role in explaining their theosophical concepts. This tradition applied to all visual culture. The esoteric interpretation of mathemat-

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24 Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst, insbesondere in der Malerei* (München: R.Piper Verlag, 1912).

25 Ringbom, "Nähtavat ületamas", 13.

26 Ibid., 15.

27 Anna Moszynska. *Abstract Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 48.

28 Annie Wood Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms* (London: Theosophical Pub. Society, 1905).

29 Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 49.

30 Carel Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction", *The Spiritual in Art*, 96.

ics, which so significantly influenced the aesthetic approaches in Dutch theosophical circles, appeared in Mondrian's work between 1910 and 1911.<sup>31</sup> The change in Mondrian's style is generally associated with his move to Paris at the end of 1911 or beginning of 1912 and his interest in Cubism,<sup>32</sup> although it is also known that this interest was generated by the artist's theosophical background. Cubism provided the artist with a developed formal method of describing the nature of things through their dematerialisation.<sup>33</sup> Mondrian's concept of horizontal and vertical lines combined with three primary colours, which supposedly summarised the complete nature of things and solved the antitheses between feminine/masculine, static/dynamic and spiritual/material, did not coincide with Cubism's understanding of line and colour. According to Mondrian, the meanings of the horizontal and vertical lines in his works were influenced by Blavatsky writings.<sup>34</sup> Mondrian utilised the theories and semi-mystical texts of Mathieu Hubertus Josephus Schoenmaker, a mathematician and follower of theosophy<sup>35</sup> in his development of Neoplasticism. Although Schoenmaker's influence<sup>36</sup> has also been questioned, this does not change the fact that Mondrian's creative method was based on the totally adoption of the main theosophical principles. Unfortunately, the manifestation of Neoplasticism as the final phase of artistic development severed his relations with Theo van Doesburg, one of his closest collaborators. "Mondrian's geometric abstract painting is thus a direct pictorial equivalent of mystical beliefs prevalent at the time, which were themselves rooted in the Idealist metaphysics of the nineteenth century" writes Anna Mozynska.<sup>37</sup>

Hilma af Klint's fate as an artist is unique and her importance as a pioneer of Abstract Art is still being debated. Klint has been a marginal phenomenon after her oeuvre was first revealed to the public. Her works were first exhibited in 1986, 42 years after her death, at a show called "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 -1985" in Los Angeles. To date,

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31 Ibid., 100.

32 Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 49.

33 Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism", 102.

34 Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism", 103, Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 50.

35 Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 54. Of Mathieu Hubertus Josephus Schoenmaker's works, the following is highlighted: *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* (Uitgegeven Door C.A.J. van Dishoeck, 1915).

36 Several researchers have cast doubt on Schoenmaker's influence by claiming that Mondrian's theories were already developed before he met Schoenmaker. See Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism", 111, ref. 49.

37 Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 54.

the largest and most complete coverage of her work has been provided by the exhibition called "Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction" at the Moderna Museet in 2013.<sup>38</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Klint, who had started as a portraitist and landscape painter, traded in her successful career to become an abstract painter even before Delaunay, Kandinsky or Malevich. Like the aforementioned artists, she too was influenced by the ideas of occultism, and especially spiritualism and theosophy, and later anthroposophy, which was popular in her day. In the context of modern art, Klint was not an abstractionist on principle. In her case, it was an attempt to provide form to the invisible, to make it visible, and she saw herself as a medium in this process. However, Klint's visual world, which did include figurative elements, developed in the direction of geometrical abstraction, through which she thought she could more easily express consciousness at a higher level. By working as an artist-medium, Klint believed that by painting she could make contact with beings of a higher consciousness, whose messages she could communicate through her paintings.<sup>39</sup> For the same reason, she also started practicing automatic writing long before the surrealists.

Klint's first abstract works date from 1906, although they did not develop overnight, but gradually starting in 1896. In 1908, she met Rudolf Steiner, who was the head of the German section of the Theosophical Society at the time, and influenced by this meeting, Klint started to show an interest in Esoteric Christianity. Klint's central body of work "The Paintings for the Temple" (1906 – 1915) is a grouping of 193 mainly abstract works. Klint later painted another long series (*Parsifal*, 1916, which depicted the journey of a girl and boy through various levels of consciousness). Klint did not show her abstract works during her lifetime, and for a female artist living far from the centre of Europe this is understandable. She tried to get Rudolf Steiner, with whom she communicated for a long time, interested in her works, but was unsuccessful. Pascal Rousseau has summarised Hilma af Klint's meaning for the history of modernism as follows: "Of course, Hilma af Klint could not have been included in Cubism and Abstract Art as it is only recently that this

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38 The exhibition continued in Berlin (Hamburger Bahnhof, 15.06. 2013 – 06.10. 2013), Malaga (Museo Picasso Málaga, 21.10.2013 – 09.02.2014) and Louisiana (Museum of Modern Art, 07.03.2014 – 06.07.2014). Vt. ülevaadet: Caroline Levisse, „[Review of:] Hilma af Klint. A Pioneer of Abstraction (Louisiana, Copenhagen, March 7 – July 6, 2014)“, *H-ArtHist*, Apr 7, 2014: <http://artist.net/reviews/7393/mode=exhibitions>, (22.07.2014).

39 Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 33.

untimely artist has begun to be more widely known. It still remains to be seen how Hilma af Klint's welcoming into the art historical canon will alter understanding of this crucial period of early modernism."<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, both Steiner and the other followers of theosophy emphasised the visual aspect of spiritualism, especially the meditation process. It is known that at a meeting of the Theosophical Society in 1910, the agenda included a discussion on the subject "What is the relationship between theosophy and art? Does theosophical art exist and if it does, how is it to be practiced?"<sup>41</sup> Yet, the relationship with art was not two-sided. Paradoxically (the reasons for which cannot be analysed in depth here) the adherents of theosophy did not understand or accept Abstract Art as their own. A disappointed Mondrian complains: "When Steiner visited Holland last summer, I wrote him a letter and included my brochure! Not even a reply!/--/ It is Neoplasticism that is purely a theosophical art (in the true sense)."<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned above, Hilma af Klint always was not able to change Steiner's mind. The artist's interest in the occult sciences remained one-sided. Unfortunately, the leading proponents of theosophy and their followers did not understand the importance or influence of their knowledge on contemporary art. It seems that the artists' interest in the esoteric sciences was focused on the future, a part of the modernist avant-garde, while the role of art as seen by the supporters of theosophical teachings was related to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century concept of art and they were not ready to Abstract Art as a visual interpreter for their teachings. Modern art is an artist's individualistic act, and regardless of the rhetoric explaining the works, no alphabet beyond a personal capacity for empathy exists that can help one to decipher abstract works. Spiritualism, as well as theosophy and anthroposophy, which attempted to find a common language with science, recognised abstract images as means of meditation, but not as separate artistic creations. In summary, one can say that, if the esoteric sciences helped one to understand, or at least temporarily fill, the void discovered by the artists, then the new radical art form itself was not acceptable to the teaching that aspired to develop itself into a system.

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40 Rousseau, "Premonitory Abstraction", 239.

41 Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism", 96.

42 Ibid., 104.

## IN ESTONIA

Nonfigurative art has never played a leading role in Estonian art. There are several reasons for this including the campaign of anti-abstraction conducted by Soviet ideology in the 1960s. At the same time, we have important examples of abstract art from the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>43</sup> These works have by analysed from two aspects involving radical form alteration and intellectual resistance. Based on the information available today, there is not reason to search for ties to esoteric fields of activity in the case of these works, although, it is not totally precluded in the post-war period. However, a separate topic of research could be the abstract works produced by Henn Roode from 1965 to 1967. Some of the surviving comments on his works<sup>44</sup> allude to searches in which form is not primary, but rather a tool for achieving spiritual objectives.

The nonfigurative art that developed at the turn of the next decade was clearly distinguishable from the previous wave, and we can call this the second wave. Namely, now we see the emergence of the theme of spirituality, of works of art as the communicators of certain spiritual messages that are formulated in teachings, as meditative tools. This approach was most prominent in the approach of two artists – Tõnis Vint and Leonhard Lapin. The latter continued to create abstract art in the second half of the 1970s and 1980s and created a theoretical framework for his work related to the subject of emptiness.<sup>45</sup>

The Sixties are an era of rock music, hippies and New Age, but Estonia, which was part of the Soviet Union, was not the place where flower children and esoteric beliefs would have been welcomed by the authorities. Yet, interest in various transcendental phenomena spread, with the goal, as Vladimir Wiedemann has noted when speaking about the hippie community, of conducting personal spiritual searches.<sup>46</sup> About

43 Eda Sepp, "Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimise probleemid ja naiskunstnike osakaal: Valve Janov, Silvia Jõgever ja Kaja Kärner", *Ariadne lõng: nais- ja meesuuringute ajakiri*, II,1/2 (Tallinn: Eesti Naisuurimus- ja Teabekeskus (ENUT), 2001, 70-85; Sirje Helme, "Miks me kutsume seda avangardiks? Abstraktnel kunst ja popkunst Eestis 1950. aastate lõpus ja 1960. aastatel", *Erinevad modernismid, erinevad avangardid. Kesk- ja Ida-Euroopa kunstiprobleemid pärast Teist maailmasõda. Eesti Kunstimuuseumi Toimetised*, 4. (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, 2009), 123-138.

44 "Henn Roode mõttekildel joonistustelt", *Kunst*, 1/ nr.73, (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1989), 27-30.

45 Leonhard Lapin, *Tühjus ja ruum I: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia üldkompositsiooni õppetooli õpik* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 1998); Leonhard Lapin, *Kontseptsioonid 1979 – 1980; Protsessid 1980-1995* (Tallinn: Pakett, 1997); Leonhard Lapin, *Tühjus = Void* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2003).

46 Kiwa, Terje Toomistu, *Nõukogude lilled: 70ndate psühheedeeline underground. Videointervjuud*. (Kultusfilm OÜ, 2013).





Fig. 1. Henn Roode, "Composition". Oil, cardboard, 1965 (AME).

sixty or more years after the triumph of theosophy, anthroposophy, etc, a similar pattern of interest was repeated in Europe and the U.S., and this time also reaching Estonia. This was an interest and spiritual need for anything different, non-compulsory, irregular, non-material, and in Estonia, this package of interests included UFOs, occultism, Tarot cards, I Ching systems, and other oriental teachings. Enn Tegova has said that esoteric things were a good tool for surviving in a totalitarian system,<sup>47</sup> although more extensive processes were probably involved than just the rejection of totalitarian ideology.

In Estonia, as elsewhere, the writings on art history have not considered it necessary to deal with the issue of how much the interest in esoteric and oriental teachings, which were popular in the 1960s, influenced/caused the second wave of abstract art in the later part of the decade. Of course, what ideas the artists shared and discussed, and whether they were realised creatively, may not be reflected or recorded in art history texts. The following text is also only a compilation of initial notes and meant more to raise the question than to be a thorough study. However, rushing ahead, I can confirm that there is a significantly greater connection between art and the more or less esoteric ideas of the turn of the decade than is reflected in our art history.

Practically no printed materials from the Soviet era exist that would confirm an interest in the occult and oriental beliefs. The little material that does exist can be divided between texts introducing oriental culture and extremely chequered materials that, as mentioned above, range from UFOs to Rosicrucian groups.

A few texts dealing with oriental art<sup>48</sup> were officially granted printing permits at that time, but they undoubtedly underwent very strict censorship. Thus, a publication permit was not issued to the text on Tantric art thoroughly prepared by Tõnis Vint for the "Kunst" (Art)

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47 Ibid.

48 See, for example: Mart Helme, „Hieroglüüf Kaug-Ida kunstis“, *Kunst* 1/ 50, (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1977), 54 -39; Mart Helme, „Dzitoku „Härjakarjatamispildid““, *Kunst* 3/ 53, (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1978), 54 -56.

almanac.<sup>49</sup> In the article, Tõnis Vint directs the readers' attention to the meaning of oriental teachings in artistic portrayal, as also to C. G. Jung's psychoanalytical research based on the psychology of the day. Vint also alludes to the development of artists' compositional diagrams based on larger (psychological, etc.) systems that are mentioned in the art history of pre-Reformation Europe. Considering the above, it is positively amazing that several important texts did appear in the 1980s, which were translated and annotated by Linnart Mäll (1938 -2010). This success is due largely to the Looming Library series, although the Eesti Raamat publishing house also produced several important works.<sup>50</sup> However, dealing with oriental religions was generally not tolerated, and proved a hindrance to, at least, anyone's academic career.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, much of the published material available to the public dates from the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The quantity of literature that Mäll was able to translate into Estonian, especially in the early 2000s, is awe-inspiring and high in quality.<sup>52</sup> Several texts with Buddhist influences were also published at that time by Leonhard Lapin,<sup>53</sup> and a special issue of "Ehituskunst" (Building Art) dedicated to Tõnis Vint's research was initiated by him.<sup>54</sup>

Hand-written translations of occult literature, the quality of which varied to an extreme degree, were passed from reader to reader, and

49 Tõnis Vint, „Kuldne lill. Tantra. Tao“, *Kunst* 2/ 48 (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1975). In the same issue, also: Linnart Mäll, „Kuidas mõista tankasid“, *Kunst* 2/ 48. The issue of the magazine was destroyed at the orders of Glavlit, which was the official body for censorship and the protection of state secrets, which, among other things, controlled and approved publishing permits. Without these permits nothing could appear in print in the Soviet Union. Some of the copies that were to be destroyed, nevertheless, survived. What is confusing is that the next issue of *Kunst*, which included some articles from the previous one, but not the articles by Tõnis Vint and Linnart Mäll, bore the same issue number.

50 See, for example: Kong Fuzi, *Vesteid ja vestlusi/ Konfutsius*, translated from ancient Chinese and annotated by Linnart Mäll (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1988).

51 In 1973, Linnart Mäll was dismissed from his position as senior lecturer in general history at the Tartu State University for political reasons and thereafter worked for 10 years as the engineer in the Oriental Studies Office of the University. He was not able to defend his thesis until 1985.

52 Linnart Mäll has translated Buddhist texts from Sanskrit, Pali, classical Chinese and Tibetan, written forewords, introductory articles, commentaries, compiled registers, etc. A few examples: *Dhammapada: Buddha mõttesalmide jada*, translated from Pali and foreword and explanatory notes by Linnart Mäll (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli orientalistikakeskus: Budismi Instituut, 2005); *Bodhitšarjāvatāra/ Šāntideva*, s translated from Sanskrit and foreword and explanatory notes by Linnart Mäll (Tartu: Lux Orientalis, 2008).

53 See, for example: Lapin, *Tühjus ja ruum I*; Lapin, *Kontseptsioonid 1979 – 1980*; Lapin, *Tühjus= Void*.

54 *Tõnis Vindi eri, Ehituskunst*, nr.33/34, editor-in-chief Leonhard Lapin (Tallinn: Eesti Arhitektide Liit, 2002).



Fig. 2. Tõnis Vint, "Two Lighthouses". Litography, paper, 1980 (AME).



Fig. 3. Tõnis Vint, "GM 54". Ink, gouache, paper, 1989 (AME).

this has been mentioned in several interviews.<sup>55</sup> In addition, it was possible to obtain spiritual literature in Russian, either by swapping books from pre-war home libraries or from antique shops, but primarily about Russian Freemasons. In the early 1970s, English-language occult literature could be found in antique shops, although seldom. Some of Erich von Däniken's books about extraterrestrial civilisations were passed from reader to reader and were extremely influential and popular. In Soviet society, Däniken's texts about ancient aliens and the development of civilisations, which lacked any connection to the accepted dogma of the science of history at that time, truly seemed like revelations.<sup>56</sup>

The names of Blavatsky and Steiner were also known, but, as far as the author knows, theosophical literature did not circulate. However, Leonhard Lapin has alluded to an interest among young cultural intellectuals in so-called "New Christianity" (L. Lapin's expression).<sup>57</sup> People were also interested in Paul Tillich's texts, from which people got idea of Christianity, and which typically circulated as hand-written copies. The translations were apparently done by the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>58</sup> Some of Lapin's works of art were also directly inspired by the new interest in Christianity. According to the artist, his works called "Becoming One with the Star" I-III (1970), "The Beauty of our Burial Places" I-III (1971) and "Finger Pointing Toward the Sun. Iconostasis" (1972) were directly influenced by his interest in Christianity. Lapin gave the works a Pop Art form. This is a noteworthy and provides a reason to add another dimension, which has been ignored to date, to the limited material on Estonian Pop Art. The question is not what form Lapin gave his reflections on God, but its seeming incompatibility with ideologies. At the same time, the interwoven nature of the culture at the time allows an explanation to be found quite simply.

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55 Kiwa, Toomistu, *Nõukogude lillelapsed*; Sirje Helme's conversation with Leonhard Lapin on 1 March.2014, (notes in the author's possession); Sirje Helme's conversation with Andres Tolts on 4 March 2014, (notes in the author's possession).

56 For example: Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved mysteries of the past*, translated by Michael Heron (New York [etc]: Bantam Books, 1973).

57 Sirje Helme's conversation with Leonhard Lapin on 1 March.2014.

58 The The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church was established in 1946 and since 2011 operates an institution of professional higher education.



The introduction of oriental culture and religions still provides the most definitive meaning for the abstract method of depiction. In this way, it is possible to find a first-hand point of contact between artistic creation and religious searches. Different periods are even discernible: first, Tõnis Vint's interest in Japanese culture at the turn of the decade and his ink drawings of geometric spaces from the early 1970s. For him, the Japanese concept of space did not only signify interior design rationality, but in his new post-Pop aesthetic concept, he combined the spatial void and its psychological impact, thereby establishing the foundation for his psycho-geometrical system.<sup>59</sup> At that time, Tõnis Vint also wrote an article about empty space, which was published in the "Kunst ja Kodu" (Art and Home) almanac.<sup>60</sup>

The beginning of the second period could be marked by the change brought about by the discovery of the Lielvarde belt.<sup>61</sup> The "reading" of the complicated geometrical ornamentation, searching for parallels for the symbolic language in the old Scandinavian cultures, as well as the ancient cultures of the Americas and

Fig. 4-6. Leonhard Lapin. "Becoming One with the Star", I- III. Ink, paper, 1970 (AME).

59 Leonhard Lapin, "Tõnis Vint ja tema ajatus", *Ehituskunst* no. 33/34, 8.

60 Tõnis Vint, "Tühi ruum", *Kunst ja Kodu 2* (Tallinn: Kirjastus Kunst, 1974), 26-29.

61 In 1972, Tõnis Vint discovered a belt as part of a Livonian national costume that was a few hundred years in Lielvarde. The belt's geometric ornamentation was amazingly similar to the ornamentation on the ritual elements of many ancient cultures. See: Lapin, "Tõnis Vint ja tema ajatus", 9.

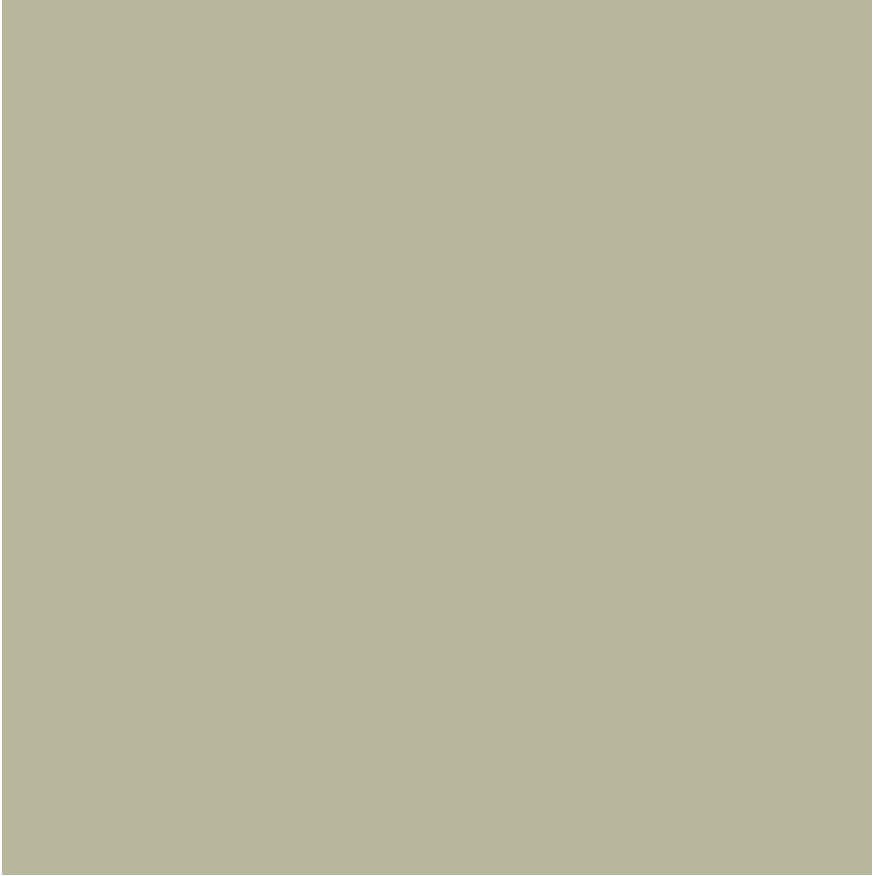


Fig. 7. Tõnis Vint, "Road of the Sun". Gouache, watercolor, paper, 1978 (Art Museum of Estonia/AME).

Far East, not only became the artist's life's work, but also formed the basis for his subsequent work. Searching for a higher consciousness, the belief in pure creative energy, which supposedly fed the old civilisations, and the messages of which should be legible with the help of old texts and symbols, became predominant in Tõnis Vint's thinking and work.

Elnara Taidre has systematically studied the artist's interest in esoteric sciences.<sup>62</sup> In her article titled "Tõnis Vint's Art Practices as a Syncretistic

62 Elnara Taidre, "Tõnis Vint's Art Practices as a Syncretistic Total Work of Art", *Tõnis Vint and His Aesthetic Universe*, ed. E. Taidre (Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2012), 30-39; Elnara Taidre, *Täiusliku visuaalse keele ja universaalse vormi otsingud. Tõnis Vindi loomingu ühest tendentsist*. Master's thesis (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia Kunstikultuuri teaduskond, Kunstiteaduse instituut, 2008).





Fig. 8. Tõnis Vint, "Road of the Moon". Indian ink, gouache, paper, 1978 (AME).

Total Work of Art", Elnara Taidre proceeds from the concept of a total work of art (in German, *Gesamtkunstwerk*), by stressing that Vint's interest was focused primarily on the potential of visual images, which the artist associated (mainly in the case of geometric images) with beliefs and philosophical thought.<sup>63</sup> Elnara Taidre has dealt in more detail with Tõnis Vint's systems in her master's thesis titled "Täiusliku visuaalse keele ja universaalse vormi otsingud. Tõnis Vindi loomingu ühest tendentsist" (Searches for an Ideal Visual Language and Universal Form. On a Trend in Tõnis Vint's Oeuvre), in which she characterises Vint's

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63 Taidre, "Tõnis Vindi kunstipraktikad kui sünkretistlik tervikkunstimeos", 24.

system as a “meta-encyclopaedic aspiration to create an all-encompassing system for explaining all possible visual symbols and their universal meaning.”<sup>64</sup>

Taidre’s approach is language-based; she analyses Tõnis Vint’s works from the viewpoint of a universal language, by approaching abstract art as a language. This is definitely a promising approach, since one of the ambitions of Modernism was to create an all-encompassing and universal art idiom, the simplicity of which is related to the new spirituality. This has also been confirmed by Tõnis Vint himself: “The mind can find the form of a visual image and take it to absolute simplicity.”<sup>65</sup>

Tõnis Vint’s concept of a psychological geometric space on one hand, and an empty surface on the other, has had a significant influence on Estonian graphic arts, and book design, in the 1970s. If we look at the few surviving geometric paintings from the mid-1970s, then one primary source is definitely Tõnis Vint’s system.

Tõnis Vint’s interest in oriental teachings coincided with the rapidly developing academic interest in the introduction and study of oriental cultures spearheaded by Linnart Mäll at the Tartu State University. Undoubtedly, Linnart Mäll himself, as a charismatic personality, had a great impact on this. In 1975, Mäll met Lapin and the friendship ended up playing a decisive role in the subsequent work of the latter. Lapin has said that Mäll was an important spiritual teacher.<sup>66</sup> Here, we call attention to two series created by Lapin: “Signs” (1972 – 1982) and “Processes” (1981 – 1991).<sup>67</sup> Lapin himself has confirmed that *Signs* was his first Buddhist series, and through this series, he defined the symbols in his work.<sup>68</sup> Lapin’s concept of void also grew out of this social interaction.<sup>69</sup> When writing about nought as the principle that creates emptiness, Lapin alludes mostly to Buddhist teachings and arrives at the source of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Abstract Art through personal experience. “However, a void as an independent picturesque value became significant only in the sec-

64 Taidre, *Täiusliku visuaalse keele ja universaalse vormi otsingud*, 4.

65 Tõnis Vint, “Mõtteid”, *Vikerkaar*, no. 4 (Tallinn: 1992), 45.

66 Leonhard Lapin, “Linnart Mäll ja Juhan Liiv”, *Looming*, no. 3 (Tallinn: 2012), 375- 380.

67 Jorma Hautala, “Leonhard Lapin – Myths and Utopias”, *Leonhard Lapin. Merkit ja tyhjyys. Signs and Void* (Hämeenlinna: Hämeenlinnan Taidemuseon julkaisuja 1/2009).

68 Sirje Helme’s conversation with Leonhard Lapin on 1 March.2014.

69 See, for example Lapin, *Tühjus= Void*.

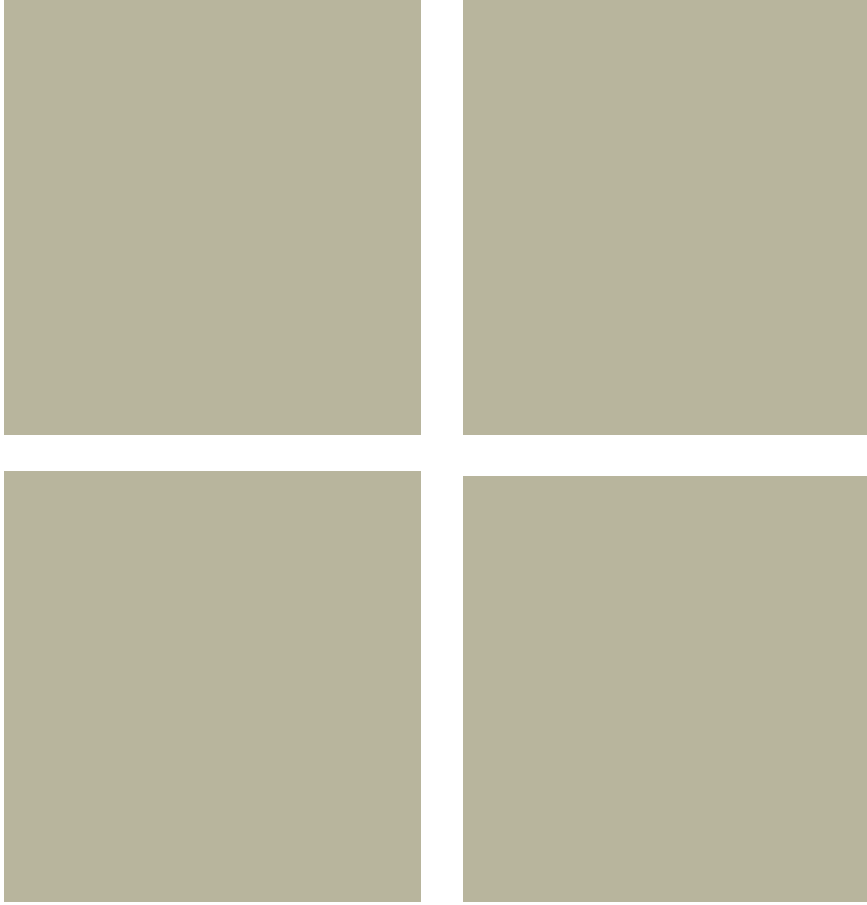


Fig. 9. Leonhard Lapin, "Process I". Litography, 1980 (AME).

Fig. 10. Leonhard Lapin, "Process XX". Litography, 1988 (AME).

Fig. 11. Leonhard Lapin, "Process XXI". Litography, 1978 (AME).

Fig. 12. Leonhard Lapin, "Process VII". Litography, 1986 (AME).

ond decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in connection with the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich," wrote Lapin.<sup>70</sup>

Lapin's relations with the Russian avant-garde have usually not been examined (also by the author) and especially with Malevich's work in the context of oriental religions. But, this is quite logical. Lapin knew Malevich's student Pavel Kondratjev in the mid-1970s,<sup>71</sup> and this friend-

<sup>70</sup> Lapin, *Tühjus= Void*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Lapin met Pavel Kondratjev through Vladimir Makarenko, who had come to Tallinn from Ukraine, met Tõnis Vint and later belonged to Vint's circle of friends.

ship in turn stimulated Lapin's interest in the avant-garde. Kondratjev himself dealt with Malevich's oeuvre primarily in the context of modernist form radicalism. According to Lapin, becoming familiar with oriental teachings through the agency of Linnart Mäll gave him the opportunity to make use of Malevich's work in the context of his spiritual searching and to reject the restrictive Greenberg-inspired theories of Modernism.

Tõnis Vint constructed his abstract system on the idea of empty space adopted from Japanese culture and somewhat later concentrated on opening up the closed world of symbols and ornamentation. In this process, he moved further from the principle of non-figurativeness, which no longer possessed autonomous importance. The study of ornamentation became primarily an issue of language and "decoding". In this process, the question of form was totally lacking and only strenuous spiritual searching remained.

Unlike Vint, Lapin moved forward via the greater abstractization of images. If the main figures in the "Signs" (1972 -1982) series were crosses/circles/squares, etc., in his series "Conceptions" (1979 – 1980) and "Processes" (1980 – 1995), the artists developed a more complicated idiom of abstract images. The artist published some of these works in a separate publication,<sup>72</sup> and the complementary texts do not try to explain the works but rather to complement them with his reflections, the development of which, the artist says he learned from the oriental teachings intermediated by Linnart Mäll.

In both cases, the geometrical depiction idiom is the means of expression through which content is searched for and signified. Geometric images have played the role of primary symbols in various civilisations and, in his texts, Lapin has emphasised the conscious utilisation of the geometric form. "In geometry the things we perceive directly are identical with the things that we perceive abstractly," the artist writes.<sup>73</sup>

At this point, I want to come back to the combination of the Pop Art form idiom and Christian content in Leonhard Lapin's work, which was mentioned above. As we know, Pop Art in Estonia did not develop into a clear-cut artistic phenomenon, and as one of the outputs of youth culture (although extremely necessary and decisive for the art field) is a natural mixing of various ideas. In a conversation with Andres

72 Lapin. *Kontseptsioonid 1979 – 1980. Protsessid 1980 – 1995*.

73 Lapin, Tühjus ja ruum I.

Tolts, the artist also directed my attention to Pop Art's affinity for sign systems,<sup>74</sup> which, in the Pop Art context, appeared as the carriers and reflectors of everyday myths. However, their semiotic meaning does not necessarily differ from the visual coding of European occult sciences. It is quite easy to find signs derived from various occult teachings in Andres Tolts's work as well.

#### IN CONCLUSION

When examining the interest in the occult sciences and oriental religions that sprung up in Estonia during the 1960s, it is not possible to ignore the decisive role, represented by Tõnis Vint and Leonhard Lapin, played by this interest in the second wave of Abstract Art at the turn of and early 1970s. For the broader comprehension of this interest, one cannot ignore the wave of interest that developed similarly at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the results of which are justifiably connected to the development of Abstract Art considered in the context of Modernism. Going forward, questions could be posed that would assume much broader-based answers, but which, nevertheless, bring us back to the concept and meaning of God and spirituality. What will replace the orthodox conceptions of God in the modern world, and how this will occur? These questions deserve to be examined in the current context. At least, material related to Estonian art exists that provides a reason to keep dealing with the question.

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74 Sirje Helme's conversation with Andres Tolts on 4 March 2014.

SIRJE HELME: THEOSOPHY AND THE IMPACT OF ORIENTAL TEACHING  
ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT ART

**KEYWORDS:** ABSTRACT ART, THEOSOPHY, RELIGION, VOID, ESTONIAN  
ART AT THE TURN OF 1960/1970.

SUMMARY:

This article focuses attention on a marginal topic that has received little attention in art history to date – the great interest shown by the avant-garde artists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the occult sciences, especially theosophy, and the influence of these occult sciences on the development of modern art, and first and foremost, on non-representational art. Although, as a result of the modernisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its whirlwind of rapidly developing scientific discoveries and technological processes people increasingly turned their back on Christianity, it would be wrong to describe this time as one when religion was totally abandoned. Alongside Christianity, the study of Far Eastern and Middle-East religions and philosophical systems became popular, and in the cultural sphere, Christianity started to be treated as a purely cultural phenomenon, and not as the centre of absolute truth and morality. Spiritualism, occultism, and theosophy, the latter being a mixture of philosophical, religious and scientific views that was moving in the direction of a systematic set of beliefs, became extremely popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a counter-reaction to the excessive pressure of a materialistic worldview. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many avant-garde artists were gripped by these ideas, including Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, whose work formed the basis for different trends in abstract art. The influence of the occult sciences on both artists was decisive in the development of their theoretical points of departure and creative principles. Attention was focused on the influence of the occult sciences on the oeuvre of these artists already in the mid-1960s (Sixten Ringbom, Robert Welsh). When the works of Hilma af Klint, which had been unknown to date, were made public, a topic, which had been relatively marginal in the study of the spiritual sources for abstract art, increased in importance. A question developed, not only about abstract art as a radical innovation of form, but as a search for new spiritual meaning, which sought fill the void that resulted from the abandonment of Christianity. The strong interest in Far-Eastern religions that developed in the youth culture of the 1960s also spread to

Estonia, although in a modest form and for different reasons than in the West. This interest was realised in the abstract works of several artists (Tõnis Vint, Leonhard Lapin). The activities of Linnart Mäll, a scholar of Buddhism, who worked at the University of Tartu, also influenced this process. Therefore, material related to Estonian art also exists that can form the basis for examining, when and how the spiritual vacuum that has developed in today's world has been replaced/supplemented.

CV:

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Articles have been published in several international journals; the author of *A Concise History of Estonian Art*, 1999 (co-author Prof. Jaak Kangilaski, translated into Finnish in 2001); *Popkunst Forever. Estonian Pop Art at the Turn of the 1960s and 1970s*, 2010; co-author of *History of Estonian Art 1940-1990*, volume 6, 2013; organizer of many conferences and seminars; editor of collections of critical essays (*Nosy Nineties. Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art on 1990s*, 2001; *Lost Eighties. Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art on 1980s*, 2010); and the *Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia* ("Different Modernisms, Different Avant-Gardes. Problems in Central and Eastern European Art after World War II", 2009; "Art and Political Reality", 2013).



