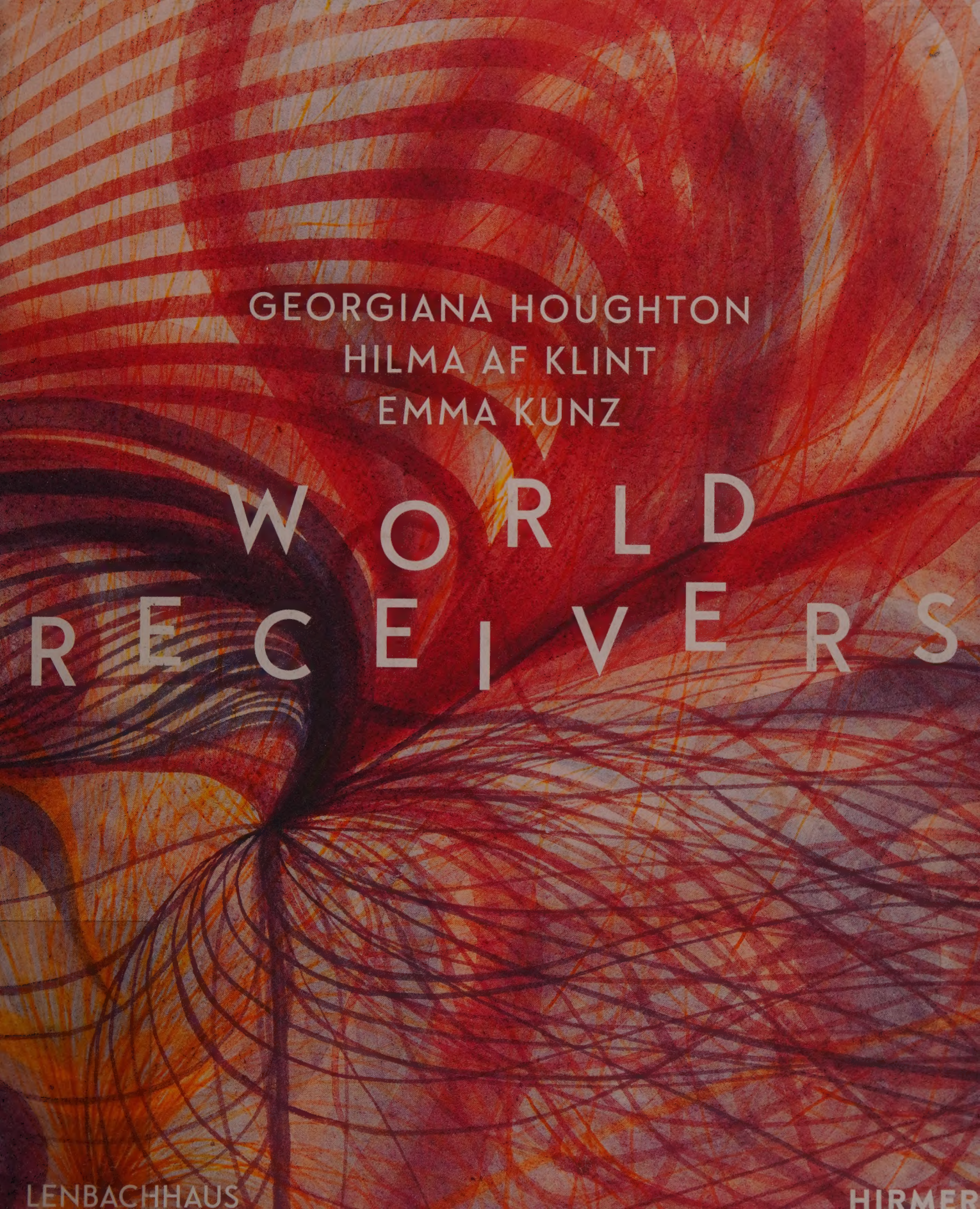




GEORGIANA HOUGHTON  
HILMA AF KLINT  
EMMA KUNZ

WORLD  
RECEIVERS





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## WORLD RECEIVERS





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GEORGIANA HOUGHTON  
HILMA AF KLINT  
EMMA KUNZ

AND JOHN WHITNEY, JAMES WHITNEY, HARRY SMITH

Edited by  
Karin Althaus, Matthias Mühling, Sebastian Schneider –  
Lenbachhaus Munich



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Karin Althaus

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# Introduction

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The exhibition *World Receivers. Georgiana Houghton – Hilma af Klint – Emma Kunz* provides insight into an extraordinary and largely unknown episode of the modern era: Georgiana Houghton in England, Hilma af Klint in Sweden, and Emma Kunz in Switzerland each developed her own abstract visual language highly charged with meaning. They followed their convictions with perseverance and assertiveness; with their works, all three strove to visualize laws of nature, the spiritual, and the supernatural. For the first time ever, we are presenting their seldom shown works together at the Lenbachhaus's Kunstbau.

In addition, little-known films by Harry Smith and the brothers James and John Whitney are also being presented. Beginning in the 1940s, these Americans developed experimental methods to depict abstract imagery in the medium of film. They, too, were strongly guided by spiritual interests that had become widespread within the American counterculture of the mid-twentieth century.

The Lenbachhaus is home to the world's largest collection of the art of the Blue Rider group. The presentation and scholarly research of this era is one of our core tasks. Since within the context of the Blue Rider group Wassily Kandinsky is one of the most important artists in our collection, our research activities and exhibitions naturally focus on the history of abstraction. Despite the fact that Kandinsky cannot, as is often claimed, be considered the inventor of abstraction, his art and theoretical writings

offer a significant starting point for many of our projects. Kandinsky's early abstractions and his influential text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) form the frame of reference for dealing with the artists at the focus of the exhibition *World Receivers*.

We are committed not only to producing exhibitions at the highest level of scholarship, but also, with these projects, to making our own contribution to such research. This also includes repeatedly devoting ourselves to neglected or marginalized topics in art history and investigating ostensibly well-known phenomena from new perspectives.

It is not about replacing the name of one pioneer of abstraction with another; on the contrary, we are aiming at a nuanced and diverse discourse on abstraction as an important component of modern art. We are interested in the abstract art of Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, Piet Mondrian, Emma Kunz, Hilma af Klint, and Georgiana Houghton—not in the question of who painted the first abstract painting. Our curiosity is directed towards an expanded contextualization of these works: We ask ourselves within which intellectual and social contexts abstract art flourished in the modern era, which concepts of artistic calling accompanied this, and which new procedures were employed. When one considers the modern era from such an expanded perspective, phenomena are revealed that have hitherto received little recognition, much less access to a broader audience. An expansion of the notion of the artist, the concept of art, and the geographical horizon can help in the recognition of interesting and relevant artistic

positions. Ultimately, it is the fascinating and often beguilingly beautiful and undoubtedly abstract works in this exhibition themselves which provide information about the history of art and to which we wish to give as much space as possible for unbiased contemplation.

Hilma af Klint painted for the future: She is the best known of the three artists presented here, and her work has long been revered by contemporary artists; in recent years, she has also received widespread institutional attention: The Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, and the Serpentine Gallery in London have dedicated highly acclaimed solo exhibitions to af Klint; in 2018, major retrospectives will be presented in the Pinacoteca in São Paulo, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. From 1906 on, af Klint created large-scale abstract paintings based on her dealings with Spiritualism and Theosophy. In doing so, she served—as she herself stated—as a medium for the immaterial messages of a higher, spiritual realm. The analysis of her spectacular work also challenges us to question previously binding narratives about the genesis of abstract art in the modern era.

Georgiana Houghton has also received a great deal of attention in recent years. Her intensely colorful ink drawings have been featured in solo exhibitions at the Monash University Museum of Art in Melbourne, and the Courtauld Gallery in London. In Victorian London, Houghton was an eminent trance medium and drew under the direct influence of spirits—throughout her life, however, she was denied credit for the artistic quality of her work. Only a few drawings are still preserved today. We are thus all the more thankful to be able to present a large number of these works to a wider audience for the first time.

Emma Kunz's dictum "My art is destined for the twenty-first century" has proven to be true. Although her work has received widespread international recognition since a first exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthau in Aarau in 1973/74, it has often been presented in connection with Outsider Art projects and has rarely been discussed in the context of general issues of classical modernism and avant-garde art. Kunz used a pendulum to explore the earth's force streams. She also used the pendulum to create geometric, colored-pencil compositions which are unparalleled in their artistic autonomy. In Germany, original works by Emma Kunz have (astonishingly) been shown exclusively

in the context of Harald Szeemann's thematic exhibitions, most recently in 1992 (*Visionäre Schweiz*, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf). The presentation at the Lenbachhaus, which features more than fifty large-format drawings, is thus also the first opportunity for a wider public to become acquainted with a broad selection of her works and to discover her working environment and world of ideas.

Harry Smith was a cult figure in the underground scene in New York. His eccentric lifestyle, heavily influenced by the use of drugs, as well as his unbridled creativity in many areas of artistic production, including painting, printmaking, and film, and as an editor of music anthologies and a collector of anthropological artefacts, make his life and work highly susceptible to myth making. Contrary to such tendencies, we consciously limit ourselves to his early works, in which—influenced by Kandinsky—he dedicated himself to the visualization of spiritual worlds of imagination and thereby developed an impressive visual vocabulary.

In their work, the brothers John and James Whitney also deliberately distanced themselves from a reproduction of external reality. The focus of their attention was the production of synthetic visual and acoustic worlds, which, in their autonomy, they saw in relation to the abstraction of Piet Mondrian. They ascribed special significance to the technical apparatus, which dictated how they had to proceed with regard to artistic design. Here, an artistic self-understanding is expressed in which the subject as creator is not put at the center. The artist is instead characterized by his instrumental character, since he acts as a mediator between a hidden and a (not yet) visible world. In the concrete case of the Whitneys, this mediation consists of a technical operation, the controlling of the machine. This aspect connects them with the other artists in this exhibition: No matter what form of visualization they were interested in, it always required a special "channel" to realize the respective project. In the case of the Whitneys, it was a machine, in that of Emma Kunz the pendulum, with Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint the hand guided by spirits, and with Harry Smith intoxication.

We would not have been able to take on and realize this project without the commitment of our three principal lenders to fully support the exhibition. We are sincerely grateful to the Victorian Spiritualists' Union in Melbourne,



in particular Lorraine Lee Tet and Alan Bennet, for their support; with thirty-five works by Georgiana Houghton, their holdings are the most comprehensive worldwide. Despite other major exhibition projects, Johan af Klint from the Hilma af Klint Foundation in Stockholm found our project so interesting that we can fortunately present a wide selection of works by Hilma af Klint, including works that have never been seen before in public. Likewise, the Emma Kunz Center in Würenlos has also been extremely obliging from the beginning; we very much regret that its founder and director Anton C. Meier can no longer experience the exhibition, and we sincerely thank Karin Kägi for her intensive commitment to the project in difficult times.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to Whitney Editions, LLC, and Light Cone, who oversee the estate of John and James Whitney. They digitized four early films by the brothers specifically for our exhibition. We are very pleased that it is thus possible to present the *Five Film Exercises* (1943–1945) in their entirety. For the rights to present the films by Harry Smith, we thank Anthology Film Archives in New York, the long-standing institution which, for decades, has committed itself to the promotion and distribution of experimental film.

From the beginning, researchers and scholars have supported us with advice and practical assistance and thus also made key contributions to the realization of this project. Marco Pasi kindly included us in his story of discovery and exhibition projects dedicated to Georgiana

Houghton and supported the project through his recommendations. Julia Voss generously allowed us to profit from her current research on the life and work of Hilma af Klint, and Vivienne Roberts and Gill Matini of the College of Psychic Studies in London not only shared their knowledge with us, but also supported us with loans. Regina Barunke and Henning Engelke were particularly important with regard to our research into the whereabouts and scholarly analysis of the films of Smith and the Whitney brothers. As a curator and a scholar respectively, these two individuals were invaluable dialogue partners, who were involved in our project from the beginning and contributed decisively to our being able to make a contribution to the reception of these artists to a wider international audience with our publication.

Pro Helvetia shares our understanding of Emma Kunz as a contemporary artist, and we are very grateful for the foundation's generous support of our project.

Many thanks go to Hirmer Verlag for its dedicated and painstaking editorial activity.

Such an ambitious project can only be realized in cooperation with many individuals. Our sincere thanks thus go, last but certainly not least, to all employees and colleagues of the Lenbachhaus.

Karin Althaus  
Matthias Mühling  
Sebastian Schneider



Gabriele Münter, left: Four people at a séance; right: Wassily Kandinsky, Marianne von Werefkin and a third person at a séance, ca. 1909, pencil on paper, 9.4 × 11.6 cm, sketchbook con. 46/35, pp. 24-25, Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung, Munich

*"The inner content of the work can be affiliated with either one or the other of two procedures which today (is it only today? or is it only particularly evident today?) dissolve in themselves all secondary movements.*

*These two procedures are:*

- 1. The breaking up of the soulless-material life of the nineteenth century; that is, the falling down of the material supports which were thought to be the only firm ones, the decay and dissolution of the individual parts.*
- 2. The building up of the psychic-spiritual life of the twentieth century which we are experiencing and which manifests and embodies itself even now in strong, expressive and definite forms.*

*These two procedures are the two sides of 'today's movement.'*

*To qualify the works which have already been produced, or even to state the final goal of this movement, would be a presumption which would immediately be cruelly punished with lost freedom.*

*As has often been said before, we shall not strive for restriction but for liberation. One shall not reject without intense attempt to discover something which is alive."*

**From: Wassily Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form" (1911/12)**



# Lenders and Acknowledgements

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This exhibition was developed in close cooperation with our principal lenders, without whose dedicated support this project could not have been realized:

Victorian Spiritualists' Union, Melbourne  
The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm  
Emma Kunz Center, Würenlos

We are grateful to the other lenders for their trust and helpfulness:

Anthology Film Archives, New York  
ABCD Collection, Paris  
The College of Psychic Studies, London  
Light Cone, Paris  
Collection of Vivienne Roberts, London  
Whitney Editions, LLC, Los Angeles

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to all those who have supported us with their ideas and deeds:

|                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Johan af Klint     | Inga Läce          |
| Charles Asprey     | Lars Bang Larsen   |
| Regina Barunke     | Emmanuel Lefrant   |
| Alan Bennet        | Gill Matini        |
| Daniel Birnbaum    | Anton C. Meier †   |
| Peter Burri        | Hans-Ulrich Obrist |
| Jane Clark         | Francis E. Parker  |
| Charlotte Day      | Marco Pasi         |
| Nicole Durling     | Vivienne Roberts   |
| Henning Engelke    | Barbara Safarova   |
| Andreas Fischer    | Jeff Stewart       |
| Patricia Fullerton | Daniela Stöppel    |
| Simon Grant        | Lorraine Lee Tet   |
| Karin Kägi         | Julia Voss         |
| Alexander Kauffman | Barnaby Wright     |
| John Klacsmann     |                    |

# Introductory Words

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Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) was a well-educated Swedish artist who graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1887 with excellent grades. She had an open mind and was well versed in the natural sciences. She started out her career as a conventional landscape and portrait painter. In 1906, Hilma af Klint started to paint in abstract form.

The gist of Hilma af Klint's abstract paintings is that she made the *invisible* world *visible*—i.e. she presented complex philosophical ideas, spiritual concepts and religious experiences *physically* on a canvas. In this endeavour, she was primarily influenced by Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Christianity. Hilma af Klint's abstract paintings were usually painted in series—not as individual works. In addition, her abstract paintings were permeated with symbols, thus directing the viewer.

In 1920, Hilma af Klint entered the Anthroposophical Society and traveled to Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland. In 1921, she studied Goethe's color theory thoroughly. She did not paint a single work during this year. In 1922, she started painting again—this time in “floating colors” or “wet-in-wet.”

Art and religion always seem to have had a strong connection—like communicating vessels. Art is presented to mankind in the form of inspiration. In the moment of inspiration, the question is whether the artist then *creates* the art work, or whether the artist is then only a mere *vehicle*? This is a crucial question as regards Hilma af Klint, as her inspiration at times was of such a pronounced intensity.

By assimilating impressions from various sources, Hilma af Klint developed her own ideas and expressions. She was in other words an *originator* of and *pioneer* within the area of abstract painting.

Hilma af Klint was my grandfather's sister. My father—vice admiral Erik af Klint—inherited in 1944 all of Hilma af Klint's oeuvres within abstract art—i.e. around 1,300 paintings and 124 notebooks and sketchbooks in excess of 26,000 handwritten and typed pages. The Hilma af Klint Foundation was established in 1972. All of Hilma af Klint's above-mentioned works were donated to the Hilma af Klint Foundation, which still owns and administers them.

The Board of Directors of the Hilma af Klint Foundation esteems greatly the substantially increased interest during recent years in Hilma af Klint and her works. This is expressed by Lenbachhaus's Munich exhibition *Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz*. We appreciate sincerely the comparison of the background to and the paintings of these three great artists. We wish the exhibition all success.

Hilma af Klint painted for the future—  
and the future is now!

Johan af Klint  
Executive Director  
The Hilma af Klint Foundation



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GEORGIANA HOUGHTON  
HILMA AF KLINT  
EMMA KUNZ

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Karin Althaus



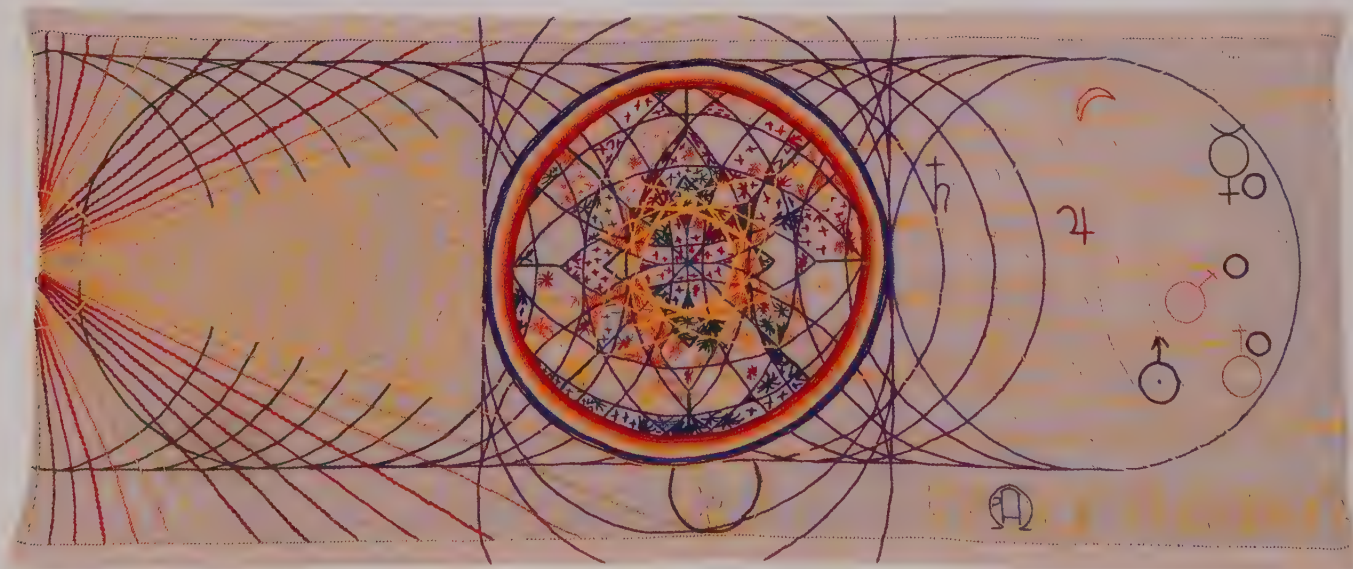
## "JE SUIS RADIO"

"I am Radio"—in 1924, Jeanne Natalie Wintsch formulated her self-image more explicitly than any of the three artists presented here. The textile work of the Swiss embroidery artist alludes to the invisible waves that surround us. Like a radio, Wintsch received messages that perhaps only she could hear and transmitted these in a large-format work.<sup>1</sup>

It is a fundamental decision to understand yourself first as a receiver and only then—if at all—as a sender; a sender who seeks to understand and process, and then to pass on what he or she has received. The notion of being a medium, of wanting to serve as a mediator, is a subjective experience.<sup>2</sup> But for supra-individual concepts of artistic creativity there are also terms that can be understood within the context of mediumship: For example, the word "imagination" (Lat. *imago*, "image") locates the origin of the image in the power of imagination, and "inspiration" (Lat. *inspirare*, "to breathe into") occurs in both religious and artistic contexts.<sup>3</sup> Inspirations can be evoked by enhanced states of consciousness, such

as trance, visions, and dreams, and intensified through meditation or drugs. In such cases, the artist subject relinquishes his or her ego, hands it over, as it were, at the studio door, acts as a seismograph or visionary, and opens him- or herself up to energies or messages that can come from surrounding nature or other realms. Here, neither the reality of these messages nor how much the artist may have influenced and interpreted them in their visual reproduction will be called into question. It is much more interesting to see what arises in the mediumistic production of art, which often frees the receiver from the conventions of the time and can lead to the invention of a new visual language.

The main focus of our project are three women artists whose work was the result of spiritual experiences and communication with a higher realm.<sup>4</sup> Completely independent of one another, Georgiana Houghton in England, Hilma af Klint in Sweden, and Emma Kunz in Switzerland developed their own abstract visual language highly charged with meaning. What they shared was the desire to explore and visualize laws of nature, the spiritual, and the supernatural.<sup>5</sup>



Jeanne Natalie Wintsch, *Je suis radio*, 1924, embroidery on cotton, 42.5 × 103 cm, Rheinau Collection, Zurich State Archives

## GEORGIANA HOUGHTON

Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) spent the greater part of her life in Victorian London. Together with her younger sister Zilla, she received an artistic education; unfortunately, nothing is known about its contents. When Zilla died in 1851, Georgiana was deeply affected and gave up her work as an artist. Like many of her contemporaries, she experienced the deaths of a number of people in her immediate environment. Thanks to her Christian faith, she believed in the continued existence of the soul; her preoccupation with the newly emerging ideas of Spiritualism made the border to the world of spirits seem permeable and offered her the prospect of making contact with the deceased. Since about 1860, Houghton not only practiced as a medium herself, but also began to draw and paint mediumistically, guided by otherworldly beings she contacted in her séances. The earliest of the works created in this manner depict botanical forms—flowers, fruits, and leaves—but the pictures painted in bright watercolors were soon completely abstract: Arches, waves, and spirals overlap in various layers; sweeping brushstrokes are juxtaposed with microscopic lines and dots. On the reverse side or on a separate sheet of paper, Houghton noted the date of execution, the title, and the spirits involved in the drawing, as well as suggestions for an interpretation. She exhibited the resulting works initially only at her own home within the context of her Spiritualist community; in 1871, however, she organized a large exhibition, for which she rented the New British Gallery on Old Bond Street in London. For the exhibition, which lasted four months, Houghton selected 155 works and published a catalogue.

In the introduction to the catalogue of her *Spirit Drawings*, Houghton explained: “To make the character and design of this Exhibition understood, I must explain that in the execution of the Drawings my hand has been entirely guided by Spirits, no idea being formed in my own mind as to what was going to be produced, nor did I know, when a stroke was commenced, whether it would be carried upwards or downwards.” She describes her first attempts as a medium, and notes that she initially recorded the messages with a planchette, a tool for automatic writing. “In July 1861, I heard of Mrs. Wilkinson’s Spirit drawings, so on the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> I asked whether my sister Zilla, who had been an accomplished

artist while upon earth, could guide my hand for Spiritual work, but neither she nor my brother Cecil [...] could be permitted to do it, but Cecil then brought Henry Lenny, who had been a deaf and dumb artist, and he immediately controlled my hand, which was resting on the planchette, to form various curves and lines, after which I was impressed to remove the black pencil, and replace it with a blue one, with which he worked upon the same piece of paper, No. 1; and I obtained leave to sit every evening for the purpose of drawing. When the first three sheets had been filled, I asked my guide to do a flower, which he did, and then wrote the name of it on another piece of paper. After a few days’ work, I was desired to take the pencil in my hand, instead of using the planchette; thus another step was gained and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August I began with colours, [...] and from that time I have continued to do them in water colours, without any kind of preliminary pencil sketch. I earnestly hope that some of the visitors of the gallery, who have leisure to devote themselves to it, will go home, and try to obtain this delightful gift, but they must bear in mind that extreme patience and perseverance are needed for all Spiritual work. In my own case, the drawing power would appear to have come with great rapidity, but they must remember that I had been already a medium for upwards of a year and a half [...]. For the drawing phase I was also prepared by my own earthly training, having devoted the chief part of my life to that accomplishment, until Zilla’s death, in 1851, so crushed me, that I felt as if I should never again use pencil or brush. The spirits say that when once the fact is acknowledged that they can work through a mortal hand, it is not really more surprising when they draw through a medium who has not learned than through one who has; they can of course better guide the trained hand, and make a more speedy progress if they are thus relieved from all the elementary part, which must be gone through, for no person can spring, at one bound, to a pinnacle of art perfection.”<sup>6</sup>

Georgiana Houghton’s exhibition of her *Spirit Drawings* attracted the most attention in Spiritualist circles; although it was expressly intended for the artworld and the general public, both showed either little interest or a lack of understanding. The few positive reviews provide insight into the fundamental willingness to consider the works from an aesthetic point of view, but they also



demonstrate the difficulty of finding a suitable frame of reference for their assessment.<sup>7</sup> The project was a huge financial loss for Houghton. Later attempts to present her works in the London art scene failed. The reasons for this are easy to understand: In the contemporary visual culture of her time, there were no comparable images, no such forms of abstraction. Houghton's works, which can be described as abstract, must have appeared to be completely alien pictorial worlds.<sup>8</sup>

Since no concept, no theory of abstraction existed at the time, Houghton, who wrote a great deal about her activities, could not explicitly thematize the non-representational nature of her works. Perhaps she believed that her new content was sufficient as an explanation, both for their form and for their alienness: Since her art was not bound to the earthly world, she did not have to depict banal objects; for the transcendently transmitted messages, the abstract forms were perfectly adequate.<sup>9</sup> When she asked the spirits to paint a flower, she was told that this flower was not an earthly one, nor an allegory, but rather an image of an object from the realm of spirits. These images were, however, in need of interpretation, and their representation was only a shadow of their actual wonderful colorfulness.<sup>10</sup> Although Houghton's imagery had become increasingly complex and formally abstract, her drawings are never non-representational insofar as they are of manifold symbolic significance and representations of something that—albeit invisible—exists in another realm.<sup>11</sup> As images of a transcendental world, Houghton's works on paper also had a didactic function: They served as proof of the veracity of Spiritualism and were intended to provide information about the nature of God. But the drawings were obviously in need of explanation. They are generally accompanied by detailed descriptions (which were, in turn, dictated by the control spirits in the form of automatic writing and so were also difficult to understand). In addition, Houghton published and lectured extensively on her experiences.

In Spiritualistic drawings, the otherworldly or supernatural message was recorded in a complex and permanent manner, which gave them precedence over the ephemeral events of a séance, which could include speaking in a state of trance, table tipping, or the apparition of objects. The higher valuation of the message over the (art)work is a typical feature of "Spirit Art."<sup>12</sup>

There is a certain inconsistency—or rather a circular argument, a sense of going in circles—in Houghton's way of dealing with her art. On the one hand, it was a means to an end, since she could only indirectly convey her insights into another world through drawings or written notes. In this context, the mediumistic drawings were more than beautiful objects: They were sermons full of sacred symbolism, containing complex spiritual messages. On the other hand, Houghton aspired to establish the works created in this manner within the official London art scene. Their artistic quality, in turn, made the works a convincing and thus powerful instrument for the dissemination of Spiritualism. To these ends, Houghton also increasingly assumed public duties. It was also important for her as a teacher to guide others to Spiritualistic drawing.

In 1872, Houghton discovered "spirit photography." She made the acquaintance of Frederick Hudson, one of those photographers who experimented with spirit photography at the time, and served him as a medium in his studio. Her presence was not only intended to evoke apparitions, but also to substantiate them. Hudson was, however, soon charged with fraud. Indeed, it is not difficult to see that the alleged recordings of the appearances of spirits were created with the help of double exposures and manipulations of the photographic plate. Houghton presumably knew far too little about photographic techniques to see through this. In 1882, she published a detailed account of the ten-year collaboration with the photographer.<sup>13</sup>

The naivety and clumsiness of spirit photography astonishingly contrasts with the radicalism and freshness of Houghton's drawings. Their abstract timelessness also sets them apart from the representational Spiritualist art of their time, which is often based on traditional iconographies and pictorial formulas. Houghton knew she was ahead of her time with her art and described the *Spirit Drawings* as "works that could not be criticised according to any of the known and accepted canons of art."<sup>14</sup>

Among the artists presented here, Georgiana Houghton is the oldest, but the last to have been rediscovered. It is only since 2015 that her works have been exhibited and published internationally in a larger selection.

## HILMA AF KLINT

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm and graduated with honors in 1887. Here, in contrast to most European art centers, women were permitted to study from as early as 1864. In her professional work, af Klint specialized in landscapes and portraits influenced by Impressionism and Art Nouveau. Accomplished in the field of scientific illustrations, she also worked at the municipal Veterinary Institute in 1900/01. Her studio was located in the center of Stockholm's art scene; not only could she exhibit her own works there, she could also follow the current debates about artists such as Edvard Munch or Ernst Josephson up close. In her work from 1906 on, Hilma af Klint broke with the pictorial conventions of the time and developed a large group of works inspired by Spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, and Theosophy, and the life sciences, the visual language of which is often purely abstract. She was convinced that, when she was painting, she was in contact with beings of a higher level of consciousness and that these entities used her as a medium: "The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke."<sup>15</sup> From 1906 to 1908, af Klint created the first 111 works of the cycle *Paintings for the Temple*, the execution of which was a direct order from the spirit Amaliel. In a second phase from 1912 to 1915, another eighty-two works were added. For this later group of works, she also fulfilled the function of a medium, but her hand was no longer guided directly: visions now served as inspiration. She was now also permitted to interpret the words and images that appeared within her and to paint more freely than before.

The visual language of the *Temple* paintings is largely abstract, initially integrating forms that are related to botanical, organic, and physical representations, and later becoming increasingly geometric. Af Klint's artistic sophistication is revealed in sovereign compositions and daring color combinations. Letters, symbols, individual figurations, and titles clearly show that the cycle dealt with a broad exploration of human existence that attempted to transfer the duality of microcosm and macrocosm, life and death, the earthly and the spiritual, the feminine and the masculine, into a wholeness or unity.

Hilma af Klint's work is based in her experience that the spiritual dimension of human existence has become more and more marginalized in an increasingly materialistic world. As for Houghton, it was the death of her beloved sister, Hermina af Klint, in 1880 which provided the occasion for af Klint to become more involved with religious questions and the popular Spiritualist movements. In 1875, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York, which propagated the conviction of a progressive development to transcendence and strove to rationalize Spiritualism by including the study of all world religions, especially Eastern wisdom. Hilma af Klint dealt intensively with Theosophical ideas and joined the Swedish Theosophical Society in 1889, its founding year. From 1896 on, she met with friends in the group "The Five" (De Fem), whose program united Rosicrucian, Theosophical, and Christian elements. This ten-year period was instrumental in af Klint's spiritual development and helped to prepare her for the task ahead. "The Five" performed séances, during which mediumistic writing and drawing were practiced. The experiences and the messages received by the spirits were documented and analyzed in detailed notations. The resulting pencil and crayon drawings already anticipate several of the formal elements of Hilma af Klint's later works, including snails, roses and lilies, and other floral motifs and geometric shapes. The abstract visual language of af Klint's work was obviously prepared in the context of this group. Among the interpreters of her works, the opinion prevails that her professional activity as an artist was not the basis for her mediumistic drawing; on the contrary, it was necessary to break away from what she had learned, from the conventions of academic art production, in order to be able to passively and freely record the messages.<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to Georgiana Houghton's view that her artistic education was the ideal precondition for her work as a medium.

In 1908, af Klint met Rudolf Steiner in Stockholm; at the time, he was Secretary General of the German section of the Theosophical Society. She showed him her works; he praised the symbolism but rejected the mediumistic practice. From 1913 on, together with many of Steiner's supporters, she shifted from Theosophy to Anthroposophy as a doctrine of wisdom and spiritual science, which is more oriented towards the development of man.<sup>17</sup> As a result, she studied his teachings intensively, as well as their



underlying sources, which include Goethe's writings, in particular his color theory. She left the Anthroposophical Society in 1930.

The degree of potential friction is revealed through a comparison of af Klint's work with Steiner's ideas on art, as he expressed these in a lecture in Munich in 1918 (during the First World War!): "[...] it seems to me that in connection with a perceptive feeling for art and the creations of art it is necessary to speak of two original sins. Certainly one of these is the copying, the reproduction of the physical, that is, of what belongs purely to the world of the senses. The other seems to me to be the wish to express, represent or reveal, through art, the super-physical."<sup>18</sup> He positioned artistic freedom between these two poles. He goes on to say: "It is due, however, to a kind of possession—possession by one's own understanding and reason—when there is a desire for the embodiment of an idea, for the artistic embodiment of what is purely spiritual."<sup>19</sup>

After completing the *Paintings for the Temple*, Hilma af Klint resumed her professional artistic career, while continuing to create spiritual works. These included pictures that were part of a larger project to understand and systematize nature, a kind of esoteric parallel to the scientific approach of the time. In 1922, she ceased making geometric abstractions and created a new series with watercolors in a flowing wet-on-wet technique, which was inspired by Goethe's color theory and which went beyond Anthroposophical art theory, as she used the "forbidden" color black. She continued to paint in this way until her last paintings in 1941.

As with Houghton, the supernatural diktat and theme gave Hilma af Klint the freedom to understand herself first and foremost as an instrument for recording and to develop a visual language that was not committed to the reproduction of external reality. Against the background of her artistic training and her familiarity with contemporary painting, af Klint would not have been blind to the radicalness and novelty of her comprehensive project dedicated to spiritual art and research.<sup>20</sup> Despite repeated attempts, however, she failed to find a public audience for her spiritual works. From 1916 on, she erected a studio building with the support of her friends at Villa Furuheim on the island of Munsö on Lake Mälaren, her regular summer residence. Here, her *Temple* paintings were made accessible to selected visitors. Efforts to exhibit her works

at an Anthroposophical Society venue were in vain. In 1928, however, with the help of friends, she succeeded in presenting her paintings at the World Conference of Spiritual Science in London. In 1931, af Klint designed a spiral temple building as a suitable setting for her work; it was to be built on the island of Ven in Öresund, but construction never began. During this time, she must have come to the conclusion that only future generations would understand her work. Thus, in 1932 she stipulated that her works should be shown at the earliest twenty years after her death.<sup>21</sup>

Since her rediscovery in the 1980s, not only the breadth and ambition of Hilma af Klint's work have proved to be astonishing, but above all their innovative and radical visual language. Her worldview is propagated not only through hundreds of paintings and drawings, but also in thousands of sketchbook pages and many notebooks. Her mediumistically created works were themselves a subject of research for af Klint, and she traced their significance until the end of her life. It is thus questionable whether others can truly gain an understanding of the elaborate symbolic system of her metaphysical works, let alone decode them. One may therefore find it a relief that the reading, or rather the readability, of works of art is a form of reception that has in general become questionable in the age of modernism. Wassily Kandinsky, for example, hoped that the perception of his paintings would "cause vibration in the soul," whereby he saw color as a means "which directly influences the soul": "Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings."<sup>22</sup> This paraphrasing with musical metaphors transforms the viewers of a work of art into "resonance bodies" that absorb its vibrations.<sup>23</sup> If one connects the music metaphor with the radio metaphor of Jeanne Natalie Wintsch, then not only artists, but also their recipients are to be understood as receivers.

## EMMA KUNZ

Emma Kunz (1892–1963) saw herself primarily as a researcher. This self-understanding connects her with Hilma af Klint. Kunz dedicated her life to investigating the energies and powers of nature in order to use these

as a healer for the benefit of her fellow human beings. Based on her intuition, and with the help of a pendulum, she created large-scale drawings that map these energy flows. These works on paper served as an orientation in answering specific questions and problems—and as a basis for meditation. Her artistic work is an expression of a holistic philosophy of life. And like af Klint, Kunz was convinced that she had created works for the twenty-first century and that her art could not be understood during her own lifetime.<sup>24</sup>

Emma Kunz is the only one of the three artists discussed here who did not receive any artistic training. Although she grew up around 1900 in a rural Swiss region in the context of industrialized craftsmanship, namely weaving and embroidery, she lived for about ten years with the family of an academically trained painter. While she drew a great deal in school notebooks from an early age, she did not start working artistically until 1938, when, at the age of forty-six, she began to produce large-format drawings on almost square-cut graph paper. These works on paper, each produced in a single session lasting several hours, are evidence of extreme concentration on a concrete initial question; they can also be understood as protocols of the exploration of larger contexts, of the secrets of creation.<sup>25</sup>

The graph paper provided Kunz with an initial structure that facilitated orientation and objectification. An additional aid was a small square board of 8.7 × 8.7 centimeters, the function of which is comparable to a compass. A delineated cruciform, the vertical of which ended at the top in a V-shaped opening, marked the various directions, especially the way up, to an opening to the spiritual. This schematic diagram, a “redemption raser,”<sup>26</sup> was the basis for all of Kunz’s drawings. Her intuition, in combination with the movements of the pendulum, showed her where she should position dots, how to connect these, and how the resulting network of relationships could be condensed. The images resulting from this working process appear as a dynamic layering of various geometric shapes: triangles, rectangles, pentagons, and hexagons, as well as circles, crosses, stars, and parallelograms.<sup>27</sup>

In 1953, Kunz titled two self-published treatises on her art, *Neuartige Zeichnungsmethode* (New Methods of Drawing) and *Wunder schöpferischer Offenbarung* (The Miracle of Creative Revelation). It is clear from these publications that, according to her own understanding,

each element of the drawings had a precise meaning. They also testify to her astonishment, as well as to her gratitude, for the insight into larger contexts that were revealed to her. Emma Kunz drew to explore the laws and forces of nature’s regularities. The starting point was her own body, as well as her concentrated attention to nature.<sup>28</sup> Kunz approached her healing practice in the same way: By completely surrendering herself to energy flows, she directed the damaging forces onto herself and transformed these into healing energies.<sup>29</sup> There are astonishing reports about her healing successes, which already attracted attention during her own lifetime.<sup>30</sup>

That Kunz’s approach was also a form of mediumistic art practice is described by Heiny Widmer, who organized her first exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau in 1973/74: “Emma Kunz used the pendulum as a stimulant, just as other artists attempted to put themselves into a state favorable to their work through appropriate measures. She often recounted that ordered systems of points had suddenly appeared before her inner eye. She immediately understood this as a basic pattern of a new figure and wrote it down. In tireless work, she then expanded the basic pattern, enriching it, consulting the pendulum and inner visions. At times it seemed as if the picture was completing itself outside of her own consciousness, as if her hands were being guided. When a work was finished, the painter stood in front of it filled with wonder and described what had been found—returning from distant depths, curiously astonished. This working process: vision—compositional fixation—drawing—enhancement—subsequent interpretation, clearly shows that, at least in part, we are dealing with a case of mediumistic painting. In part and not entirely because, in the complete works of Emma Kunz, a tendency of development can be discerned which clearly signals that interaction between consciousness, conscious behavior, and almost unconscious listening to the primal roots of existence (*Muttergründen*), which is only found among genuine artists.”<sup>31</sup>

Since the 1970s, Kunz’s drawings have been exhibited in a variety of contexts: in solo shows, in group exhibitions of Outsider Art (including Harald Szeemann’s *Visionäre Schweiz* (Visionary Switzerland), 1991, and the Venice Biennale in 2013, curated by Massimiliano Gioni), within the frameworks of projects on the expanded concept of art (once again by Szeemann in *Richtkräfte für das 21. Jahrhundert* (Directive Forces for the Twenty-First Century),



1999, where she was presented together with Rudolf Steiner, Joseph Beuys, and Andrej Belyi), and finally as a contribution to the history of abstraction (Catherine de Zegher's *3 x Abstraction*, 2005/06, together with Hilma af Klint and Agnes Martin). It was obviously easy for her interpreters to draw connections to other artforms and artists, with comparisons ranging from Malevich and Mondrian to Max Bill, as well as from mandalas to the imaging techniques of computers (which, in our context, builds a bridge to the Whitney brothers). Nevertheless, Emma Kunz herself made only one single formal reference, namely to the illustration of a newspaper article by the mathematician Jekuthiel Ginsburg, who devoted himself to the beauty of mathematical formulas: She was stunned by a circular image such as she herself had already drawn.<sup>32</sup>

Kunz's claim to a holistic approach to her life and work has repeatedly posed challenges to interpreters; as one of her earliest and most effective exegetes, Harald Szeemann summoned up every imaginable rhetoric to do justice to this: With reference to the drawings, he spoke of "visualized 'overmind,'" "messages of salvation," and "holistic imagery."<sup>33</sup> It is clear that, for Kunz, "the painterly [was] not an end in itself"; her paintings became "art against her will."<sup>34</sup> As art historians or curators, we believe that the highest recognition is given to an oeuvre if we no longer question its classification, its status as "art." In the case of Emma Kunz, however, it is to be feared that her life's work would even be done an injustice if its artistic character were to be overemphasized. It seems that it is easier to recognize her visual art than to appreciate her much less comprehensible and understandable art of healing.<sup>35</sup> It can be assumed that Emma Kunz herself regarded healing, indeed the saving of life, as a more important and lasting achievement than the creation of drawings.

## AN EXPANDED CONCEPT OF ART

Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint, and Emma Kunz explored invisible forces and the transcendental. The remarkable perseverance with which they devoted themselves to their artistic work makes it clear that this was an

extremely important part of a spiritual way of life. Pictures have an advantage over words in that they translate a *per se* inexpressible experience into a clarity that can be more suggestive and resonant than concepts that are fixed to a more narrowly defined rational meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Their self-understanding as receivers allowed these artists to attribute the creation of their images to an external source. This gave them the freedom to overcome social, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries, as well as the necessary creative energy to actually do so.<sup>37</sup> In all three cases, the combination of difficult to visualize content with the medimistic approach led to new visual forms. The resulting individual pictorial languages are difficult to assign to a specific stylistic tendency or a particular circle of artists; they are thus a challenge to art history, and especially to the history of abstract art.

In recent years, the works of Hilma af Klint and Georgiana Houghton have caused a sensation by being abstract paintings *avant la lettre*. According to the traditional conception of the development of art, which remains effective to this day and which the founding director of The Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr Jr., noted in a now famous diagram, the "invention" of abstraction dates to the year 1910.<sup>38</sup> Af Klint verifiably created her first abstract painting in 1906, that is to say at least four years before the founding fathers of modern painting, including Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, František Kupka, Kasimir Malevich, Adolf Hölzel, Otto Freundlich, and Francis Picabia. For this reason, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm celebrated Hilma af Klint on the occasion of the comprehensive retrospective in 2013 as a "pioneer of abstraction." This was a high-profile gambit and immediately sparked an intense discussion about this claim; in the longer term, however, this exhibition with its catchy subtitle made it clear that the history of abstraction is dominated by clichés, and that the term "abstraction" describes many different phenomena and is thus relatively unprecise.

There is no doubt that the widespread view that abstract art was "the most revolutionary stylistic development of the modernist period"<sup>39</sup> makes the position of its "inventor" seem immensely attractive. To this day, Wassily Kandinsky ranks first in the general perception, though Otto Stelzer stated as early as 1964 in his "prehistory of abstract art": "The claim that Kandinsky painted the first abstract painting in 1910 is outdated."<sup>40</sup>

Art historians have long attempted to demonstrate that abstraction did not begin in the early twentieth century, but has always been an important aspect of the visual arts. In particular, when artists attempted to depict things that were invisible or not perceptible to the senses, images emerged which, though they are representational, are not a depiction of external reality. The scholar of abstract art Raphael Rosenberg proposes the concept of the “amimetic” (beyond mimesis, that is to say not committed to the imitation of nature) in order to distinguish the “fore-runners” from the concept of abstraction in the history of art in the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup>

What unites these amimetic artists with those of the early twentieth century is the desire to lend invisible things a visible form. A prime example of this is one of the most famous artist’s statements, namely the first sentence of Paul Klee’s *Creative Confession* (1920): “Art does not reproduce what is visible, instead it makes it visible.”<sup>42</sup> The success of Kandinsky’s essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), which was reprinted twice in the year of publication, indicates a broad need to address philosophical, psychological, scientific, and spiritual issues in art and to find new painterly means for this, which are no longer dependent upon complicated iconographies, symbols, and allegories as translation aids.<sup>43</sup> Painting that breaks away from the model of nature, from the object, becomes itself “objective,” indeed “absolute.” Abstraction is not a negation, not an absence of content, but quite fundamentally a communication of contents resulting from an “inner necessity,” a central concept of Kandinsky.<sup>44</sup> In Kandinsky’s view, abstract art can thus contribute to bringing about the “epoch of great spiritual leaders.”<sup>45</sup>

The affinity of Kandinsky’s notion of an ever-higher spiritual development of humankind with the belief systems of Houghton and af Klint cannot be overlooked: They were based on Theosophical ideas of the time around 1900. The connections between the emergence of abstract art and theory and occult and esoteric ideas have been explored since the mid-1960s: Fundamental studies by Sixten Ringbom on Kandinsky and by Robert P. Welsh on Mondrian were devoted to the close proximity of artists to Theosophy. Their findings, which gained ground only relatively slowly, culminated in Maurice Tuchman’s comprehensive exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. The exhibition sought to demonstrate that

the genesis and evolution of abstract art were inextricably linked with esoteric notions of the time. The artists had the task of finding new pictorial means for spiritual, metaphysical, and utopian ideals.<sup>46</sup> Hilma af Klint’s works could be seen in this exhibition for the first time since her passing. In the catalogue, she served Sixten Ringbom as a “one-person control group” for his thesis of the spiritual origins of abstraction, which he had previously formulated for the “mainstream abstract pioneers.”<sup>47</sup>

Extensive publications and exhibitions have since popularized this interpretation of abstract art. Important for the German reception was Veit Loers’ project *Occultism and the Avant-Garde: From Munch to Mondrian 1900–1915* at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main in 1995. “The birth of abstraction from the spirit of esotericism has become one of the most popular master narratives of twentieth-century art.”<sup>48</sup> The now highly differentiated research was able to show that the influence was mutual: In their syncretic approach, the Theosophists also drew from art history and theory. Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, for example, based their writings and illustrations revolving around the notion of the “aura” on eighteenth-century theories of aesthetic effect. When artists, in turn, became inspired by their *Thought Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* (1901), the circle was closed.<sup>49</sup>

The three “world receivers” and the avant-garde artists of the 1910s are linked by their anchoring in the history of ideas of their time. The comparability of their works on many levels makes the previous art historiography and canon formation seem narrow-minded. In order to uphold the validity of the recurrent story of the avant-garde in the twentieth century, various strands of development and categories have been introduced to help separate insiders from outsiders. According to these, only those who worked, exhibited, and theorized within a particular group, and were at best also interpreted within this circle, were worthy of discussion in the context of this master narrative. To facilitate the search for the first abstract picture or artist in a more differentiated way, one also inquired into the accompanying discourses.<sup>50</sup> Kandinsky thus initially remained the focus of the discussion: Although no “first” abstract work can be identified in his oeuvre, a tendency towards abstraction since the period around 1910 is easy to observe. Kandinsky’s self-understanding of having made a substantial contribution to the development of a new,



abstract art was documented directly in the publications accompanying his art, while the works themselves became known through simultaneous and intensive exhibition activity. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which had been prepared in initial drafts since the year 1909, was finally published in December 1911 (with an official publication date of 1912), parallel with the *First Exhibition by the Editorial Board of The Blue Rider* in Munich, where Kandinsky's *Composition V* could also be seen.<sup>51</sup>

The relativity of the applied categories, however, becomes immediately clear when biographies of artists who were previously outside the canon are considered more closely. Hilma af Klint was not only concerned with the theoretical treatment of her art, but also strove to find suitable exhibition venues. Forty years before Kandinsky, Georgiana Houghton published extensively about her own art, passed it on as a teacher, and made her *Spirit Drawings* accessible to a wide audience. This is an unmistakable indication that the search for the first work of abstract art, as well as for the inventor of the “concept” of an abstract art, is not very effective. One will always discover an even earlier example.<sup>52</sup>

It seems increasingly difficult to write a history of modern art based on exclusion—exclusion on the grounds on gender, social or political situations, geographical loca-

tion, or another understanding of art and creativity. The time has come to introduce an expanded concept of art into the general narrative of modern art and the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, which includes both the achievements of conceptual art and Joseph Beuys' notions of social sculpture. For Emma Kunz in particular, Beuys' conviction that human action within society must be considered as art would be an ideal concept of art, which allows us to appreciate both her drawings and her healing practice in accordance with her own understanding of holism.<sup>53</sup>

When pioneering achievements and rankings do not need to be discussed, but rather content is central, one could agree that, in their work, Georgiana Houghton, Hilma af Klint, and Emma Kunz were concerned with the same topics as Kandinsky, namely, “this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders.”<sup>54</sup> And if the horizon is further broadened, the output of all the works presented here is an idealistic notion of artistic freedom, as best expressed by Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*: “for art is the daughter of freedom, and it requires its prescriptions and rules to be furnished by the necessity of spirits and not by that of matter.”<sup>55</sup>

- 1 See Iris Müller-Westermann, "Paintings for the Future: Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction in Seclusion," in: idem and Jo Widoff (eds.), *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*, exh. cat. Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; and Museu Picasso, Málaga, 2013–2014 (Ostfildern 2013), pp. 33–51, here pp. 47–48.
- 2 See Hans Körner, "Die Anfänge der spiritistischen Kunst – Victor Hugo, Victor Hennequin und Victorien Sardou," in: idem (ed.), *Botschaften aus dem Jenseits* (Studia humaniora, vol. 35), Düsseldorf 2002, pp. 157–196, here p. 180. Marco Pasi formulates this as a problem: "In Western culture the interaction with spiritual, non-human entities has been constantly perceived as a sensitive issue." That is why, in Christianity, only Church-sanctioned forms of this kind of interaction are accepted, and within the secular, rational framework of post-Enlightenment society, this is generally considered an impossibility, a conceit or delusion. See Marco Pasi, "Hilma af Klint, Western Esotericism and the Problem of Modern Artistic Creativity," in: Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (eds.), *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, Stockholm 2015, pp. 101–116, here p. 103.
- 3 See Körner 2002 (as note 2), p. 172, and Gertrud Sandqvist, "The Great Affirmation," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 255–270, here p. 262.
- 4 Pasi describes four ways in which esotericism has found expression in modern and contemporary art; the fourth path described by him and discussed here is what connects our three artists. See Pasi 2015 (as note 2), p. 102.
- 5 Primary and secondary literature on each of the artists can be found in the appendices to their respective detailed biographies in this publication.
- 6 Georgiana Houghton, *Catalogue of the Spirit Drawings in Water Colours Exhibited at the New British Gallery, Old Bond Street. By Miss Houghton, Through Whose Mediumship They Have Been Executed*, London 1871, unpaginated (Introduction).
- 7 Simon Grant and Marco Pasi: "'Works of art without parallel in the world.' Georgiana Houghton's Spirit Drawings," in: Simon Grant et al. (eds.), *Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings*, exh. cat. The Courtauld Gallery, London, with contributions by Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi, London 2016, pp. 8–23, here p. 20.
- 8 See Rachel Oberter, "Esoteric Art Confronting the Public Eye: The Abstract Spirit Drawings of Georgiana Houghton," in: *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2006, pp. 221–232, here p. 221.
- 9 Here, I once again follow Oberter 2006 (ibid.), pp. 222–223.
- 10 Houghton 1871 (as note 6), on cat. 12: "representations of real objects growing in spirit regions, and not simply allegorical."
- 11 See Grant/Pasi 2016 (as note 7), p. 16.
- 12 See Oberter 2006 (as note 8), p. 228.
- 13 Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye: Interblended with Personal Narrative*, London 1882. See Pasi 2015 (as note 2), p. 107.
- 14 Georgiana Houghton, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance. Welded together by a species of autobiography. Second Series*, London 1882, p. 80.
- 15 Quoted in: Müller-Westermann 2013 (as note 1), p. 38.
- 16 This position is explicitly represented by, for example: Müller-Westermann 2013 (as note 1), p. 41. She assumes that several drawing exercises of the circle of "The Five" served precisely this purpose. Åke Fant saw their drawing method as being open to chance. See Åke Fant, *Ökultismus und Abstraktion. Die Malerin Hilma af Klint (1862–1944)*, exh. cat. Graphic Art Collection of the Albertina, Vienna; Kulturhaus Graz; Stiftung Wörlen, Passau; and Museum Moderner Kunst (Vienna 1992), p. 35. Victoria Ferentinou sees automatic drawing for both Hilma af Klint and Ithell Colquhoun as a means of breaking the rules of academic training. See Victoria Ferentinou, "Theosophy, Women Artists and Modernism: The Case of Ithell Colquhoun," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 159–178, here p. 174.

- 17 See Elizabeth Finch, "Making Pictures Belong: Hilma af Klint's Order of Transcendence," in: Catherine de Zegher (ed.): *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin*, exh. cat. The Drawing Center, New York; Santa Monica Museum of Art; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (New York/New Haven 2005), pp. 95–106, here pp. 97–98.
- 18 Rudolf Steiner, "Das Sinnlich-Übersinnliche in seiner Verwirklichung durch die Kunst. Zwei Vorträge, München 15. und 17. Februar 1918," in: idem: *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 271, 3rd edition, Dornach 1985, pp. 81–124, here pp. 81–82. An English translation is available online at: [https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/UNK3480\\_index.html](https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/UNK3480_index.html) (accessed August 11, 2018).
- 19 Ibid., p. 82, and online English translation.
- 20 See Pasi 2015 (as note 2), pp. 104–105, and Briony Fer, "Hilma af Klint and Abstraction," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 15–24, here pp. 17–18.
- 21 This exhibition history is based on information provided by Julia Voss. I am grateful to Julia Voss for so generously providing her unpublished findings from her work on Hilma af Klint's biography to our project.
- 22 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), trans. M.T.H. Sadler, New York 1977, p. 25.
- 23 See Beat Wyss, *Der Wille zur Kunst. Zur ästhetischen Mentalität der Moderne*, Cologne 1996, pp. 139–140. Wyss bases this in particular on the circle of The Blue Rider, who concerned themselves intensively with music theory. The scholar of abstraction Raphael Rosenberg, who will be referred to once again below, would probably defend himself against the notion that af Klint's work is perceived in the same way as Kandinsky's: "We should not overlook the differences from paintings by Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, Delaunay, or Mondrian. [Af Klint's] amimetic images are both more and less than abstract painting: less pure art, less open works, more spiritual and much more specific in their meaning. They are stunning, but we need the explanations that she wrote in her notebooks to grasp them." Raphael Rosenberg, "Was There a First Abstract Painter? Af Klint's Amimetic Images and Kandinsky's Abstract Art," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 87–100, here p. 100. Gertrud Sandqvist has shown that Hilma af Klint's notes reveal typical characteristics for artists' writings and therefore can hardly be used as a direct translation aid. See Sandqvist 2015 (as note 3), p. 260. Hilma af Klint's works are now available to the public, there is no longer any sovereignty over their interpretation, and they are thus open to individual reception.
- 24 There is little written documentation from Emma Kunz herself; most of her statements have been passed on orally. Here according to: Anton C. Meier, "Emma Kunz. Leben und Werk," in: idem (ed.), *Emma Kunz. Künstlerin, Forscherin, Heilpraktikerin*, Würenlos 1998, pp. 19–37, here p. 29.
- 25 See Harald Szeemann, "Mehr als Kunst – eingebunden in Urschlamm und Lichtmystik," in: Meier 1998 (as note 24), pp. 55–84, here p. 56.
- 26 The term was coined by Szeemann in 1998: *ibid.*, pp. 55 and 58. The vertical lines connect the earthly with the heavenly, the divine. The diagonal lines represent the four elements. In the horizontal lines, evil lies on the left and good on the right. These are moral, that is to say human categories. Since according to Emma Kunz, the moral weakness of humankind was to be overcome by an upward movement, she had a cross constructed, the vertical beam of which was made of wood, while the horizontal beam was made of a transparent material that becomes "invisible"; see also: Meier 1998 (as note 24), pp. 29–31.
- 27 Terms and descriptions according to: Theo Kneubühler, "Emma Kunz" (1979), in: Harald Szeemann (ed.), *Visionäre Schweiz*, exh. cat. Kunsthaut Zürich; Städtische Kunsthalle and Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf (Aarau et al. 1991), pp. 122–127, here p. 123.
- 28 See Juri Steiner, "Pentas Parabeln," in: *Parkett*, no. 47, 1996, pp. 7–11, here p. 10.
- 29 See Szeemann 1998 (as note 25), p. 55.
- 30 Representative of these is the report by Peter Burri, recorded in 2018 and published here for the first time, pp. 174–175.
- 31 Heiny Widmer, "Emma Kunz: neun Kompositionen," in: *Du. Die Zeitschrift der Kultur*, no. 34, 1974, pp. 54–74, here p. 54.
- 32 See Steiner 1996 (as note 28), p. 10.
- 33 Szeemann 1998 (as note 25), p. 65.
- 34 Heiny Widmer, *Emma Kunz*, exh. cat. Aargauer Kunsthaut, Aarau (Zürich 1973), p. 28. As well as: Kneubühler (1979) 1991 (as note 27), p. 124, and Meier 1998 (as note 24), p. 29.
- 35 See Vera Hofmann, "'Superwoman' Emma Kunz" (2016), available online at: [verahofmann.de/sandberg/CM3\\_writing\\_VH.pdf](http://verahofmann.de/sandberg/CM3_writing_VH.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2018).
- 36 Theo Kneubühler quotes in this context the theologian Ernst Benz: *Die Vision. Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt*, Stuttgart 1969. See Theo Kneubühler, "Das visionäre Bild," in: Szeemann 1991 (as note 27), pp. 11–14, here pp. 11–12. However, this greater openness also makes a clear interpretation difficult, if not impossible.
- 37 See Catherine de Zegher, "Abstract," in: de Zegher 2005 (as note 17), pp. 23–40, here pp. 24–25. Marco Pasi describes this with the terms "alienated agency and creative dissociation." Pasi 2015 (as note 2), pp. 113–114.



The Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition titled *Inventing Abstraction*, which adheres to 1910 as the "birth year" of abstraction and thus to Kandinsky's pioneering role, though the goal was to demonstrate that abstraction was not the invention of a solitary genius, but rather of "network thinking." See Leah Dickermann et al., *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, exh. cat. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (London 2012). Julia Voss has criticized the project on several occasions, since Hilma af Klint was not mentioned anywhere. See for example: Julia Voss, "Hilma af Klints abstrakte Malerei. Die Kunstgeschichte muss umgeschrieben werden," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 24, 2013; available online at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/hilma-af-klints-abstrakte-malerei-die-kunstgeschichte-muss-umgeschrieben-werden-12086270.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

Thus states, for example, the historian Stephen Kern in his essay "Hilma af Klint and Fin-de-Siècle Culture: Abstraction, Technology, Androgyny, Nihilism," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 25–42, here p. 26.

Otto Stelzer, *Die Vorgeschichte der abstrakten Kunst. Denkmodelle und Vor-Bilder*, Munich 1964, p. 7.

Rosenberg 2015 (as note 23), pp. 87–91.

Paul Klee, "Creative Confessions," in: idem, *Creative Confessions and Other Writings*, London 2103, p. 7.

See de Zegher 2005 (as note 17), p. 23.

See Reinhard Zimmermann, "Von der Romantik zur Abstraktion? Die Esoterik und die historischen Grundlagen der abstrakten Kunst," in: Christoph Wagner (ed.), *Esoterik am Bauhaus, eine Revision der Moderne?*, Regensburg 2009, pp. 55–72, here p. 58.

Kandinsky (1912) 1977 (as note 22), p. 57; idem: *Rückblick* (1913), with an introduction by Ludwig Grote, Baden-Baden 1955, p. 46.

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." Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in: idem (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, 1986–1987 (New York 1986), p. 17.

Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," in: exh. cat. Los Angeles/Chicago/The Hague 1986 (as note 46), pp. 131–153, here p. 143.

Raphael Rosenberg, "Die Kartographie der Aura aus dem Geist der Wirkungsästhetik. Synästhesie und das Verhältnis von Kunst und Esoterik um 1900," in: Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth, and Markus Meumann (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, Berlin 2013, pp. 583–604, here p. 583. See also: Zimmermann 2009 (as note 44), p. 66: "But there is no avoiding the fact that, of all the references and receptions ever suggested, those on Theosophy and occultism are by far the best documented and can most clearly be demonstrated in the concrete style of painting."

Rosenberg 2013 (ibid.), p. 585.

The following according to: Rosenberg 2015 (as note 23), pp. 97–99.

See Leah Dickermann, "Inventing Abstraction," in: Dickermann et al. 2012 (as note 38), pp. 12–37, here especially pp. 15–16.

The organizers of the Hilma af Klint retrospective had already foreseen this failure of their marketing strategy. See Iris Müller-Westermann, "Hilma af Klint in Her Time and Ours," in: Almqvist/Belfrage 2015 (as note 2), pp. 179–192, here p. 192: "We do not wish to rewrite art history by placing Hilma af Klint at the beginning of a line of abstract pioneers – ahead of Wassily Kandinsky [...] until somebody even earlier turns up."

See also: Hofmann 2016 (as note 35).

Kandinsky (1912) 1977 (as note 22), p. 57.

Friedrich Schiller, "Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen, Brief 2," in: idem, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, 8th edition, vol. 5, Munich 1989, p. 572. English translation available online at: <https://www.bartleby.com/32/502.html> (accessed August 11, 2018).





GEORGIANA

H O U G H T O N



# GEORGIANA HOUGHTON

(1814–1884)

In 1871, Georgiana Houghton noted her profession in the London census as "artist." She created some of the most amazing artworks of her time, which she herself described as "works of art without parallel in the world." What we are dealing with here are "spirit drawings" made through contact with the world beyond. Houghton was a trained artist and worked as a medium; she was active in the dissemination of Spiritualism through societies and publications, and was involved in the emergence of "spirit photography" in England. Without her exceptionally intense activities in Spiritualist circles, her life would have been largely unremarkable, that of a single, middle-class woman in Victorian London. Her paintings, seemingly abstract but rich in symbolic content, were hardly understood by her contemporaries. After her death, she was soon forgotten, and, until recently, her name was missing in most surveys of Spiritualism.

■ Georgiana Houghton was born in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, on April 20, 1814. She was the seventh of ten identified children of George and Mary Ann Houghton,

née Warrant. Her father worked as a wine and brandy dealer on the Canary Islands and Madeira, and although they lived as a respectable middle-class family, due to business failures they suffered from constant financial worries, a situation known euphemistically as "genteel poverty." Georgiana Houghton grew up primarily in London, and little is known about her childhood. In her autobiography, she mentions briefly that she went to school in France. Together with her sister, Zilla, she enjoyed an artistic education, but here as well no further information exists. Georgiana Houghton did not marry and lived with her parents until they died in the 1860s.

Among her siblings, Zilla was especially close to her. Zilla Rosalia Warren, née Houghton, died in 1851 at the age of thirty-one, just days after she had given birth to her fifth child. Her death was a severe blow to Georgiana, who subsequently gave up her own painting, having, as she wrote in *Spirit Drawings* (1871), "devoted the chief part of my life to that accomplishment."

Georgiana survived seven of her siblings. The year 1869 was particularly difficult, for not only her mother, but also her nephew Charlie, a son of Zilla, died. Although Victorians accepted death as a fundamental part of life, for many the promise of communicating with the deceased was a great comfort. English Spiritualism of the nineteenth century was based on the Christian faith but went far beyond the dogmatic teachings of the Anglican Church. The basis was the notion of the survival of the soul after death. In general, "spirits" were seen as deceased people existing

in the hereafter. “Spirit guides” were thought to enable contact with loved ones after death. The conceptions of the nature of the spiritual realm were shaped by the descriptions the Swedish philosopher and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg had written roughly one hundred years before. These were complemented by eschatological ideas that proceeded from the continuous development of humankind, who, in the age of the Holy Spirit (following those of the Father and the Son), could transcend the boundaries to the spiritual world and thus come closer to the revelation of God. It is significant and typical of the times that Houghton’s descriptions of her Spiritualist beliefs assume compatibility with Christianity, and that her drawings and writings are rich in references to the Bible, especially the New Testament and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Houghton’s interest in Spiritualism was aroused in 1859, after attending her first séance, which was conducted by her neighbor, Mary Marshall, the first medium in England to make public appearances. Here, the spirits manifested themselves clearly and in rapid succession through knocking. As communication with Zilla contained information that no one in the room could have known, Georgiana Houghton was convinced of the verity of Spiritualism and of the possibilities it opened. From the beginning, her goal was to connect with the deceased herself, and from then on she developed her skills as a practicing medium in the private sphere.

Houghton began with table-turning (messages in the form of alphabets or codes) and, after about a year, began recording messages with a planchette, a tool for automatic writing. In 1861, she heard about the automatic drawings of the medium Elizabeth Wilkinson, her husband William Wilkinson, editor of *Spiritual Magazine* and author of *Spirit Drawings* (1858), as well as her brother-in-law, Dr. J. J. Garth Wilkinson, homeopath and publisher of the writings of Swedenborg. The Wilkinsons had lost a child and believed that the drawings they made during the séances were sent by him. At the first meeting with the Wilkinsons on July 20, 1861, Houghton asked her sister’s spirit to direct her hand (since Zilla had been “an accomplished artist”); the attempt failed, however. That evening, “Henry Lenny, who had been a deaf and dumb artist,” became her guiding spirit and remained so in the future.

Houghton began with a small number of pencil drawings using a planchette. After a few days, she proceeded

to draw freehand, without mechanical aids, and after two weeks began adding colors. From then on, she worked directly with watercolors on paper, without preliminary drawings. Employing a kind of automatic drawing, she initially filled the sheets of paper with stylized flowers and fruits, soon followed by completely abstract shapes in many superimposed layers, with arches, curves, and spirals in bright colors. She was guided by an increasing number of spirit guides, among them deceased artists such as Titian and Correggio, her assigned guardians, including Zacharias, John, and Joseph, and finally seventy archangels, the “High Spirits” (underlying this is the notion that advanced spirits transmute into angels and archangels). Houghton was convinced that her one-and-a-half years of training as a medium and her previous artistic education made her the ideal drawing medium. On the reverse of her works one can find information about the circumstances and the content of the drawings: In addition to title, date, and duration of the execution, the names of the spirit guides under whose influence Houghton had created a work are noted. In addition, there are occasionally detailed instructions for interpretation, though these are not always easy to understand. Houghton believed that these descriptions came directly from the spirit guides; the texts were thus also created mediumistically, like the drawings.

Houghton understood the drawings not only as aesthetically pleasing works of art, but also as insights into the realm of spirits and thus as direct evidence for their existence, as well as of the possibility of communicating with them. In this respect, they could serve as a didactic instrument—as an introduction to Spiritualism and as lessons about the nature of God.

As with her séances, she practiced mediumistic drawing and painting primarily on Sunday evenings, a time when, according to her guides, the fewest evil influences prevailed. In the first ten years from 1861 on, she created more than 150 drawings; she presumably continued this practice until her death. From 1863, she presented the resulting works at weekly meetings with an ever-increasing number of guests. One of the most prominent American Spiritualists, John Murray Spear, awarded her the honorary title of “Holy Symbolist” (later modified to “Sacred Symbolist,” a title that Houghton noted on her works).

Georgiana Houghton’s original goal was to communicate with deceased family members and friends. Soon,





PLATE 1.

Frederick Hudson, frontispiece in: Georgiana Houghton, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye: Interblended with Personal Narrative*, London 1882



however, she strove to share her skills and to contribute to the promotion of Spiritualism in general. Together with her friends Agnes Guppy, Daniel Dunglas Home, Emma Hardinge Britten, and Mary Marshall, Houghton belonged to a group of Spiritualists who practiced privately. She also promoted and collected the mediumistic art of others. Among the artists with whom she was in contact were George Childs, Thomas Heaphy, Henry Collen, and Alice Pery; Barbara Honywood can be described as Houghton's student; she was guided by her and adapted her style.

An important friend and fellow protagonist was the author and artist Anna Mary Howitt Watts, who studied with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, first at the art school of Henry Sass and then with Wilhelm von Kaulbach in Munich. After a few appearances in the London art scene, she turned to mediumistic drawing following a personal crisis. Her finely detailed "spirit drawings" are very different from Houghton's: They feature complex floral and religious iconography and an often female-looking Christ figure, partially supplemented with automatically written notes. Howitt Watts was probably the first artist to reach an audience outside the narrower circle of séances with mediumistic drawings. In 1857, they were included in Camilla Crosland's book on Spiritualism, *Light in the Valley*, published in London.

Within the Spiritualist community, Houghton became increasingly active and publicly visible, not through séances for a larger audience, but rather through lectures, publications in Spiritualist organs, and membership in various societies. On January 4, 1867, she gave a lecture on "spirit drawings" in conjunction with the opening of the Spiritual Athenaeum in London and was elected to the board of the newly founded British National Association of Spiritualists, from which the still extant College of Psychic Studies emerged.

Her involvement coincided with the rise of Spiritualism as a London fashion phenomenon that reached all social classes, including numerous celebrities in aristocratic, scientific, intellectual, and artistic circles. Profound conviction on the part of the Spiritualist activists and recipients was met with rejection and even ridicule from the skeptical sections of society. The spectrum of involvement in this Spiritualist trend, which continued from the 1860s until well into the twentieth century, ranged from deeply religious or professional commitment to amused, amateurish participation and even deliberate fraud. For



Frederick Hudson, Georgiana Houghton with Tommy Guppy and Spirit, 1872, Collection of The College of Psychic Studies, London

women, who fought for ever greater independence, Spiritualist circles offered a place of freedom. In return, their activities were either ridiculed or pathologized by those who perceived them as a threat to social stability. Discoveries and developments in science and technology, from geology and the theory of evolution to the telegraph, changed the image of humankind, its origins, and its survival. This expansion of the conceivable gave rise to occult theories, even in scientific circles: The inventor of the telegraph, Cromwell Varley, and his wife participated in Houghton's séances; she created Spiritualist portraits of both.



Anna Mary Howitt Watts, Collection of The College of Psychic Studies, London

In order to gain an even wider audience for Spiritualism, but also to publicly consolidate her position as a Spiritualist artist, Georgiana Houghton organized a solo exhibition of her own works at the New British Gallery at 39 Old Bond Street, which ran from May to September 1871. She presented 155 works from ten years of mediumistic practice—*Spirit Drawings in Watercolours*, created “under the direct influence of spirits,” as noted in the accompanying catalogue. Georgiana Houghton organized the exhibition space and the advertising, wrote and produced the catalogue (including a special edition for Queen Victoria), framed and hung the works herself, and was there almost every day to hand out magnifying glasses and talk to the visitors about the works and Spiritualism.



Anna Mary Howitt Watts, *Untitled Spirit Drawing*, ca. 1859, gouache on fine tracing paper, 35.5 × 30.5 cm, Collection of The College of Psychic Studies, London

The reactions to the hitherto unseen world of images were very mixed. Several artists and reviewers praised the color harmonies and the new visual language, ignoring the Spiritualist themes; some members of the clergy, in turn, were more interested in the new content. There were only a few reviews in the press which commented on the works or ideas in the catalogue; most of the critics were surprised and alienated, dismissive, malicious, or amused. The public was also largely irritated and could comprehend neither the images nor the texts. Houghton herself was pleased with the numerous visitors and considered the exhibition a success, since it had aroused general interest in Spiritualism. Nevertheless, the project was a financial fiasco for the artist: She had used up most of her savings,



did not sell more than one work, and was able to secure only one commission. Her work was too innovative or incomprehensible for Victorian taste, and apparently no one wanted to spend money on it. Houghton, too, realized that her art was beyond the canon and could not be honored with the traditional vocabulary of painting: “works that could not be criticized according to any of the known and accepted canons of art,” as she noted in her autobiography.

Nevertheless, she believed in both the content and the artistic value of her work and continued to seek public recognition: Several times she applied—without success—to the Royal Academy and the Dudley Gallery for exhibitions of her drawings. She tried in vain to organize a larger exhibition of mediumistic art and planned the founding of a Society of Spirit Artists, which, however, she was not able to realize.

A few months after the 1871 exhibition closed, Georgiana Houghton was at the center of a mediumism fashion in England, “spirit photography.” In her book *Chronicles of the Photographers of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye: Interblended with Personal Narrative* (1882), Houghton reports that, as early as 1859, the first year of her engagement with Spiritualism, she had received the message from her archangel guides that she would soon be able to transmit their images onto photographic plates. Spirit photography was accidentally discovered by the American photographer William H. Mumler in 1861, when he developed a self-portrait in which he also recognized the image of his cousin, who had died twelve years earlier. Houghton’s own attempts as an amateur photographer in this area were unsuccessful.

On March 7, 1872, however, she met the photographer Frederick Hudson through the well-known Spiritualists Agnes and Samuel Guppy, and within that same month was able to announce that a spirit photograph had successfully been shot in London. From then on, she would call Hudson the “Photographer of Marvels.” Over the next few years, she participated in more than 250 sessions in Hudson’s studio, where her mediumistic skills were used to evoke the spirits that appeared in the photographs. She documented this in her *Chronicles* and defended Hudson against allegations of fraud, even after the end of their collaboration; he was accused, for example, of using trick effects, such as the super-

imposition of portraits with images of people imitating spirits. Although Hudson’s supporters affirmed that many of his pictures depicted recognizably deceased people, doubt and criticism led to the closure of his studios in Holloway in 1874 and in Notting Hill in 1876.

At the end of the first part of her two-volume memoirs, *Evenings at Home in Spiritual Séance* (1881/82), Georgiana Houghton gave a kind of retrospect and overview on her work: “In 1861, came the drawing mediumship, to open into all the rest. – In 1871, the exhibition of those ten years of work. – And now, in 1881, this most comprehensive labour of all! – I cannot but speculate – what will the next decade evolve? What shall I do in 1891?” On March 24, 1884, however, Georgiana Houghton died of a heart attack in Kensington, London, at the age of sixty-nine.

Thanks to her publications, Georgiana Houghton’s name lived on for some time in British Spiritualism and has repeatedly appeared in accounts of the history of spirit photography. Nevertheless, her art was largely forgotten. A group of works ended up in Australia: In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (probably in two stages), a total of thirty-five works came into the possession of the Victorian Spiritualist’s Union in Melbourne, founded in 1870, which is still active today. Seven works on paper have been preserved in an album of the College of Psychic Studies in London, and a few drawings are in private hands.

Until recently, Houghton was virtually unknown to art history. In addition to rare references in essays on British art history, several selected watercolors have appeared in Australian exhibitions (Victorian Association of Spiritualists, Victoria, 1893; Verdon Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1963; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1978; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996). Nevertheless, one can only speak of a rediscovery of her works since 2015, when the Monash University Museum of Art exhibited a large selection in Melbourne, and when the Courtauld Institute in London dedicated an exhibition to her in 2016.



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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Flower of Helen Butler,  
October 5th 1861  
No. 24 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor on paper, with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
32 × 23 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 3  
► see ill. p. 45

The Holy Trinity,  
November 29th 1861  
No. 42 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
32 × 23 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 5  
► see ill. p. 47

Flower of Samuel Warrand,  
August 19th 1862  
No. 41 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor on paper laid on  
board with pen and ink  
inscription on verso,  
32.6 × 23.7 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 6  
► see ill. pp. 48–49

The Eye of God,  
September 25th 1862  
No. 45 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23.7 × 32.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 8  
► see ill. pp. 50–51

The Sheltering Wing of the  
Most High, October 2nd 1862  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23.7 × 32.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 9  
► see ill. pp. 52–53

The Portrait of the Lord Jesus  
Christ, December 8th 1862  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
32.6 × 23.7 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 10  
► see ill. pp. 54–55

Fruit of Alexander Warrand,  
November 16th 1863  
No. 55 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor on paper laid on  
board with pen and ink  
inscription on verso, 32 × 23 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 14  
► see ill. p. 57

Plant of Sidney Alexander  
Houghton, December 1st 1863  
No. 58 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor on paper laid on  
board with pen and ink  
inscription on verso, 34 × 47 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 15  
► see ill. p. 58

The Glory of the Lord,  
January 4th 1864  
No. 60 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
34.9 × 47.9 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 16  
► see ill. p. 59

The Risen Lord, June 29th 1864  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23.7 × 32.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 18  
► see ill. p. 61

Glory be to God,  
July 5th 1864  
No. 68 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23.7 × 32.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 19  
► see ill. pp. 62–63

The Love of God,  
August 3rd 1864  
No. 73 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23.7 × 32.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 20  
► see ill. pp. 64–65

The Lord God,  
December 6th 1864  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23 × 32 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 22  
► see ill. p. 66–67

The Lightnings Shew Forth  
the Power of the Lord,  
January 30th 1865  
No. 101 in the 1871 exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
23 × 33 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 25  
► see ill. pp. 68–69

The Eye of the Lord,  
September 22nd 1866  
(year partially obscured),  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
32.7 × 23.8 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 7  
► see ill. pp. 70–71

The Spiritual Crown of  
Annie Mary Howitt Watts,  
April 24th 1867  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
43.5 × 53.5 cm  
Collection of Vivienne Roberts  
► see ill. pp. 72–73

The Eye of the Lord,  
September 1st 1870  
No. 150 or 151 in the 1871  
exhibition  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
25.3 × 35.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 31  
► see ill. p. 74

Untitled, ca. 1872  
Watercolors and gouache on  
paper laid on board,  
32.6 × 23.7 cm  
ABCD Collection, Paris  
► see ill. p. 77

Untitled, August 2nd 1875  
Watercolor and gouache on  
paper laid on board with pen  
and ink inscription on verso,  
25.4 × 35.6 cm  
Victorian Spiritualists' Union  
Melbourne, No. 32  
► see ill. p. 75

Anna Howitt Watts  
(1824–1884),  
Untitled Spirit Drawing, ca. 1859  
Gouache on fine tracing paper,  
35.5 × 30.5 cm  
The College of Psychic Studies,  
London  
► see ill. p. 34

Nº 10

# CATALOGUE

OF THE

## Spirit Drawings in Water Colours,

EXHIBITED AT THE

NEW BRITISH GALLERY,

OLD BOND STREET.

BY

MISS HOUGHTON,

THROUGH WHOSE MEDIUMSHIP THEY HAVE BEEN EXECUTED.

MAY 22ND, 1871.

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## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.



O make the character and design of this Exhibition understood, I must explain that in the execution of the Drawings my hand has been entirely guided by Spirits, no idea being formed in my own mind as to what was going to be produced, nor did I know, when a stroke was commenced, whether it would be carried upwards or downwards. I will give a slight sketch of the manner in which the power came to myself, so as to aid others in their endeavours to be similarly successful.

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In the summer of 1859 I first heard of the possibility of communion with the Spirits of those who had passed away from the mortal form ; and having received proofs that it was indeed a reality, I was anxious to obtain the gift of mediumship, to be thus reunited to the many dear ones whom I had lost, and still bewailed. For three months Mamma and I sat for about half an hour each evening at a small table, with our hands resting lightly upon it, and at the expiration of that period, we were rewarded for our patience by the table being gently tipped towards me, and having messages thus given to us by means of the alphabet. We were then told by the communicating spirits that we must not rush headlong into this new joy, but must use it soberly, and that we were only to have our

#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

*séance* once a week, Sunday evening being the best, as we should then be less disturbed by evil influences. I was also always to "try the spirits" according to the directions given 1 John iv., 1, 2, 3. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; but every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." Which text receives additional strength by being compared with 1 Corinthians xii., 3. "And no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."

I adhered closely to all these directions, and we thus went on quietly for above a year, when I got a planchette, and our messages were then written with that aid. In July 1861, I heard of Mrs. Wilkinson's Spirit drawings, so on the evening of the 20th I asked whether my sister Zilla, who had been an accomplished artist while upon earth, could guide my hand for Spiritual work, but neither she nor my brother Cecil (whom I asked as he was about the age of Mrs. Wilkinson's young son, who was her guiding Spirit) could be permitted to do it, but Cecil then brought Henry Lenny, who had been a deaf and dumb artist, and he immediately controlled my hand, which was resting on the planchette, to form various curved lines, after which I was impressed to remove the black lead pencil, and replace it with a blue one, with which he worked upon the same piece of paper, No. 1; and I obtained leave to sit every evening for the purpose of drawing. When the first three sheets had been filled, I asked my guide to do a flower, which he did, and then wrote the name of it



#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

on another piece of paper. After a few days' work, I was desired to take the pencil in my hand, instead of using the planchette; thus another step was gained, and on the 6th of August I began with colours, having on the previous day been told to put a sheet of paper into the drawing-board in readiness, and from that time I have continued to do them in water colours, without any kind of preliminary pencil sketch.

I earnestly hope that some of the visitors to this gallery, who have leisure to devote themselves to it, will go home, and try to obtain this delightful gift, but they must bear in mind that extreme patience and perseverance are needed for all Spiritual work. In my own case, the drawing power would appear to have come with very great rapidity, but they must remember that I had already been a medium for upwards of a year and a half, after having steadily striven for it during three months. For the drawing phase I was also prepared by my own earthly training, having devoted the chief part of my life to that accomplishment, until Zilla's death, in 1851, so crushed me, that I felt as if I should never again use pencil or brush. The Spirits say that when once the fact is acknowledged that they can work through a mortal hand, it is not really more surprising when they draw through a medium who has not learned than through one who has; they can of course better guide the trained hand, and make a more speedy progress if they are thus relieved from all the elementary part, which must be gone through, for no person can spring, at one bound, to a pinnacle of art perfection, any more than an acorn can in one season become a widely spreading oak.

I have numbered the drawings chronologically for a double pur-

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

pose. In the first place the character of the work is so totally unlike all mortal experience, that the eye, even of an artist, will better appreciate the later ones by being led up to them by the gradual changes of style, and secondly, because the Spiritual significance deepened in proportion with my own development. The early ones are but very faint shadows of what they are intended to represent, because my own Spirit was still too much clogged with earthliness to grasp the hidden mysteries beyond the veil, or even to have them pourtrayed through my mediumship.

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON.

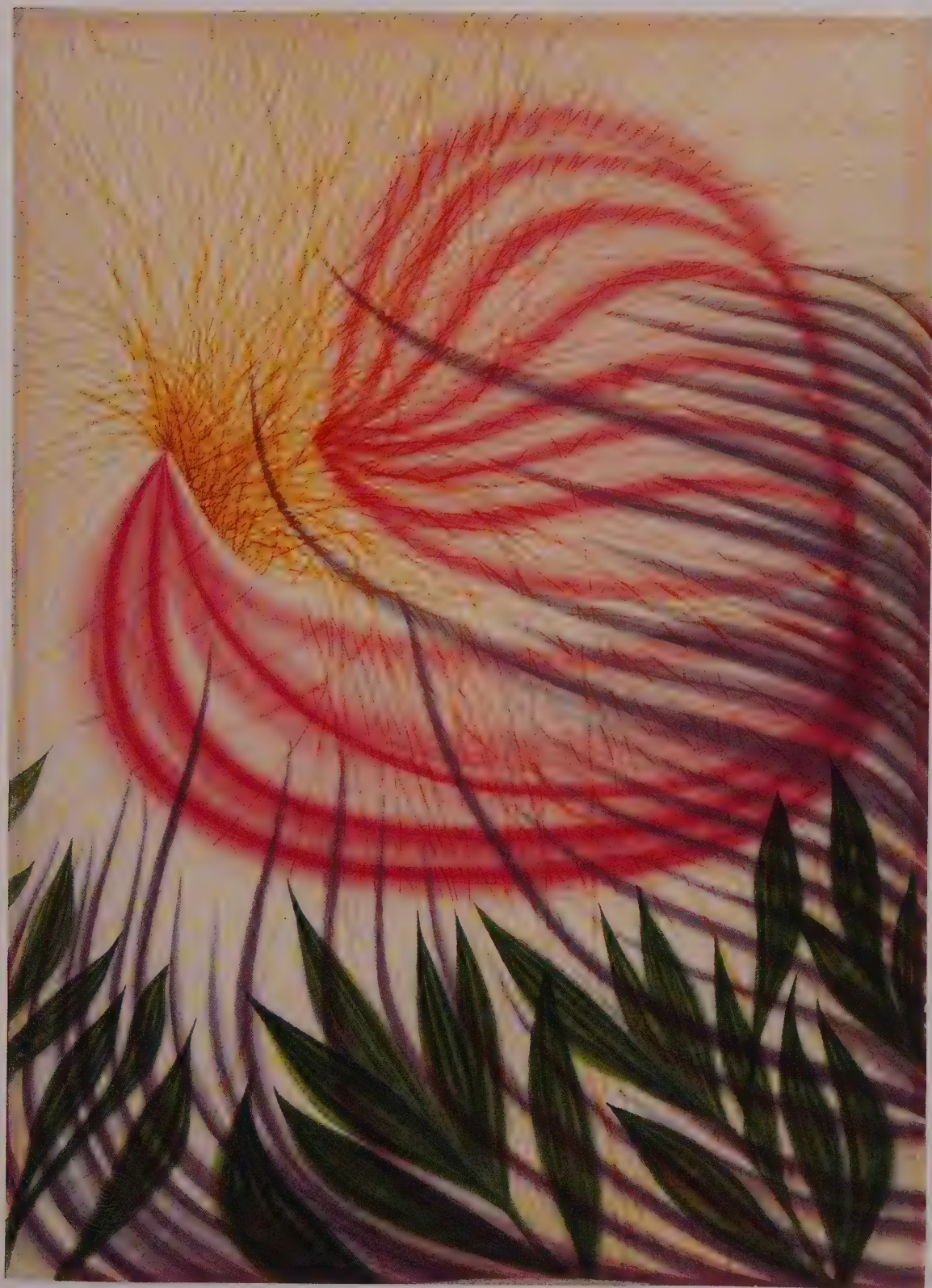
20, DELAMERE CRESCENT,

WESTBOURNE SQUARE, W.

*April 20th, 1871.*











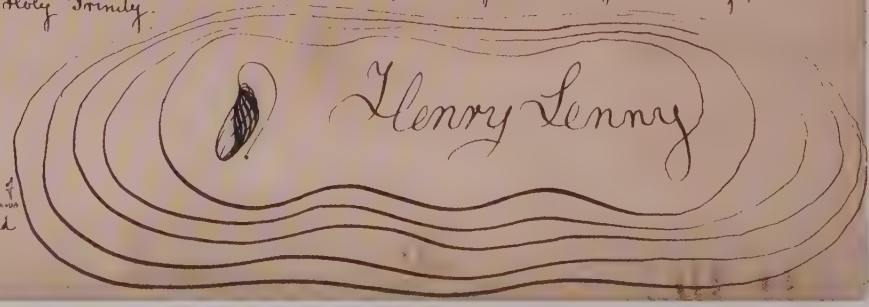




The Flower of Samuel Warrand, the much loved Uncle of Georgiana, the drawing medium, Mrs Houghton being his dearest sister, of whom he was always very proud, and to whose judgment he would at all times defer; so it was, that when in trouble and difficulties at home, brought on by his own imprudence, he was grateful for her husband's suggestion (coupled with assistance of a pecuniary nature) to go to St Petersburg, and gladly hearkened to her advice to go with those depending upon him, to seek a living in a foreign land, where the introductions that Mrs Houghton gave him, enabled him to make a start as a teacher of languages, and he was soon able to make a living, and in course of time thankfully repaid the money, but the loving help was ever his dearest recollection. He got into a high connexion in his profession, and was appointed English master to the imperial family, where he made himself so much loved by his winning disposition as he was respected for his attainments; honourable mention must be made of his simplicity of character, which preserved him from the worst perils of a court life, and he would speak the truth to the emperor as unflinchingly as to any one else.

I will now proceed to describe his flower, which is red, slightly tinged with violet, showing the loving warmth of his nature, combined with veneration for His Maker, and a humble sense of his own shortcomings; the curved petals also manifest the same loving quality, the leading feature of his life. The wing like petal at the top, represents The Gracious Mercy of The Lord, sheltering His repentant servant through The Mediation of The Lord Jesus Christ. The Emblems of The Holy Trinity are seen in strong colours on the left of the drawing: upwards, God The Father; - round, God The Son; - and twining lovingly downwards, God The Holy Ghost, and they are also seen in more delicate tints in the lower part of the drawing. There is a cluster of lines in the centre of the flower, some of which go towards the Emblems as if imploring forgiveness, and others wave and curl towards the right, again expressive of his tenderly affectionate disposition, one of these lines is carried on towards the bottom, and from it emanate many broader lines of a blue tinge, showing his Hope in His Redeemer. The yellow lines express the principal actions of his life, those going upwards being good, and those going downwards faulty; they spring from the heart of the flower, although they seem almost as if unconnected. There are no leaves because the flower is so large, but his temper may be understood without, as it of course was amiable.

The broad yellow strokes from the left, signify the Might, Majesty, Dominion, Glory, Power, Long-suffering, Mercy, Watchfulness, Meekness, Truth, Sympathy, Tenderness, Kindness, Charity, Love of The Holy Trinity.



This drawing was the joint production of Henry Lenny and the high spirit who drew through Georgiana's hand, and was finished August 19th 1862.

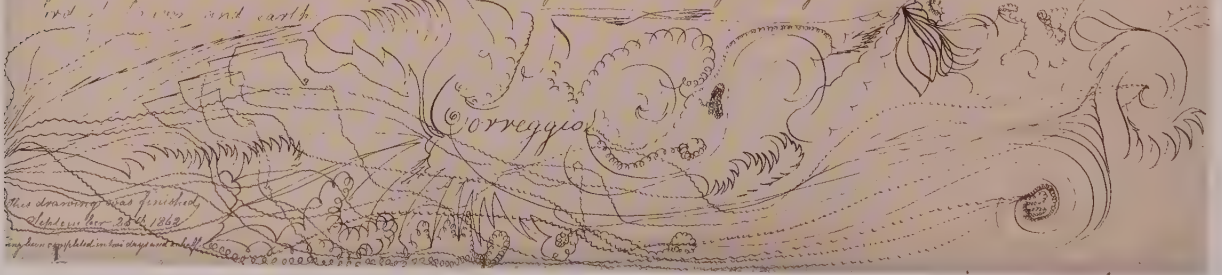




## The Eye of God.

F. Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio, have endeavoured through Georgiana's hand, to represent the Eye of God, in the Three Persons of the Trinity. The Ever Watchful Eye looking down on man's most trifling acts as well as his more important ones, and seeing at the same time the consequences of them, and thus seeing that in that respect, the apparently trifling ones are often in fact the most important. I have striven to make my meaning as simply clear as possible: none can mistake the separate Persons. — The Father, in vivid yellow, with the Eye clearly looking upon all. — The Holy Ghost, with the Eye understood, rather than expressed, to show that His Dwelling is in the hearts of His faithful servants. — and the Son, with the Eye of pity gazing upon the sin and self sought misery of His creatures, and enduring for their Redemption the sufferings of all.

The Symbols of the Trinity are variously repeated, but the principal ones are the three clusters of white lilies, each distinguished by the symbolical colour. From the cluster on the left emanate pearly forms again, repeating the Trinity, and strings of pearls to signify the Wondrous Attributes of the Lord. Along the bottom of the drawing near the centre cluster are pearly forms to express the Humility of the Saviour, and the Many Torments that He exhibited in Human Form, as an example for those who were to bear His Name, and be called Christians. The third cluster streams down in strings and masses of pearls, showing the Pouring forth of the Holy Spirit upon all who are willing to receive Him, may the number of them continually increase through the Gracious Love and Power of the Lord Jesus and earth.



This drawing was finished  
Sept. 25th 1862

and has been completed in two days and a half



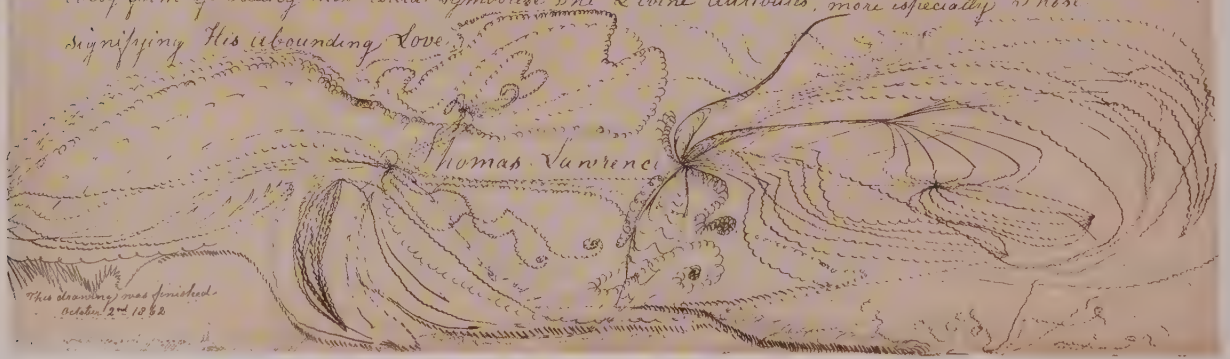


## *The Sheltering Wing of The Most High.*

Through the hand of Georgiana, T. Thomas Lawrence, have endeavoured to symbolise The Marvellous Love of God, as exemplified in The Care with which He protects His creatures in every event of their lives. In their sorest trials He bestows unexpected alleviations, and sooths their griefs averting from them many calamities which had appeared to them inevitable.

I wish to explain our drawing in as few words as I can, because Georgiana's written accounts are already so numerous that long explanations would be tedious, and would hinder the real object of these manifestations, which is to impress the minds of the beholders with The Power and Loving Mercy of The Lord. it is no longer necessary to enter into much detail, as the many previous descriptions must have made all familiar with the emblematic meanings.

I have made The Wing a development of The Holy Trinity, and have adorned it with every form of beauty that could symbolise The Divine Attributes, more especially Those signifying His abounding Love.





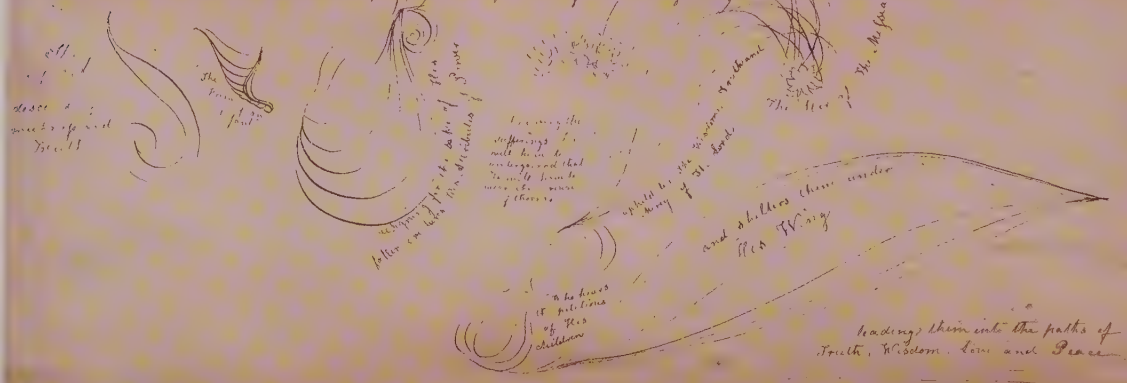


Georgiana Houghton, *The Sheltering Wing of the Most High*, October 2nd 1862



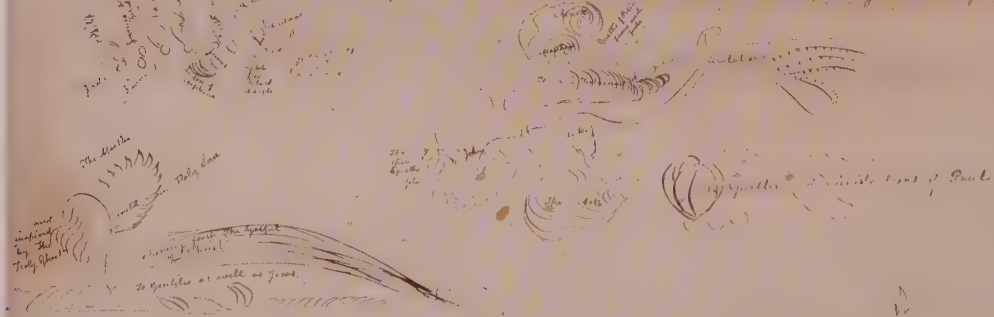
# The Portrait of The Lord Jesus Christ.

drawn through the hand of Georgiana by His loving servant and companion while upon the earth, Luke, one of the Evangelists.  
I wanted, in this drawing, to represent, in Spiritual Symbols, all the Works of The Lord while upon the earth, therefore it has taken a very long time, but I have regretted its completion, for both Georgiana and myself have rejoiced in our occupation, and have been equally unwilling to quit it.  
Of course, the earlier part was typical of the Infancy.



Having thus symbolised The Infancy of The Saviour, as the above description faintly shadows forth, my next desire was to show His many wondrous miracles and acts of love, of which I have expressed in the drawing all that have been mentioned in the Gospels, and many besides, but His life was so entirely a life of acts of love that it would be impossible to depict them all.  
Our next happiness was to endeavour to trace The Saviour's Sufferings, but it is here that I feel most deeply my inability. Still, I was thrown to portray The Saviour's Eyes that looked with His passion upon sinners, while absorbing in His blood, from the Crown of thorns, and shed His blood to ransom the world - The Tender Month wherein I found myself - but Words of Wisdom, Truth and Mercy.

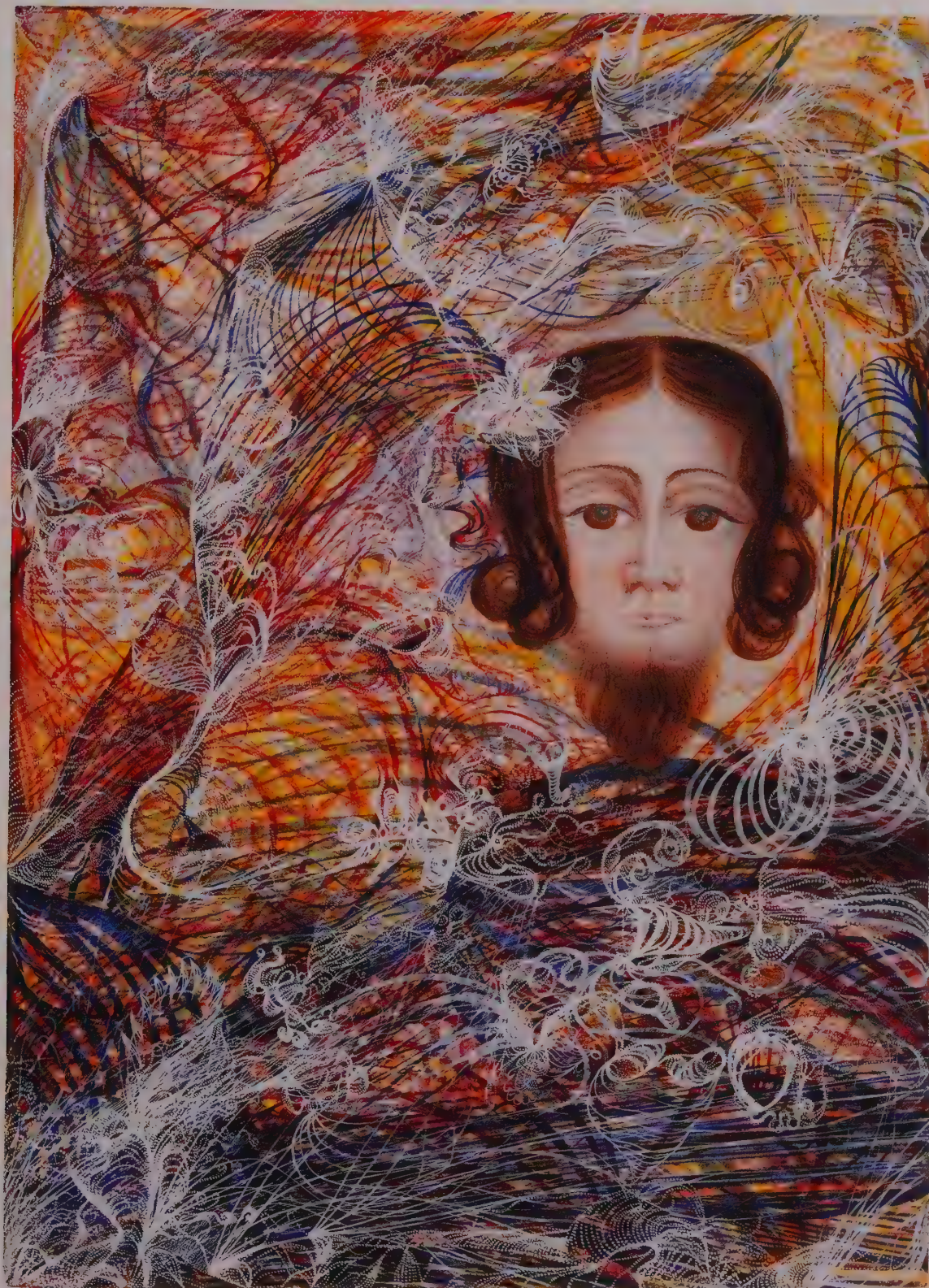
Great as I feel The Saviour's sufferings to be, I am sure that the twelve Apostles, & others many added on by whom drawn from the and



I hope the foregoing explanations will be clear. I have wished not to make them too elaborate. May The Saviour's Blood I have represented various attributes of The Lord - May His love fill all hearts.  
This drawing was finished December 8th 1862. We were occupied upon it for 25 days.

Luke, Evangelist.

















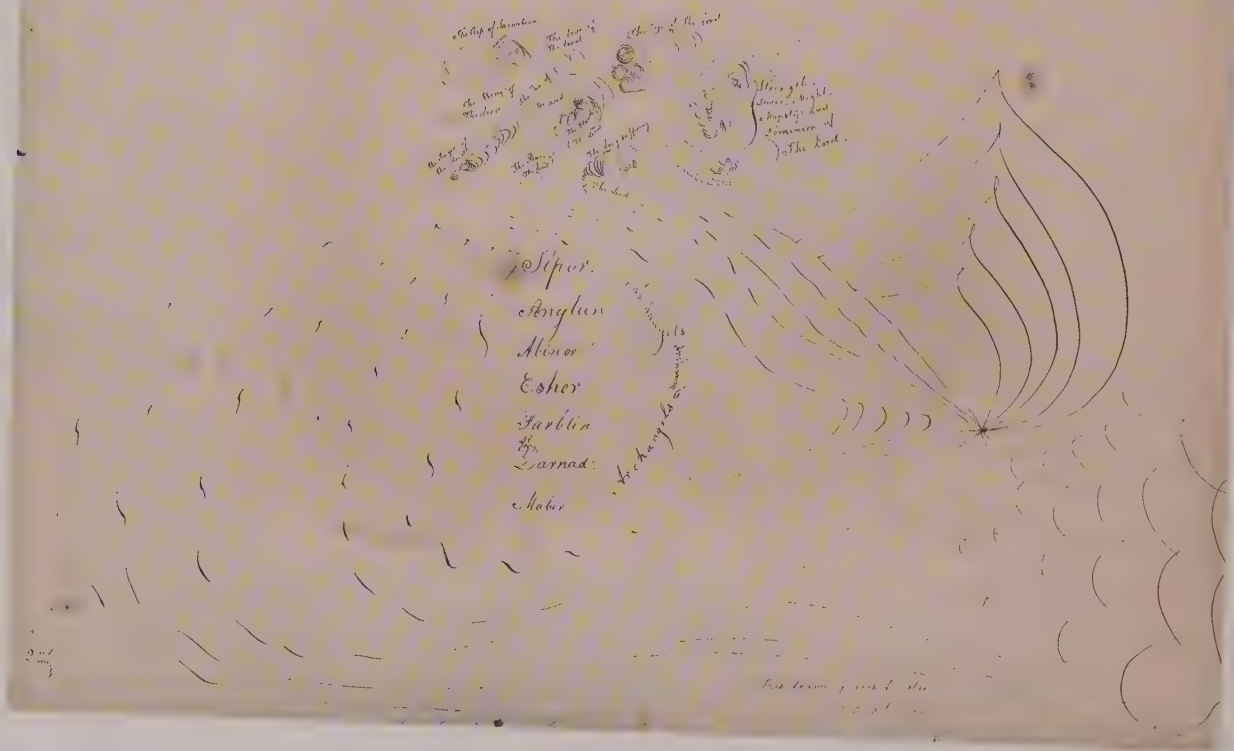








Glory be to God.









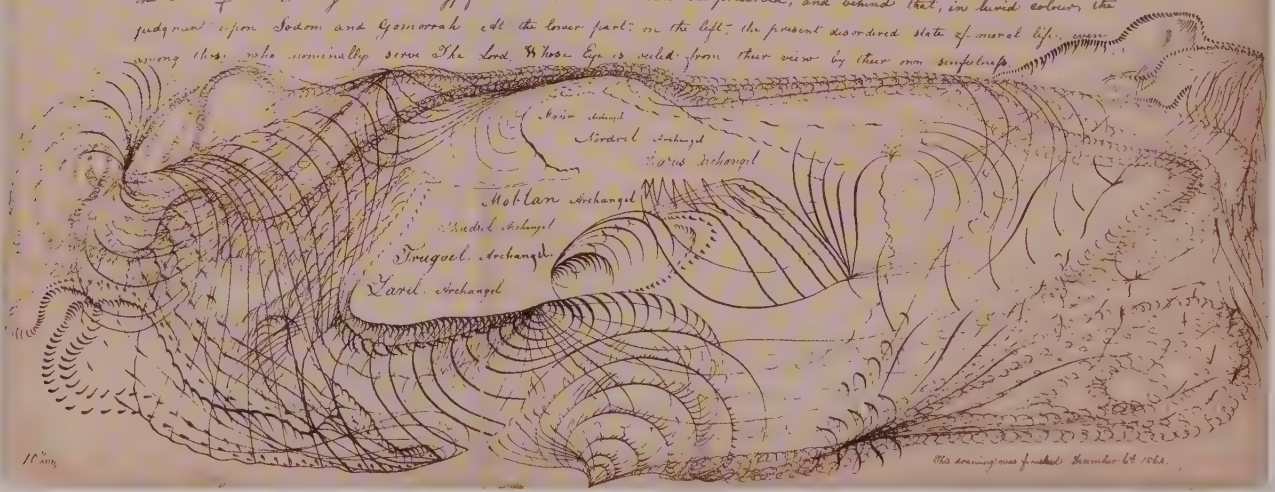






# The Lord God.

The Lord God has created all for ultimate happiness. He Who formed man, formed him so as to enjoy happiness; even upon the earth that happiness is overabundantly great when men fulfil His Will, and enjoy the pure felicity which has been prepared for them. In Eden it was complete when The Lord had bestowed upon Adam his pure and loving wife; there might they have dwelt in tranquil bliss, had they not succumbed to temptation, and disobeyed The Commands of The Lord, thus sin entered the world, and they were driven forth from their blissful home to a land which would require hard labour to supply them with the necessaries for their existence. Then came the crime of murder; but as succeeding generations sprung up, so wickedness increased, until mankind even became impure. The Lord, Who ever sought to recall His creatures to Himself, has at various times punished severely; but He still shewed forth His Blessings, and finally appeared upon earth in mortal form, to teach mankind by precept and example what they should strive in their lives to be. But alas! even nominal Christians still forget The Pure Eye that is overlooking them, and think lightly of the sin of impurity, which, next to the shedding of human blood is of the deepest enormity. We have represented The Lord God in thirfold majesty and loving power in the centre of the drawing. Above is typified the ark where Noah was preserved, and behind that, in vivid colours, the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah; all the lower part, on the left, the present disordered state of moral life among those who nominally serve The Lord, Whose Eye is veiled from their view by their own selfishness.



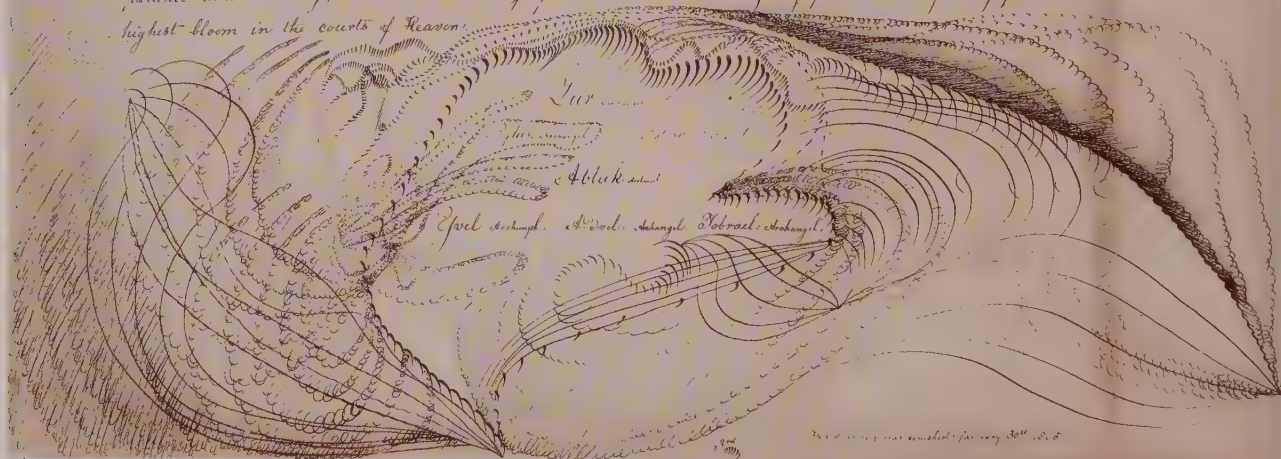


Georgiana Houghton, The Lord God, December 6th 1864



5 The Lightnings show forth the Power of the Lord

God manifests His Power to move, and they talk of electricity, and the laws thereof, forgetting The One ruling Hand: how are the clouds governed, thus to generate the electricity & not by their own will, by Whose think Man may and should search into the material surroundings, and strive by the knowledge thus acquired to benefit their species; but they must learn to seek in them the delicate workings of The Lord's Hand, and see in all, symbols of the inner workings of The Spirit upon the heart of man: see the ravages of the storm, the overthrow of the mighty trees of the forest!—then comes calms: the smaller shrubs which have been over-shaded by them, are permitted to behold the sun's genial rays: to bask in his warmth, and thus struggle forth into life and vigour: So with the human being: some great calamity falls upon him, shattering his strength, pointing to him that his will has led him into error: he bows before the Lord, and The Grace of God is poured upon him, fostering the virtues of patience and humility, until the little insignificant shrubs rise into gloriously blooming lovely flowers to come to their highest bloom in the courts of Heaven.







Georgiana Houghton, The Lightnings Shew Forth the Power of the Lord, January 30th 1865



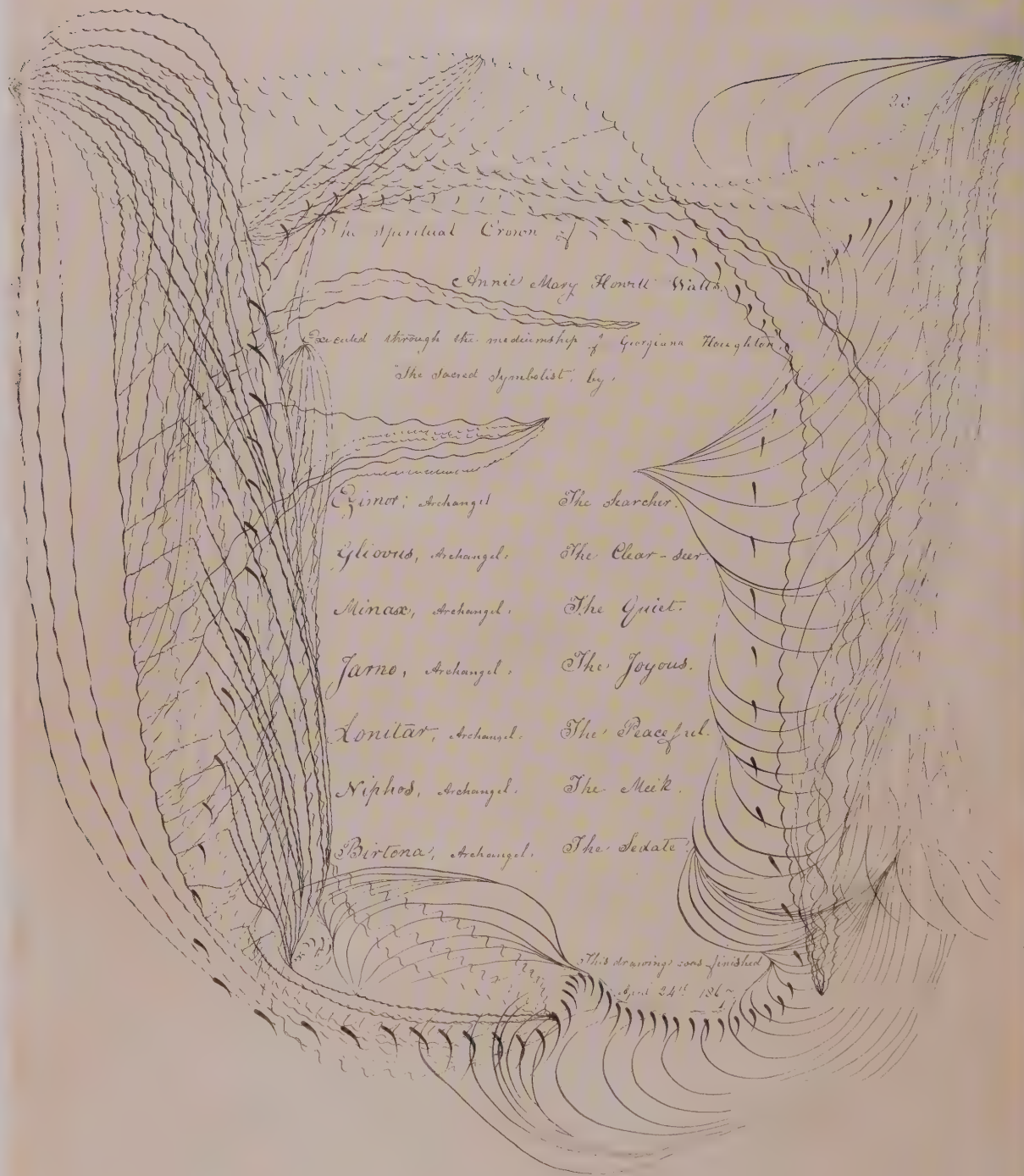






Georgiana Houghton, The Eye of the Lord, September 22nd 1866 (year partially obscured)





























HILMA

A F K L I N T

# HILMA AF KLINT

(1862–1944)

Although educated as an academic painter and active in this profession, after 1906 Hilma af Klint distanced herself from the conventions of her time and, influenced by Spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, and Theosophy, developed a unique pictorial language that is often purely abstract. She systematically explored the immaterial contents of another, higher, world and captured these in symbolic works, resulting in far-reaching series with organic or geometric abstractions in unusual combinations of color and form.

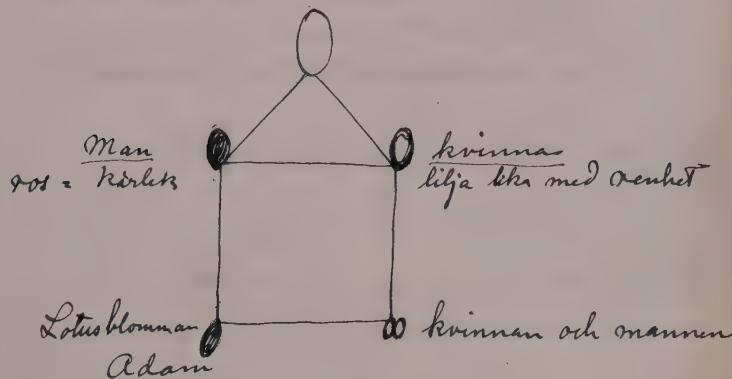
Hilma af Klint's art-historical rediscovery in recent decades was accompanied by the sensational realization that she developed her non-figurative works some years before the well-known modern fathers of abstraction such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, Kupka, and others, and is thus among the founders of abstract painting in the twentieth century. Since af Klint stipulated in 1932 that her work should not be exhibited until long after her death, it is only today that it finds its place in the art history of modernity, the canon of which is being intensively debated.

■ Hilma af Klint was born in Karlberg Castle (Karlbergs Slott) near Stockholm on October 26, 1862, as the fourth of the five children of the naval officer Fredrik Victor af Klint and Mathilda Sontag. She spent the first ten years of her childhood there together with her parents and siblings. Her father taught astronomy, navigation, and general nautical science, as well as mathematics and science, to naval cadets at the Karlberg Military Academy. In this way, Hilma also came into contact with these topics, which would become important for her later artistic work. The af Klint family's connection to the navy goes back to the eighteenth century; Hilma af Klint's ancestors were well-known for their nautical charts and navigation tables, and her grandfather Gustaf mapped the depths of the Swedish waterways. In 1872, the family moved to Norrtullsgatan in Stockholm. They spent summers on the family estates on Hanmora and Tofta on the island of Adelsö on Lake Mälaren, where Hilma af Klint returned throughout her life for the warm months. Her intensive contact with nature and the lake landscape thus remained a constant.

Hilma af Klint already had a talent for drawing at an early age. Her artistic training began at the Technical School in Stockholm (Technika skolan, today Konstfack, School of Applied Arts) in 1880, complemented by lessons in portraiture with Kerstin Cardon. At the age of twenty, she was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Kungliga Konstakademien) in Stockholm; the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Arts had been teaching women since 1864, earlier than many European academies. She



Varje revben ett syskonpar.  
 12 revbenspar, Totalt själiska krafter.  
 Av de trettonde revbenen skapades kvinnan,  
 detta revbenspar innehåller en liten del av  
 varje revben, därför både manlig och kvinnlig  
Människa



12 lotusblad, 12 par revben, 12 par själiska krafter  
 det 13:e revbensparet innehåller en liten del  
 av vardera, det blir kvinnan Eva.

Hilma af Klint, Notebook, 1914, p. 6, The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 419

studied for the usual five years until 1887, her teachers including, among others, Georg von Rosen, August Malmström, and Per Daniel Holm. As a student, and also after completing her training, she traveled to Norway, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. She became friends with her academy colleagues Lotten Rönnquist, Elisabeth Wahring, Charlotte Wahlström, and Anna Cassel; she was closely connected with the latter until the end of her life. A graduate with honors, she received one of the coveted academy studios at Hamnagatan 5, which she shared with Alma Arnell and Lotten Rönnquist, and where she worked for over twenty years, until 1908.

At the academy, she was awarded a prize in the history painting category for her Symbolist work *Andromeda*. She later specialized in naturalistic landscapes and portraits in the style of the time, which was influenced by Impressionism and Art Nouveau. She was also an accomplished draftswoman of botanical studies and worked in 1900/01 as an illustrator at the Veterinary Institute (Veterinärinstitutet). During a trip to Italy, which probably took place in 1903, she studied the Renaissance artists in northern Italy, especially Florence. For a while, she was also the secretary of the Association of Swedish Artists (Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor) founded in 1910.



"The Five" (De Fem), Untitled (Notebook 5, p. 28), May 5 1903, graphite on paper, The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 1518

Hilma af Klint's studio was in the center of the lively art scene of Stockholm, adjacent to the large park of Kungsträdgården. Also here were the rooms of the Swedish Art Society (Sveriges Allmänna Konstförening), where she exhibited several times, as well as the gallery and the café of the art dealer Theodor Blanch. Hilma af Klint was therefore able to follow the current art debates directly on site. In 1894, Edvard Munch caused a stir here with an exhibition of his works, and it is probable that it was here that af Klint became acquainted with Munch's Symbolist and Expressionist work through paintings such as *The Frieze of Life*, *Madonna*, *The Scream*, and *Vampire*. Several of the works the artist Ernst Josephson had painted after he was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1888 could also be seen for the first time in the 1890s.

Hilma af Klint regularly presented her naturalistic works, for example at the Art and Industry Exhibitions in Norrköping in 1906 and in Lund in 1907. In 1911, she was represented at the exhibition of the Association of Swedish Artists at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, as well as at the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö in 1914, where, in the Russian section, Wassily Kandinsky presented recent—among them also abstract—works, including *Improvisation 2 (Funeral March)* from 1908 (now in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm) and *Composition VI* from 1913.

After an unrequited love affair with a distant relative, a doctor named Helleday, Hilma af Klint remained unmarried—possibly a conscious decision made in her youth to give her life other goals. After the death of her father in



1898, she lived with her mother at Brahegatan 52. When her mother became blind in 1908, af Klint henceforth devoted a great deal of time to her care; she also gave up her studio, but set up a small workspace in her home. Since graduation, the center of her life had become a circle of friends who shared her artistic and spiritual interests. In 1912, Anna Cassel bought the Villa Furuheim in Sjöängen on the island of Munsö on Lake Mälaren, which she let Hilma af Klint use as a summer house. With the help of friends, in 1916/17, af Klint had a studio house built adjacent to the Villa Furuheim. In 1918, she moved permanently to the Villa Furuheim together with her mother and the nurse Thomasine Andersson.

After her mother's death in 1920, it was possible for af Klint to travel more frequently. From 1920 to 1930, she traveled annually to Dornach in Switzerland, where Rudolf Steiner had founded a center of Anthroposophy. Her routes took her through many northern European cities, including Amsterdam, where she visited the Rijksmuseum. In 1928, she visited London and participated in the World Conference of Spiritual Science. There, she exhibited works from the *Temple* series for the first time in public and gave a lecture on Rosicrucianism.

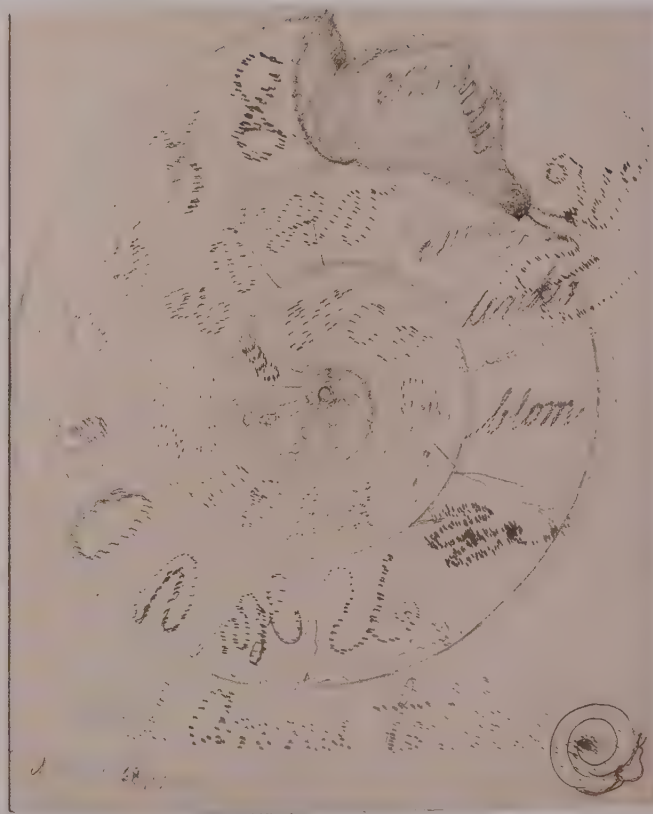
Together with Thomasine Andersson, in 1920 af Klint moved to Helsingborg for the winter months; from 1928 to 1931, they lived in Uppsala, and from 1934 in Lund. They continued to spend the summer months on Munsö. Af Klint's circle of friends gradually became smaller: Anna Cassel died in 1937, Thomasine Andersson in 1940. In 1944, af Klint went back to Stockholm and lived with her cousin, Hedvig af Klint, in Ösby in Djursholm. Hilma af Klint died on October 21, 1944, shortly before her eighty-second birthday, as a result of a traffic accident.

Hilma af Klint's significance for art history, however, lies not in her early biography, but rather in the pictures created after 1906, work which, she decided in 1932, should not be exhibited until twenty years after her death. These innovative and impressive works were created in the context of her intensive investigation into Spiritualism, Theosophy, and the life sciences: interests that she shared with many contemporaries, including artists of the avant-garde.

As with the environment of Georgiana Houghton in Victorian London, in Stockholm around 1900 a strong sense of unease about the marginalization of the spiritual dimension of life in an increasingly materialistic and

industrialized world began to become widespread. Theories of evolution and psychoanalysis, as well as discoveries of phenomena such as X-rays and radioactivity, which constantly outdid each other, led to a sense of uncertainty rather than trust in clearly defined scientific laws. There were obviously innumerable aspects of nature that could not be grasped with the senses of humankind and thus brought the mind up against its limits. The Evangelical Lutheran state church provided no answers. Various religious and esoteric movements from all over the world were thus given increasingly more attention.

As a teenager, Hilma af Klint came into contact with occult circles and is said to have already shown skills as a medium during her childhood. From the age of seventeen, she participated in séances as part of a Spiritualist group. With the death of her sister Hermina in 1880, her interest



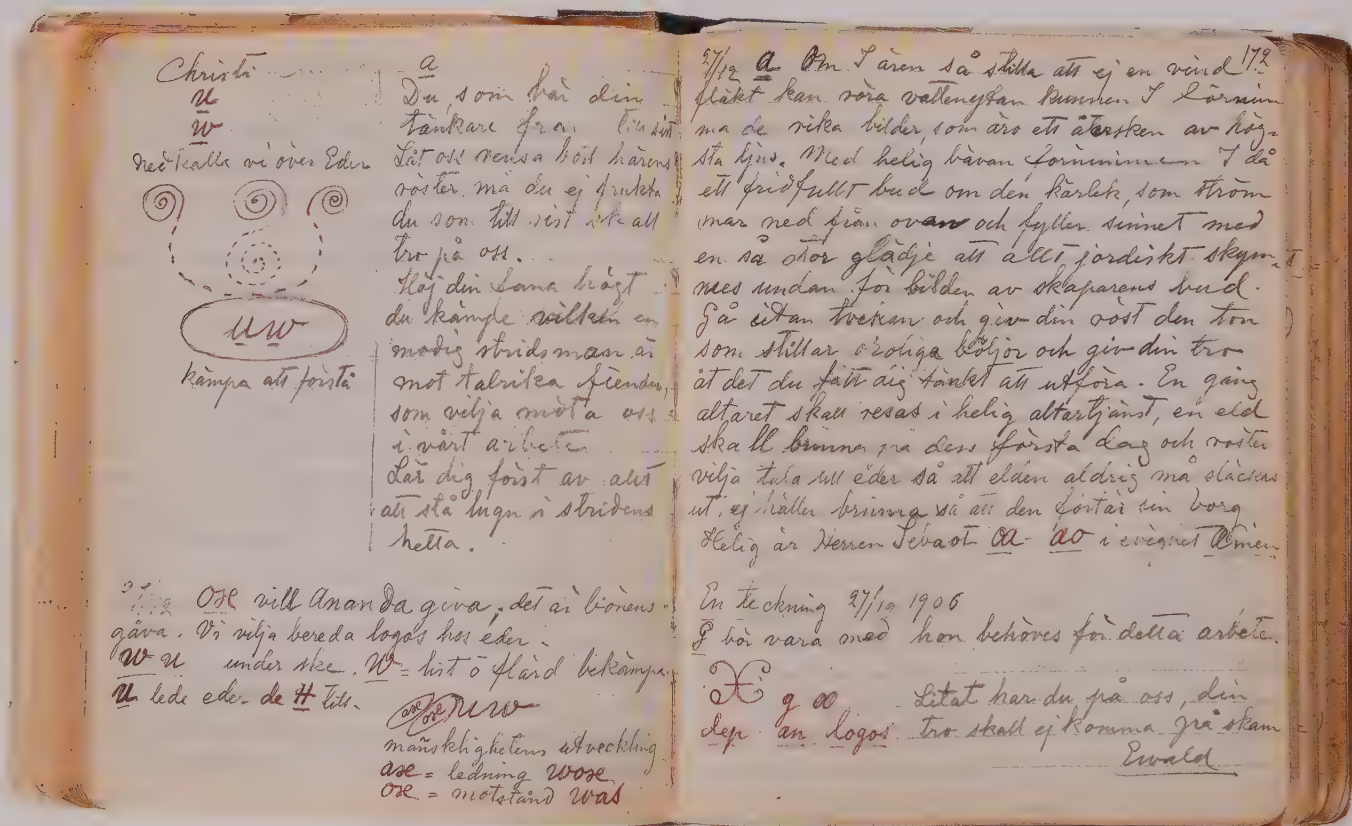
"The Five" (De Fem), Untitled (Notebook 13, p. 12), November 28 1905, graphite on paper, The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 1526

in religious issues—as well as her need to connect with the “other side”—grew. Hilma af Klint had already left them by 1882, as she did not regard the Spiritualist movement as serious enough. With her spiritual commitment, she was alone within her family; it nevertheless became a constant to which she dedicated her life. At the same time, she was always described by those around her as a sober and clear thinker; it was said that she always carefully and critically considered what was important for her spiritual development and was well-informed in this regard. For example, she promptly participated in the widespread shift of interests from Spiritualism to the more broadly based Theosophy and joined the Swedish Theosophical Society as early as 1889, the year of its founding.

In 1896, Hilma af Klint was in contact with the Edelweiss Society (Edelweissförbundet), to which many women

from higher circles in Stockholm belonged. Since the focus of the society did not appeal to her, that same year she founded, together with four other women, the group “The Five” (De Fem): Anna Cassel, Sigrid Hedman, Cornelia Cederberg, and Mathilda Nilsson. There were overlaps with the so-called “Friday Group” (Fredagsgruppen), which was active for roughly one year around 1900. The group “The Five” met regularly during the ten-year period 1896–1906, with occasional meetings for another year. These meetings were instrumental in Hilma af Klint’s spiritual development and in her preparations for executing the *Paintings for the Temple*.

In photographs of the meetings of “The Five” we can see an altar with a cross, which has a rose in the centre (a reference to the Rosicrucians). The base of the cross had three levels, indicating the three phases of human



Hilma af Klint, Description of Symbols, Signs, and Paintings (Notebook, pp. 35/36), 1906–1908, The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 556



spiritual development. Occasionally, the cross was framed by a triangle. An image of Christ hung on the wall behind the cross, while palm branches and lilies decorated the altar. The meetings began with a prayer, meditation and a sermon, followed by an analysis of one of the texts in the New Testament. Then followed the séance. The spirits, with whom contacts were established in the astral world, identified themselves as Gregory, Georg, Clement, Amaliel, Esther, and Ananda. They were said to have their origins in Tibet. They were intermediaries to unnamed spirits from higher levels, unnamed but called “The High Masters” (De Höga Mästarna). All these aspects, as well as the messages received, are documented in notebooks of the group “The Five” and were carefully preserved, a practice that would be maintained by af Klint throughout her life.

In the beginning, Sigrid Hedman served as a medium and received messages in a trance or via a psychographer, an instrument in which a needle points to letters of the alphabet. Automatic drawing replaced automatic writing. The sheets were usually signed only with “D. F.” (De Fem), occasionally with the monograms of all present, since it was not authorship but rather the message that counted. It is nevertheless known that, in the beginning, Cornelia Cederberg created most of the drawings and, from 1903, Hilma af Klint took the graphite or colored pencils in her own hand. Some motifs of later works by af Klint already appear here, including snails, roses and lilies, abstract floral motifs, and geometric forms.

Af Klint’s abstract imagery was thus developed within the context of mediumistic drawing. In this context, the medium was to adopt a passive attitude and receive messages freely. For this, it was necessary to break away from the conventions of academic art production, to unlearn them.

During a séance in 1904, the spirit Ananda prophesied that she would soon paint images on the astral level which would represent the immortal aspects of humanity, and that she (af Klint) should mentally prepare herself for this task. During two séances in 1904, the spirit Georg gave permission for a temple to be built and requested that Hilma af Klint should make the necessary architectural drawings. In 1905, at the age of forty-three, Hilma af Klint received a promise to work in the services of “The Mysteries” and to be prepared to receive a message. She was furthermore to take part in the building of the Temple.



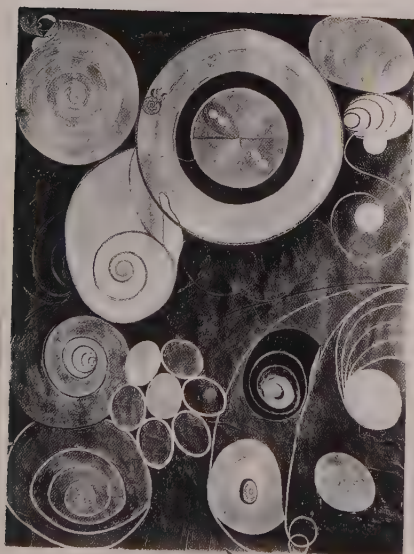
Altar of “The Five” (De Fem), ca. 1900

Her work in this respect would be performed through painting. On January 1, 1906, the spirit Amaliel finally gave her the task to make the paintings, which became a turning point in her life. She was fully committed to this project. During 1906, Hilma af Klint went through a process of “purification” corresponding to the three phases of an alchemic process—becoming spiritually, mentally and physically prepared to assume the task assigned to her. From 1906 to 1915, Hilma af Klint created her *Paintings for the Temple*. This cycle, a key work within her oeuvre as a whole, consists of 193 predominantly abstract works, which were created in several phases and subdivided into various series.

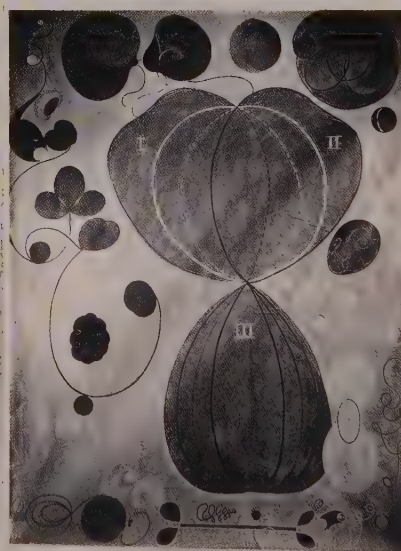
From November 1906 to April 1908, she devoted herself to the first group, which comprised 111 pictures.



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Hilma af Klint, Notebook pages documenting two works from the series *The Ten Largest* (1907), No. 3: Youth, No. 7: Adulthood, color drawings and black-and-white photographs (after 1917), The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 1174



In the beginning, she told only a few like-minded people about her work. She described how her hand was directed while she was painting: “The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke.”

In the following four years, af Klint spent a great deal of time tending to her mother; the task of her *Paintings for the Temple* was put on hold. Instead, she devoted herself intensively to the study of literature on philosophy and the life sciences. From 1912 to 1915, af Klint created a second group of eighty-two *Paintings for the Temple* and thus completed the task. In this second phase as well, she functioned as a medium, but it was now possible for her to influence the works to a greater extent than before. Her hand was no longer led directly; instead, she described her inspiration as coming from words and images that she perceived inside her. The works are more geometric and characterized by religious iconography.

Works were created in a wide stylistic range. The formal means extend from biomorphic forms and radiant, wavy phenomena to geometric abstractions, from lettered and worded schemata to figurative depictions. The most intimate, small-format pictures exist side by side next to enormous canvases: The *Ten Largest*, executed in 1907, are paintings measuring 3.28 × 2.40 meters (10.7 × 7.9 feet), making them among of the most monumental abstract pictorial works of art before 1945.

The iconography and symbolism of the *Paintings for the Temple* are highly complex and not reducible to a single interpretation. Some basic structures stand out: Time and again, it is about the relationship between humankind and the universe, the creation of the world from the spirit, and the evolution of humankind from earthly to higher spheres. A consistent theme is the longing for a unity of all existence and thus the unification of dualities, especially the polarity of man and woman. For the presentation of her works, af Klint envisioned a spiral-shaped building in which visitors and viewers would progress from the exterior to the interior; in the center, the three large altarpieces would represent the solution, the return to unity.

The circle of female friends, held together by their shared spiritual interest and the De Fem group, persevered and accompanied Hilma af Klint during the time

she devoted herself to the *Paintings for the Temple*. This circle, especially Anna Cassel, her friend since her days at the academy, was committed to the construction of the studio building on Munsö, to which most of the new paintings were taken. The building had a sacral feeling about it due to its Gothic windows and double portal with lancet arches. The large central space on the ground floor was three and a half meters high, the canvases of the *Ten Largest* were rolled around its pillars for storage. Important paintings from the *Temple* series hung on the walls. Completion in 1917 made it possible to display the works for visitors, including artists such as the Symbolist painter and graphic artist Tyra Kleen.

Hilma af Klint was interested in understanding and interpreting the works she had created as a medium. She thus devoted herself, in addition to her task, to the detailed study of the ideas connected with it and continued to do so after the completion of the paintings. “The Five” read the books of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in Swedish translation; Hilma af Klint owned her *Secret Doctrine* (1888; *Den Hemliga Lärnan*, in two volumes, 1895 and 1898). In 1875, Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York together with Henry Steel Olcott, and the Theosophical movement quickly spread throughout the world. The popularity of Spiritualist thought provided an ideal basis for Blavatsky to propagate a syncretistic extension, a kind of meta-religion that unites all religious sources in the world. An important factor for this success was certainly that one was no longer only concerned with contacting an otherworldly, higher realm, but that the evolution of humankind and its spirit to ever higher spheres were also given consideration.

With equal intensity, af Klint also studied the works of, and attended lectures by, the two leading figures in Theosophy, Rudolf Steiner and Annie Besant. Together with Charles W. Leadbeater, Besant had written *Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* (1901), a book that described and illustrated supernatural phenomena for the first time for a broad audience and became highly influential for artists. The pursuit of the “spiritual in art,” to which Wassily Kandinsky dedicated his own book in 1912, found legitimacy in Theosophy and the idea of a great world spirit that stands above all and unites all belief systems, though many Theosophists, and especially Rudolf Steiner, rejected the abandonment



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Hilma af Klint, Notebook pages documenting *Altarpiece No. 1* (1915), color drawing and black-and-white photograph (after 1917), The Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm, HaK 1180



of the figurative in favor of an abstract pictorial language. In July 1908, Hilma af Klint met Rudolf Steiner, then General Secretary of the German Theosophical Society, for the first time and showed him her works. Steiner praised the symbolism of individual works but criticized the mediumistic method.

In Stockholm in 1913, af Klint reported on her spiritual development in a public lecture and participated in the Theosophical World Congress, whose chairman and guest of honor was Besant. After a period of strained relationship with the “Eastern” Theosophical Society in Adyar (South India) and with the Krishnamurti aspect as a formal reason, Steiner formally broke with the Theosophical Society at the end of 1912, begin of 1913. Together with his followers, he subsequently founded the Anthroposophical Society. Af Klint gradually turned to Anthroposophical ideas; around 1915/16, she left the Theosophical Society and in 1920 became a member of the Anthroposophical Society. An important reason for this step was presumably that Anthroposophy placed a higher value on Christianity than Annie Besant’s “Eastern” path, and Theosophy, which saw itself as one religion among many, placed Indian religions on the same level.

The insights that Hilma af Klint gained through her studies were continuously recorded in her notebooks, which run to tens of thousands of pages. In 1917/18, she also dictated her thoughts to Anna Ljungberg; the transcribed text comprises 2,075 typewritten pages.

After completion of the task for the temple, Hilma af Klint resumed her professional artistic work, but also continued to create metaphysical works. From 1916 to 1920, she worked on several series which accompanied her personal studies. The largest was the *Percival* series with 148 watercolors (1916), a visualization of the search for knowledge. Other series included studies on world religions and cultures, on atoms and *Flowers*, *Mosses*, and *Lichens* (the latter was created in 1919; af Klint donated it to the Goetheanum in Dornach in 1927). Many of these works were part of a larger project to understand and systematize nature, a kind of esoteric parallel to the then common practice in the natural sciences.

From 1920 on, Hilma af Klint traveled regularly and frequently for longer stays in Dornach, together with Thomasine Andersson. Here, she attended Steiner’s lectures and studied Anthroposophical literature. The study of Steiner led to an interruption, indeed a crisis,



Hilma af Klint at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, ca. 1885

in her work. Steiner’s view of art, formulated in a lecture from 1918, must have led her to rethink her own method, as he saw both the direct imitation of nature and the desire to reveal the supernatural as errors. Perhaps this is the reason why in 1921 af Klint stopped painting for roughly a year after her first travels and during this time studied, among other things, Goethe’s color theory, which had been edited by Rudolf Steiner. She did not succeed in arousing Steiner’s interest for her work, and an envisaged exhibition of her pictures in an Anthroposophical Society never materialized.

In 1922, she resumed painting but abandoned her geometric abstractions and created new works, including watercolors, using a flowing wet-in-wet technique inspired



Hilma af Klint, ca. 1910

by Goethe and by Anthroposophic art, including *On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees* (1922). At the age of sixty, she thus reinvented her art and developed a painterly, predominantly abstract expressionism in which the color black, rejected by Anthroposophical art theory, also appeared. She pursued this series, albeit with longer pauses, up until her last picture in 1941. After Steiner's death in 1925, af Klint tried to win over Dornach's new directorship to her work, submitting copies of the series *Tree of Knowledge* without, however, receiving any feedback. Disappointed by the continuous conflicts within the association, she finally turned away from it. In 1931, af Klint designed a spiral temple building to be constructed on the island of Ven in Öresund.

In biographical reports on Hilma af Klint—as with Emma Kunz a short time later—events or documents are referred to which purportedly provide additional testimony to the mediumistic abilities of the protagonist. Cases are adduced in which these forces had a healing effect, and her prophetic gift is emphasized by referring to contemporary history: In 1932, af Klint created two maps (thus incorporating the cartographic tradition of her family) of Great Britain and the Iberian Peninsula, visionary maps that can be interpreted as premonitions of air strikes on London and the naval battle in the Mediterranean during the ensuing Second World War.

Hilma af Klint assumed that only future generations would understand her art. While she was able to publicly exhibit her early naturalistic, figurative art, she encountered resistance whenever she attempted to show her spiritual works. Even the leadership of the World Conference of Spiritual Science in London had initially turned down her requests. It was only the intervention of friends that made the exhibition of her works possible in 1928. After such experiences, she thus decided in 1932 that these works should only be publicly shown at the earliest twenty years after her death. She hoped that the conditions for an understanding of her work would be better among later generations.

After her death, the anthroposophist and sculptor Olof Sundström, who became acquainted with af Klint's works in Munsö in the early 1940s, catalogued the estate. Hilma af Klint left her nephew Erik af Klint more than 1,300 non-figurative pictures, as well as sketchbooks, 124 notebooks with more than 26,000 pages, and other archive materials. Since 1972, the estate has been managed by The Hilma af Klint Foundation.

It ultimately took forty years for Hilma af Klint's work to attract more widespread attention. The Swedish art historian Åke Fant presented her work for the first time in Helsinki in 1984. Two years later, her art was featured in the influential exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Paintings 1890–1985*, curated by Maurice Tuchman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986/87. Here, the influence of the spiritual and the occult on the history of abstraction was presented on a broad scale. A continually increasing international awareness of her work developed, and, in 2013, a comprehensive retrospective was dedicated to it at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, with numerous other venues, ending at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2018.



Julia Voss, who is currently working on her monograph *Hilma af Klint. Leben und Werk, 1862-1944* (to be published in spring 2019), generously shared her unpublished findings with us, for which we are greatly indebted, as did Johan af Klint, Executive Director of the Hilma af Klint Foundation.

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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### All works:

Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk  
(HaK) / Hilma af Klint  
Foundation, Stockholm

Group III, No. 5, The Large  
Figure Paintings, The Key to  
All Works to Date (The WU/  
Rose Series), 1907  
Oil on canvas, 150 × 118 cm  
HaK 42

► see ill. p. 95

Group III, No. 7, The Large  
Figure Paintings, The Act of  
Love (The WU/Rose Series),  
1907  
Oil on canvas, 164 × 148 cm  
HaK 44

► see ill. p. 96

Group III, No. 7, The Large  
Figure Paintings, The Act of  
Love (The WU/Rose Series),  
1907  
Oil on canvas, 164 × 148 cm  
HaK 45

► see ill. p. 97

Group III, No. 8, The Large  
Figure Paintings, Truth  
(The WU/Rose Series), 1907  
Oil on canvas, 164 × 148 cm  
HaK 46

► see ill. p. 99

Group V, No. 5,  
The Seven-Pointed Star  
(The WUS Series), 1908  
Tempera, gouache and graphite  
on paper mounted on canvas,  
75 × 61.5 cm  
HaK 52

► see ill. p. 100

Group V, No. 7,  
The Seven-Pointed Star  
(The WUS Series), 1908  
Tempera, gouache and graphite  
on paper mounted on canvas  
75.5 × 62 cm  
HaK 54

► see ill. p. 101

Group V, No. 9,  
The Seven-Pointed Star  
(The WUS Series), 1908  
Watercolor, 77 × 62 cm  
HaK 56

► see ill. p. 102

Group V, No. 10,  
The Seven-Pointed Star  
(The WUS Series), 1908  
Watercolor, 77 × 62 cm  
HaK 57

► see ill. p. 103

Group V, No. 20,  
The Seven-Pointed Star  
(The WUS Series), 1908  
Watercolor, 77 × 62 cm  
HaK 67

► see ill. p. 105

Group VII, No. 1  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 85

► see ill. p. 106

Group VII, No. 2  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 86

► see ill. p. 107

Group VII, No. 3  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 87

► see ill. p. 108

Group VII, No. 4  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 88

► see ill. p. 109

Group VII, No. 5  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 89

► see ill. p. 110

Group VII, No. 6  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 90

► see ill. p. 111

Group VII, No. 7  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 91

► see ill. p. 112

Group VII, No. 8  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 92

► see ill. p. 112

Group VII, No. 10  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 94

► see ill. p. 113

Group VII, No. 11  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 95

► see ill. p. 113

Group VII, No. 12  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 96

► see ill. p. 114

Group VII, No. 13  
(The US Series), 1908  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 36 cm  
HaK 97

► see ill. p. 115

Group IX/SUW. The Swan,  
No. 8, 1914/15  
Oil on canvas, 152.5 × 149 cm  
HaK 156

► see ill. p. 117

Group IX/SUW. The Swan,  
No. 18, 1914/15  
Oil on canvas, 151 × 152 cm  
HaK 166

► see ill. p. 119

Group IX/SUW. The Swan,  
No. 21, 1914/15  
Oil on canvas, 153 × 153 cm  
HaK 169

► see ill. p. 121

Group IX/SUW. The Swan,  
No. 24, 1914/15  
Oil on canvas, 151 × 152 cm  
HaK 172

► see ill. p. 123

Group IX/UW. The Dove,  
No. 2, 1915  
Oil on canvas, 152 × 115 cm  
HaK 174

► see ill. p. 125

Group IX/UW. The Dove,  
No. 7, 1915  
Oil on canvas, 158 × 130 cm  
HaK 179

► see ill. p. 126

Group IX/UW. The Dove,  
No. 8, 1915  
Oil on canvas, 155 × 128 cm  
HaK 180

► see ill. p. 127

The Parsifal Series, Group I,  
No. 3, 1916  
Watercolor and graphite on  
paper, 28 × 26 cm  
HaK 204

► see ill. p. 128

The Parsifal Series, Group I,  
No. 5, 1916  
Watercolor and graphite on  
paper 25 × 25 cm  
HaK 206

► see ill. p. 129

The Parsifal Series, Group I,  
No. 6, 1916  
Watercolor and graphite  
on paper, 25 × 25 cm  
HaK 207

► see ill. p. 130



The Parsifal Series, Group I,  
No. 9, 1916  
Watercolor and graphite  
on paper, 25 × 25 cm  
HaK 210  
► see ill. p. 131

No. 1, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 521  
► see ill. p. 132

No. 2, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 522  
► see ill. p. 133

No. 3, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 523  
► see ill. p. 134

No. 3, Appendix a,  
Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 524  
► see ill. p. 135

No. 3, Appendix b,  
Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 525  
► see ill. p. 136

No. 3, Appendix f,  
Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 529  
► see ill. p. 137

No. 3 Appendix g,  
Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 530  
► see ill. p. 138

No. 4, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 531  
► see ill. p. 139

No. 5, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 532  
► see ill. p. 140

No. 7a, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 534  
► see ill. p. 141

No. 7d, Series VII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 536a  
► see ill. p. 142

Starting Image,  
Series VIII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 537  
► see ill. p. 143

No. 1, Series VIII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 538  
► see ill. p. 144

No. 2, Series VIII, 1920  
Oil on canvas, 50 × 30 cm  
HaK 539  
► see ill. p. 145

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 26 cm  
HaK 595a  
► see ill. p. 147

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 26 cm  
HaK 600  
► see ill. p. 148

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 26 cm  
HaK 601  
► see ill. p. 149

The Aura of the Plant Seed  
(On the Viewing of Flowers  
and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 26 cm  
HaK 602  
► see ill. p. 151

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 25 cm  
HaK 605  
► see ill. p. 152

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
17.9 × 25 cm  
HaK 607  
► see ill. p. 153

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 25 cm  
HaK 609  
► see ill. p. 154

Untitled (On the Viewing of  
Flowers and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 × 25 cm  
HaK 614  
► see ill. p. 155

Wheat and Wormwood  
(On the Viewing of Flowers  
and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor and graphite on  
paper, 17.3 × 24.7 cm  
HaK 627  
► see ill. p. 156

The Birch-Tree (On the  
Viewing of Flowers and Trees  
Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
17.3 × 24.9 cm  
HaK 639  
► see ill. p. 157

The Honeysuckle (On the  
Viewing of Flowers and  
Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
26 × 35 cm  
HaK 642  
► see ill. p. 158

Fern and Common Polypody  
(On the Viewing of Flowers  
and Trees Series), 1922  
Watercolor on paper,  
24.3 × 34.9 cm  
HaK 656  
► see ill. p. 159









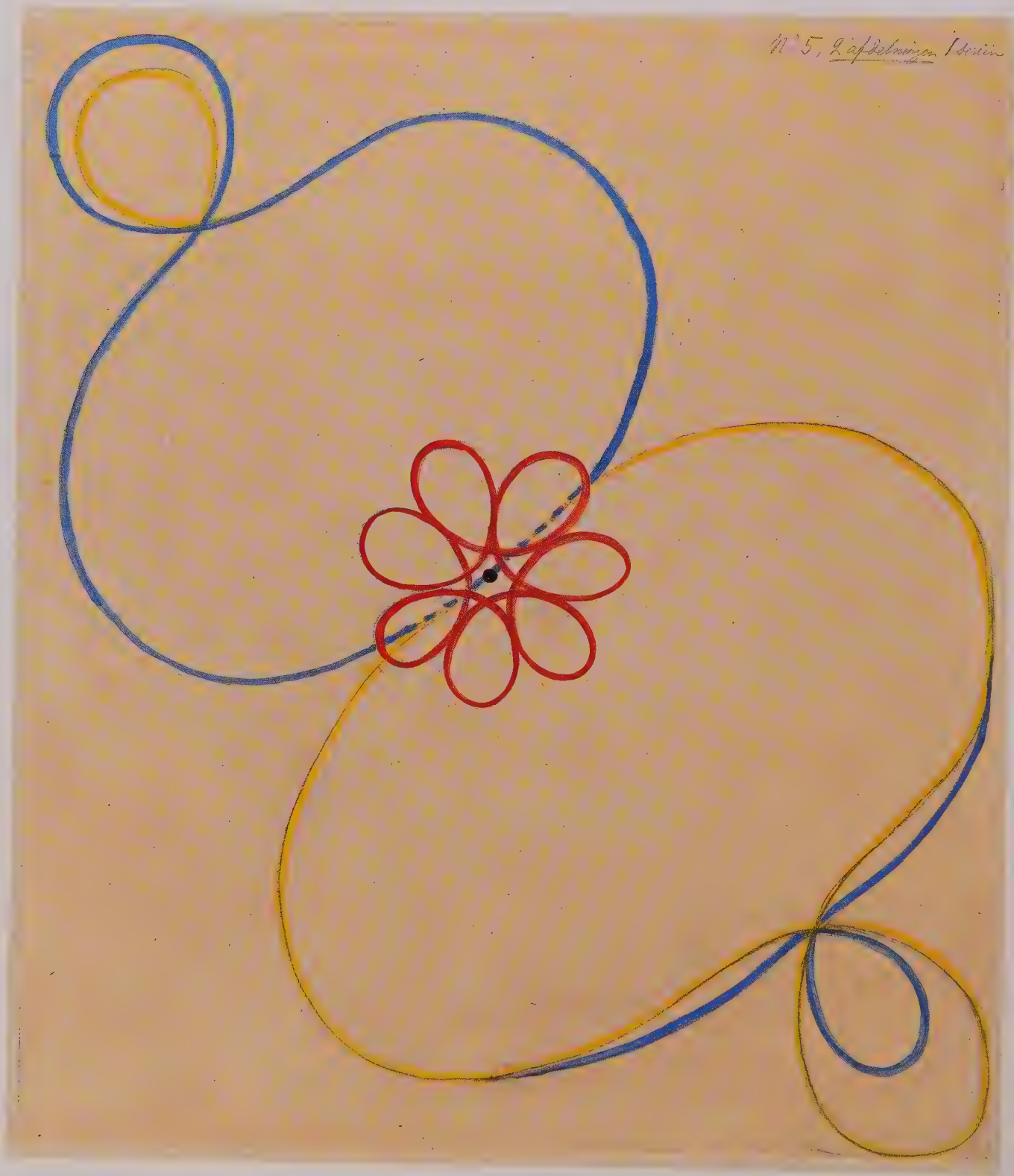




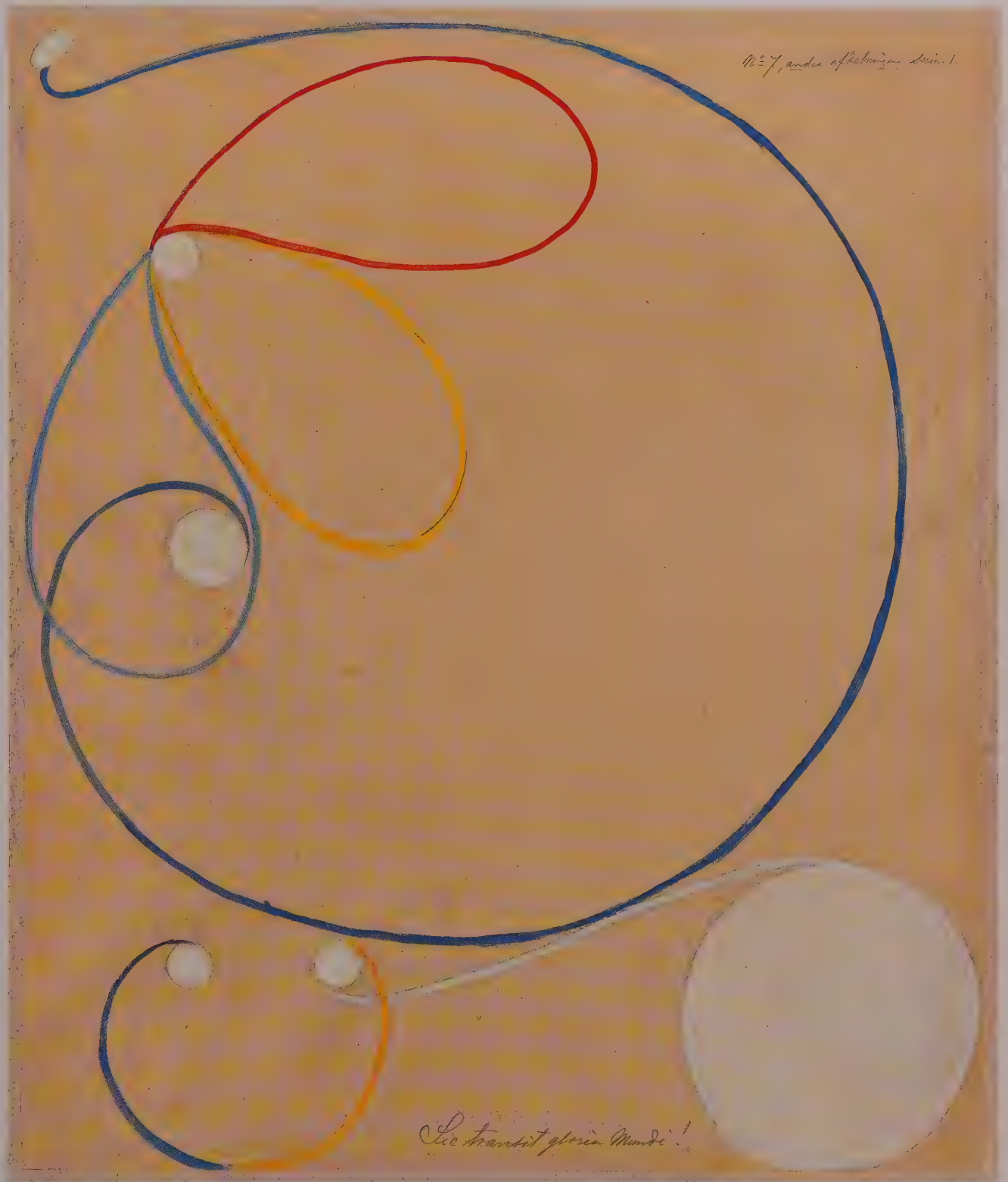






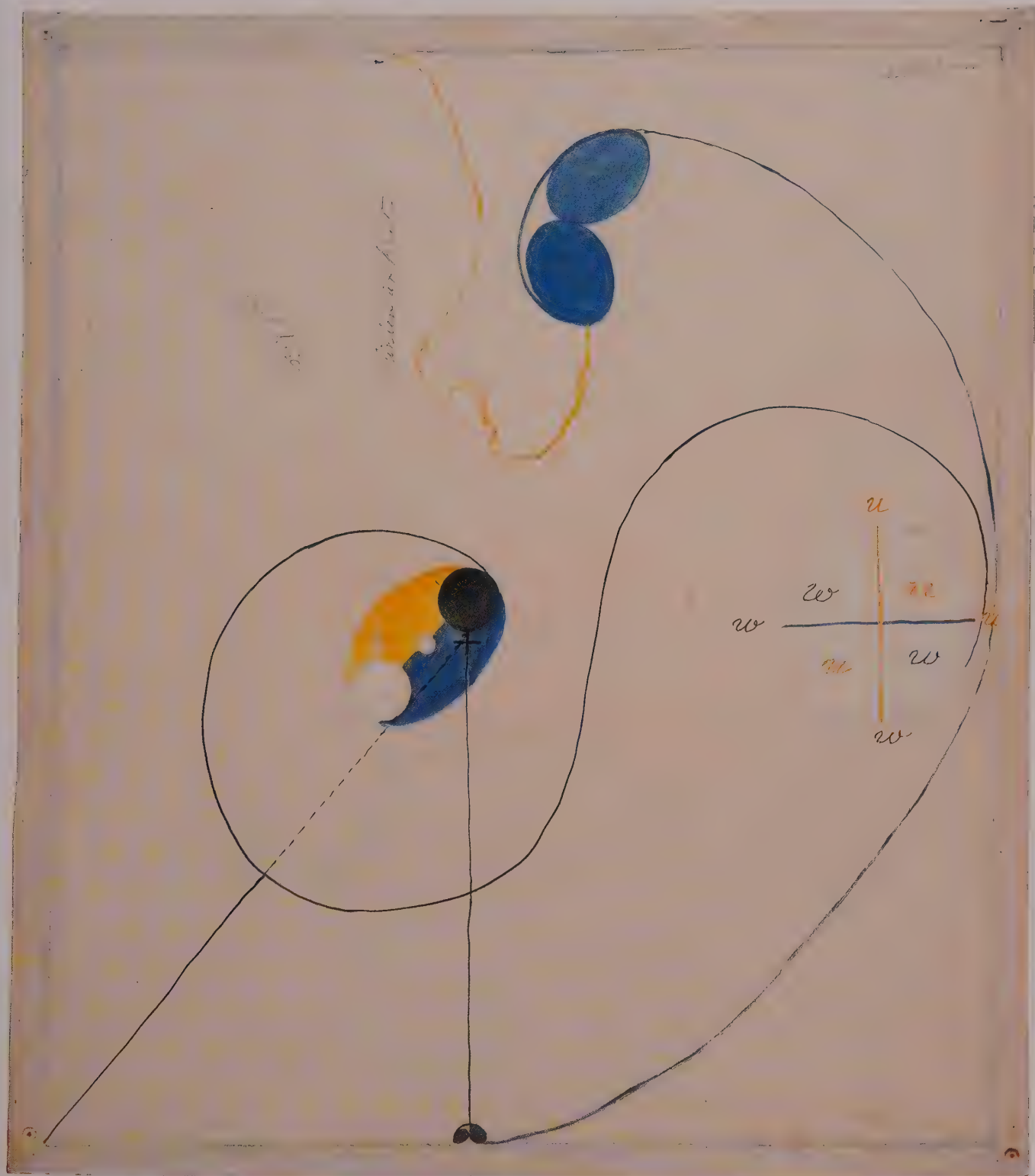










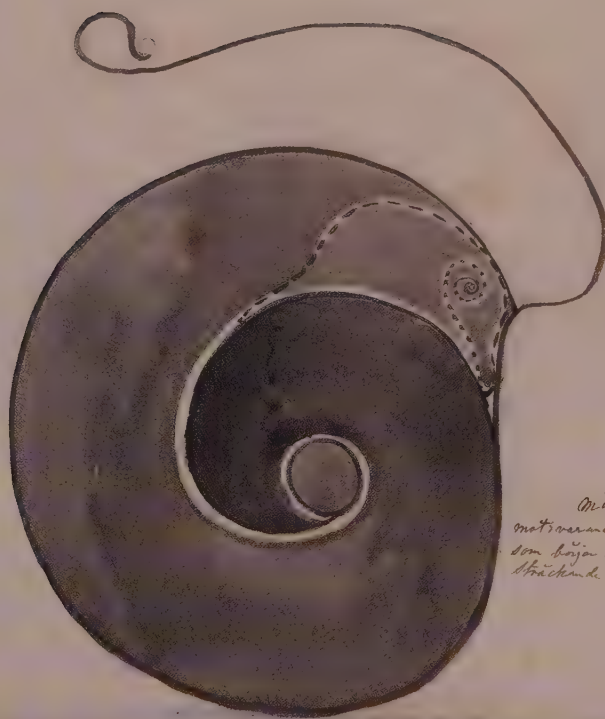






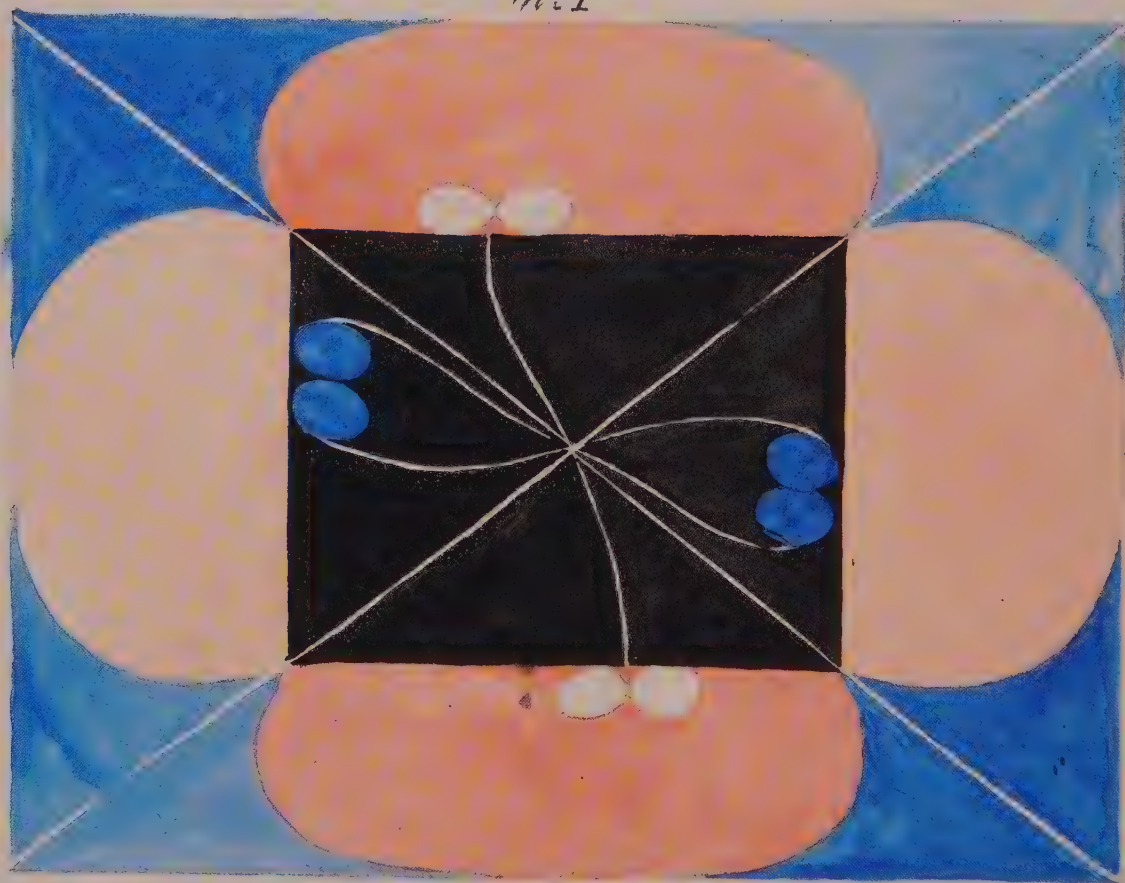
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Lafanit



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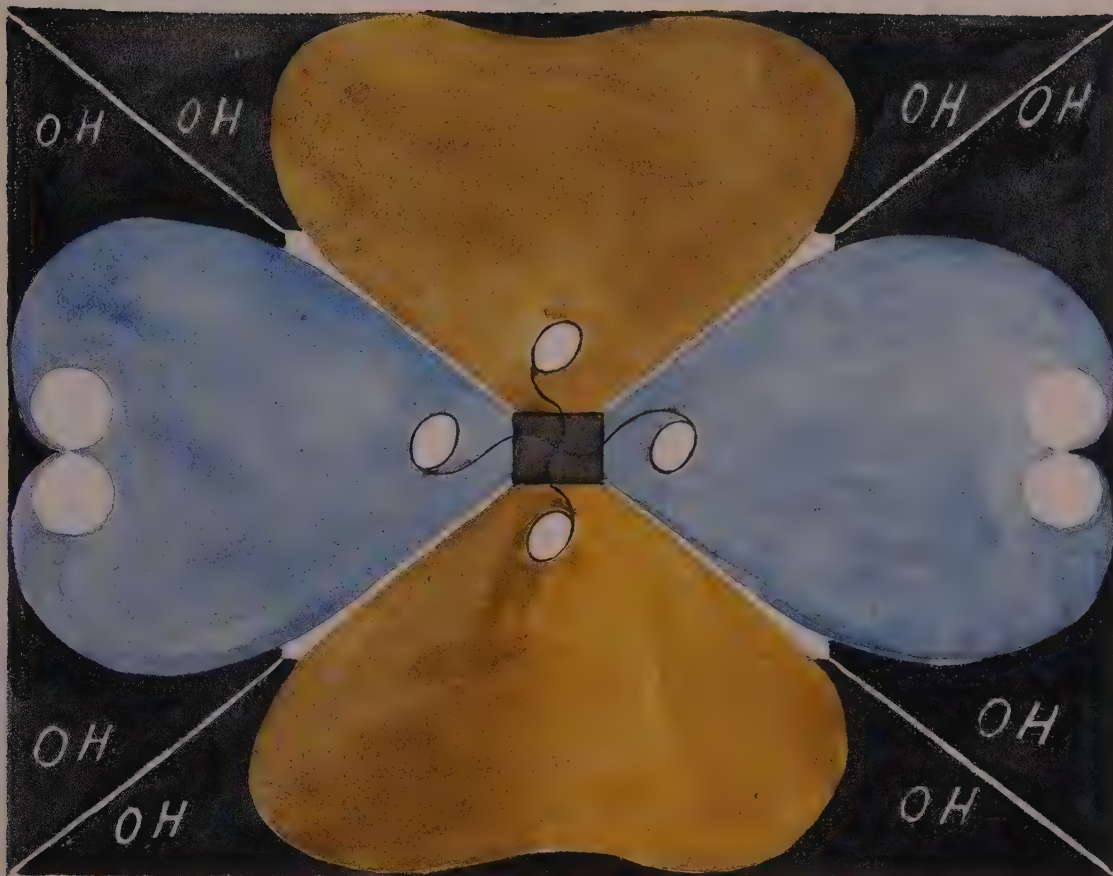
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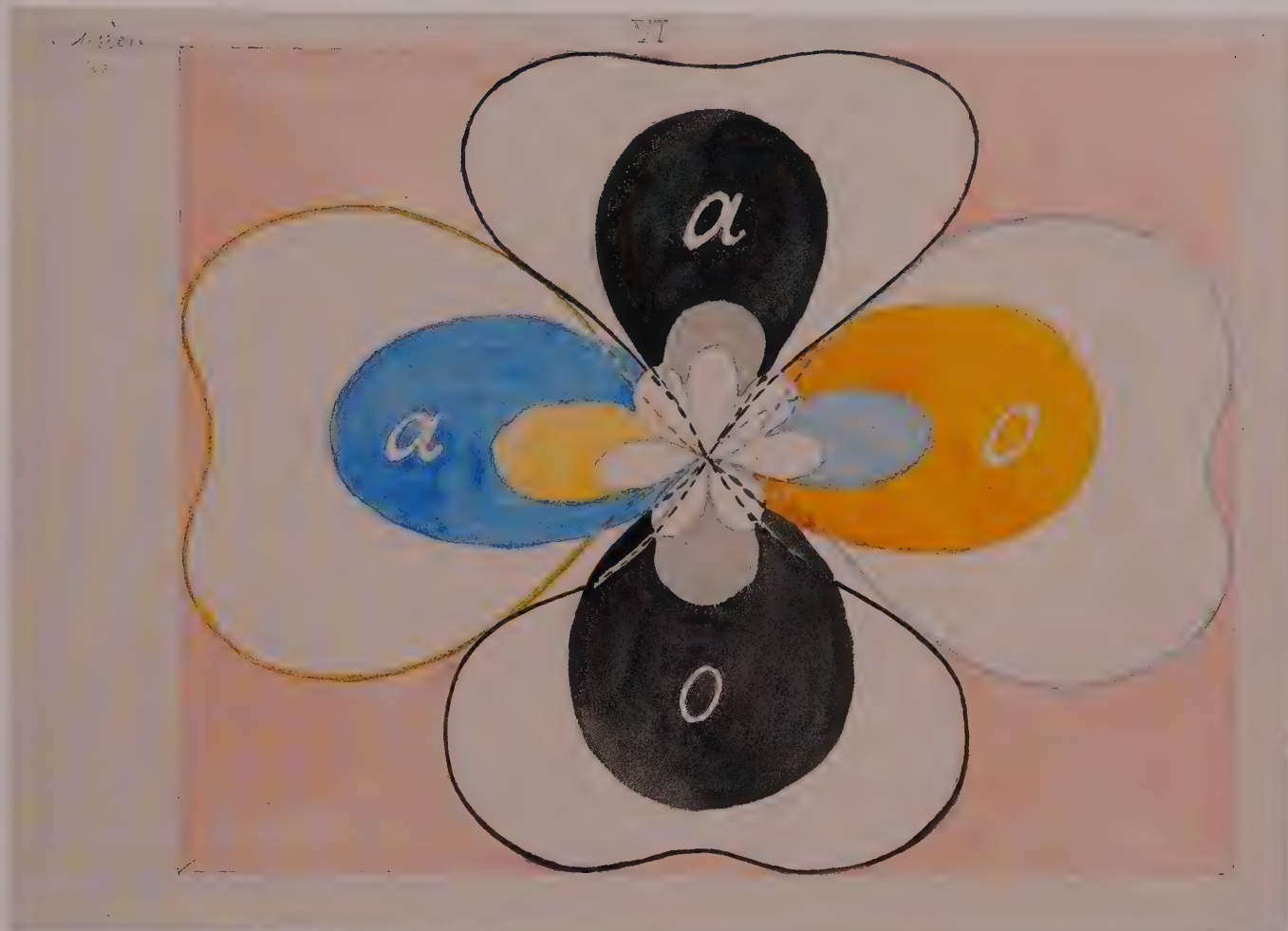


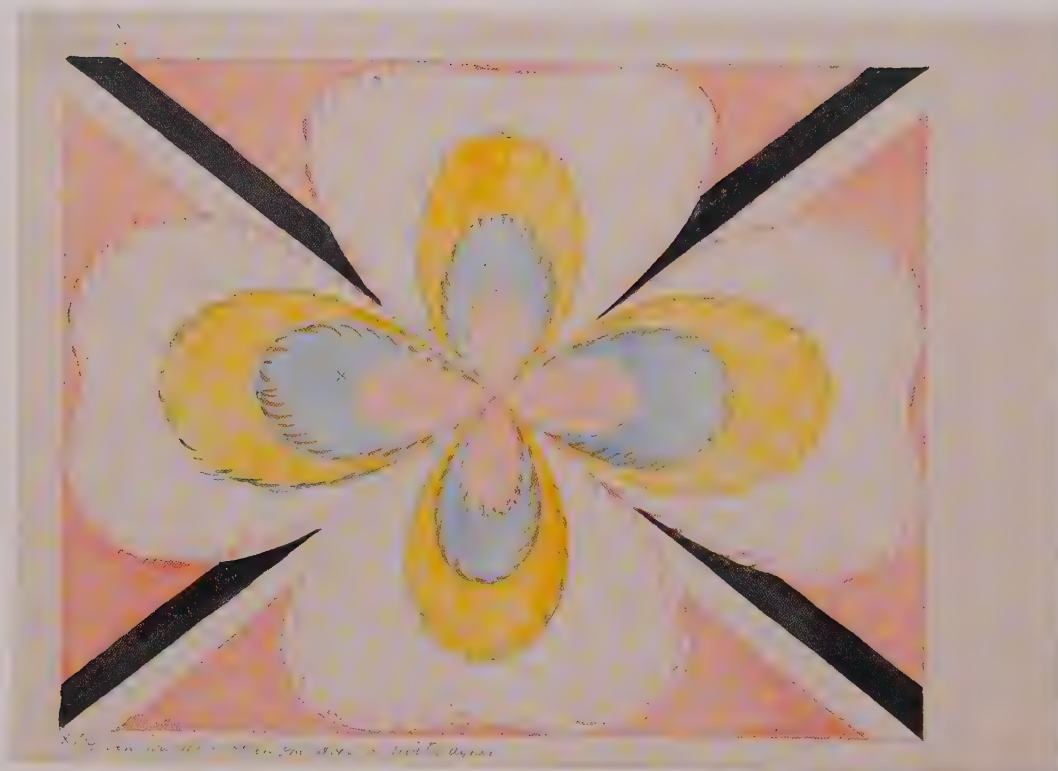








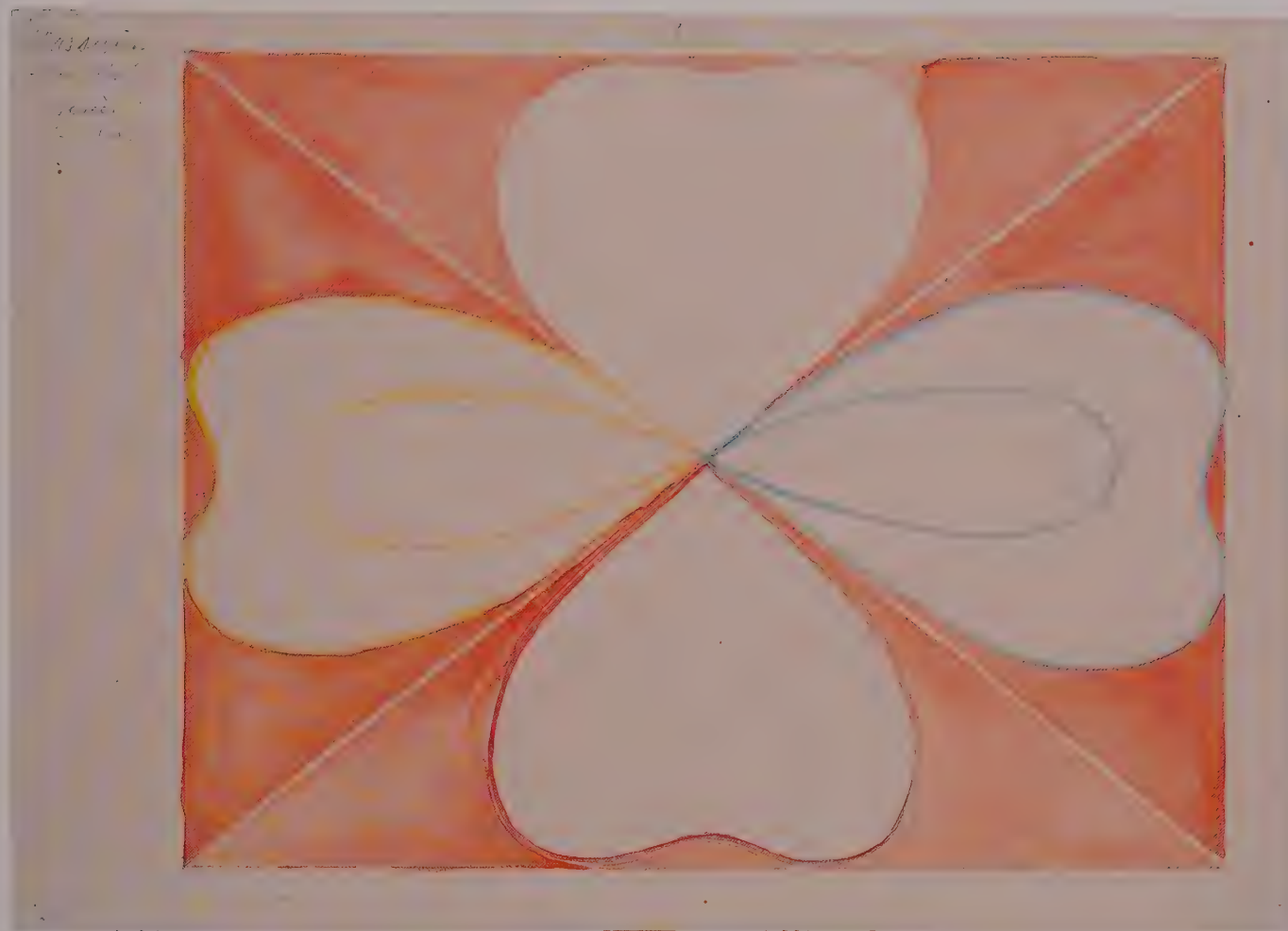






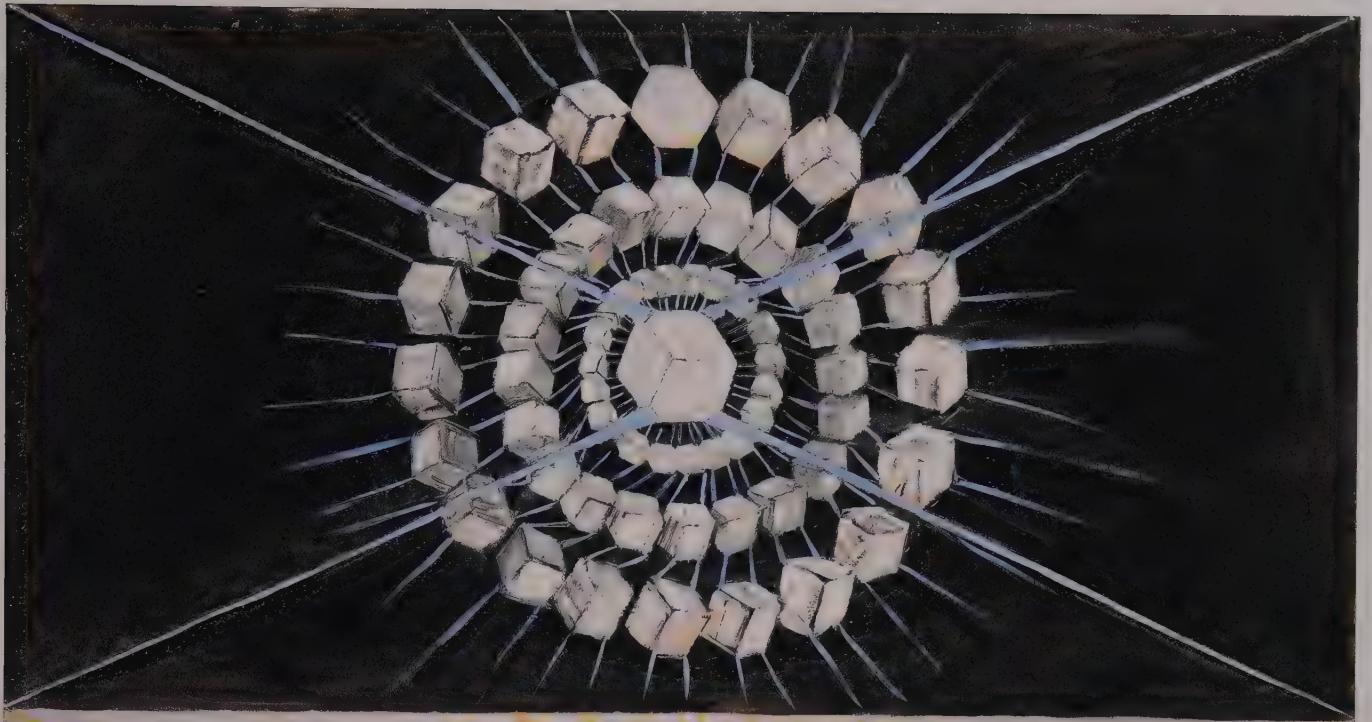






















Hilma af Klint, Group IX/SUW. The Swan, No. 21, 1914/15



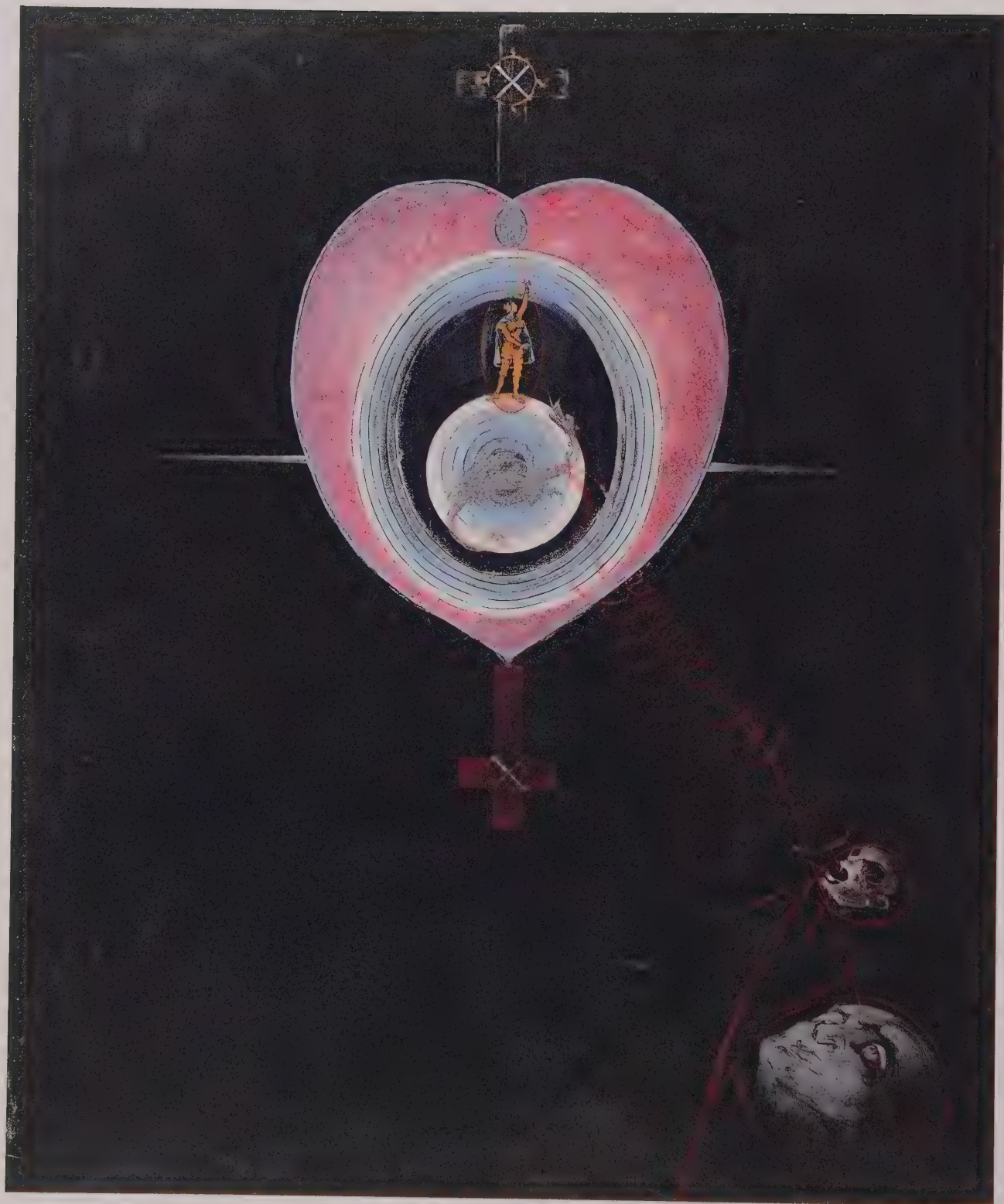




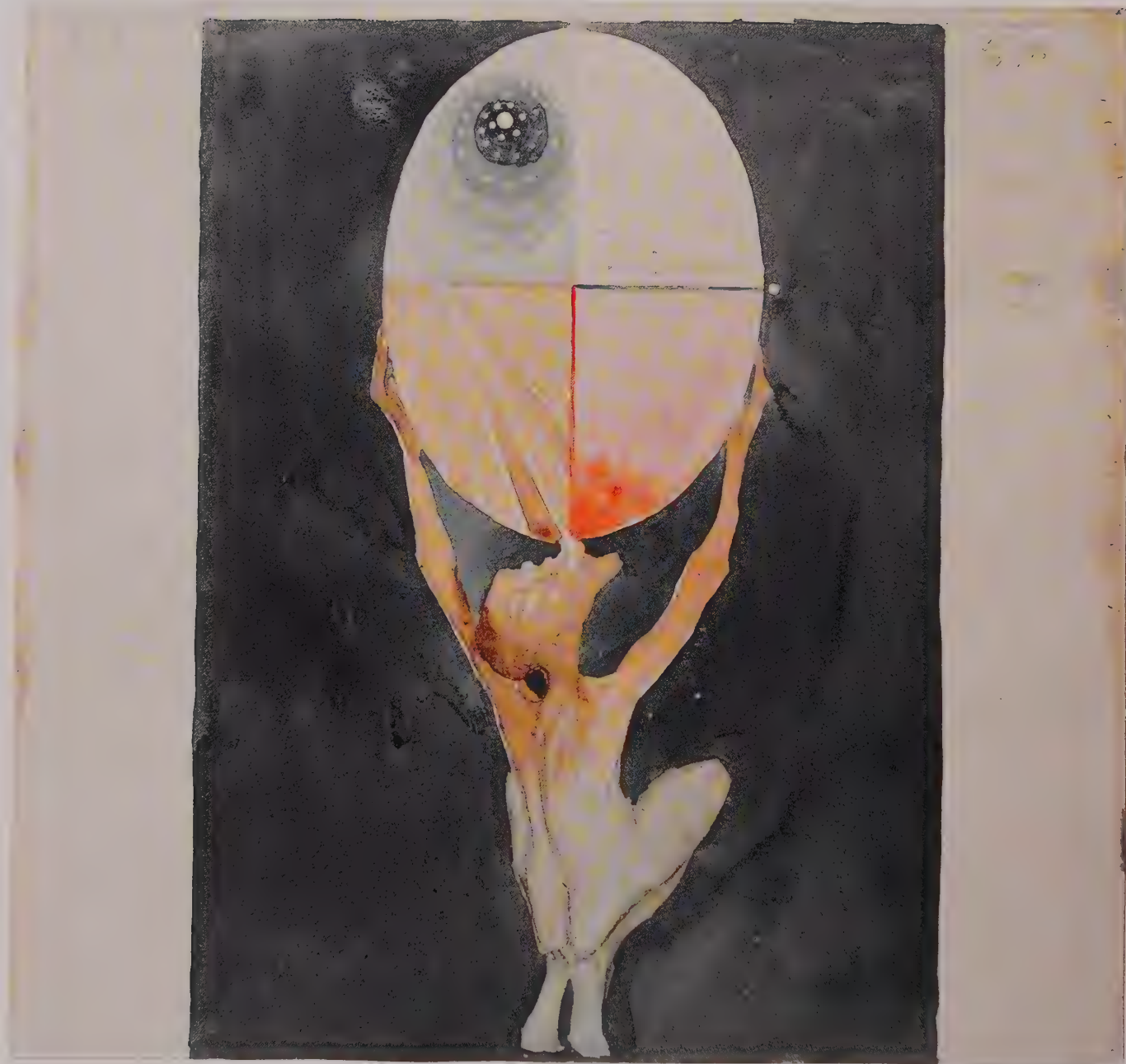
















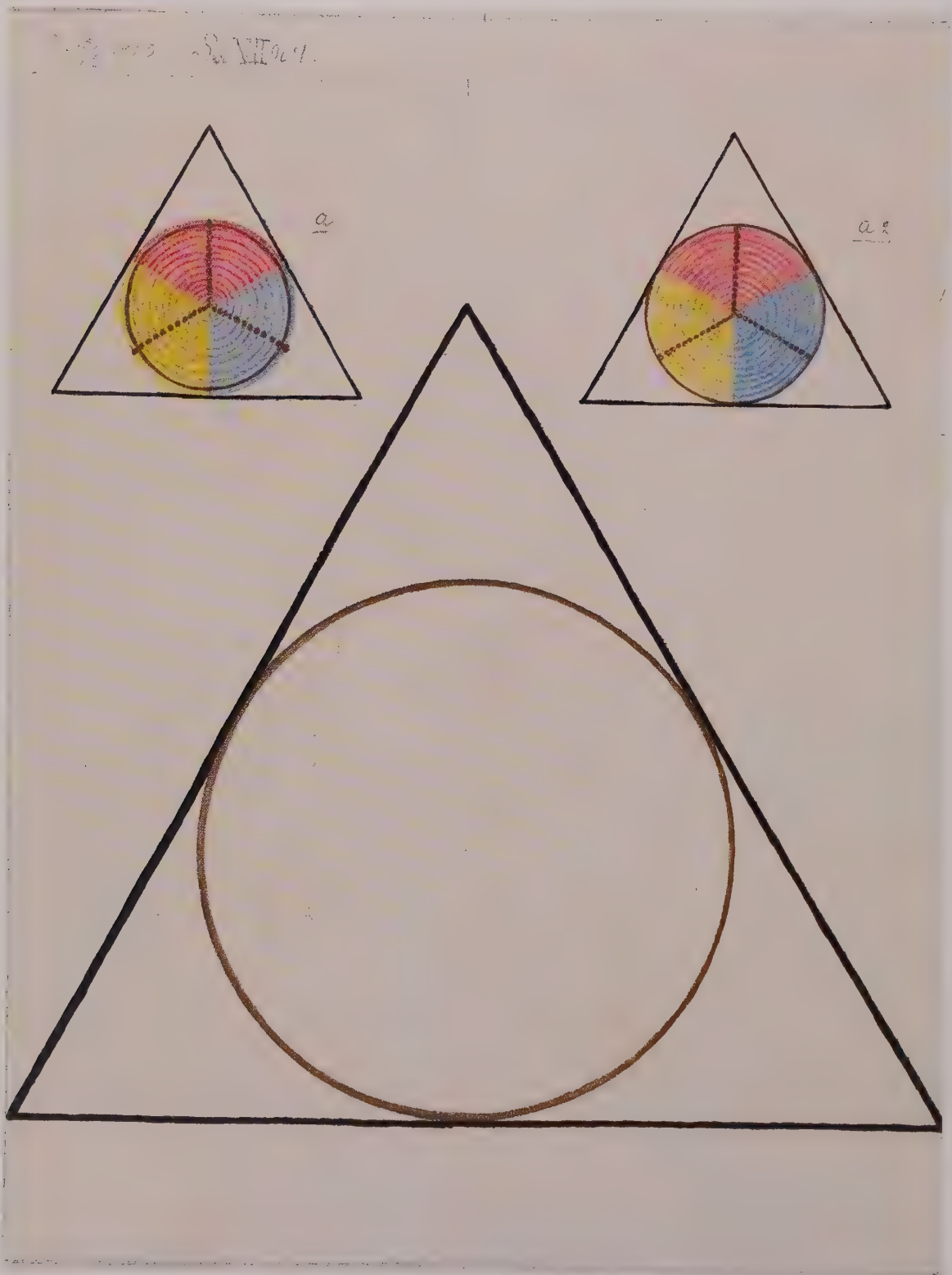
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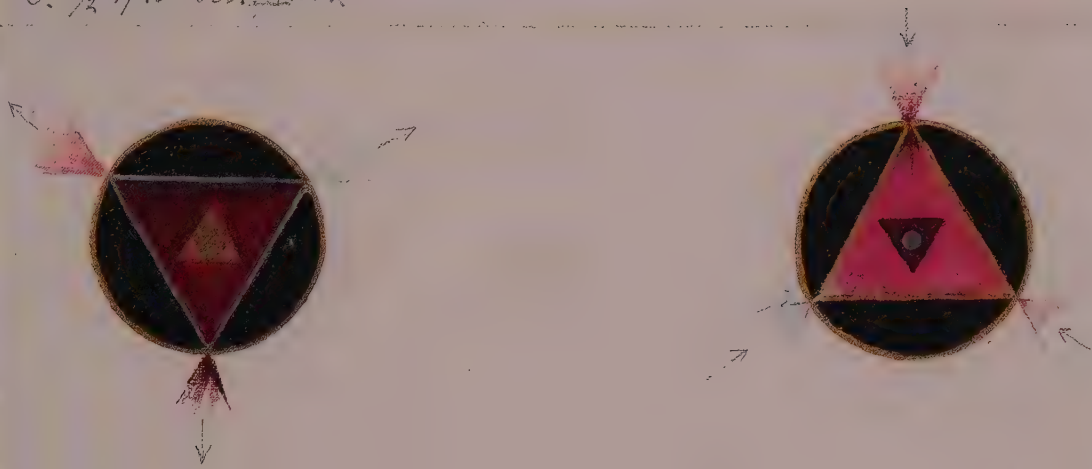




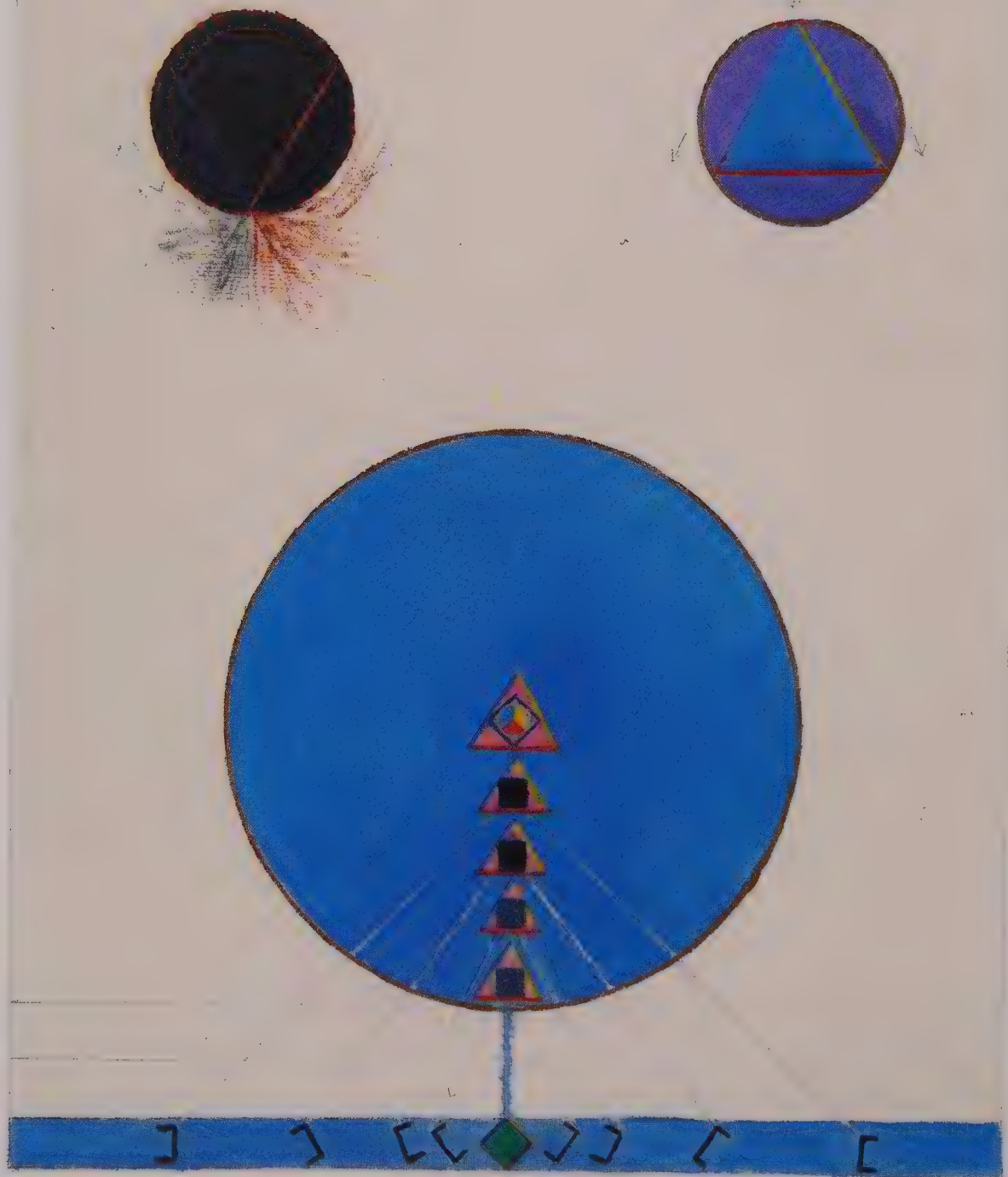




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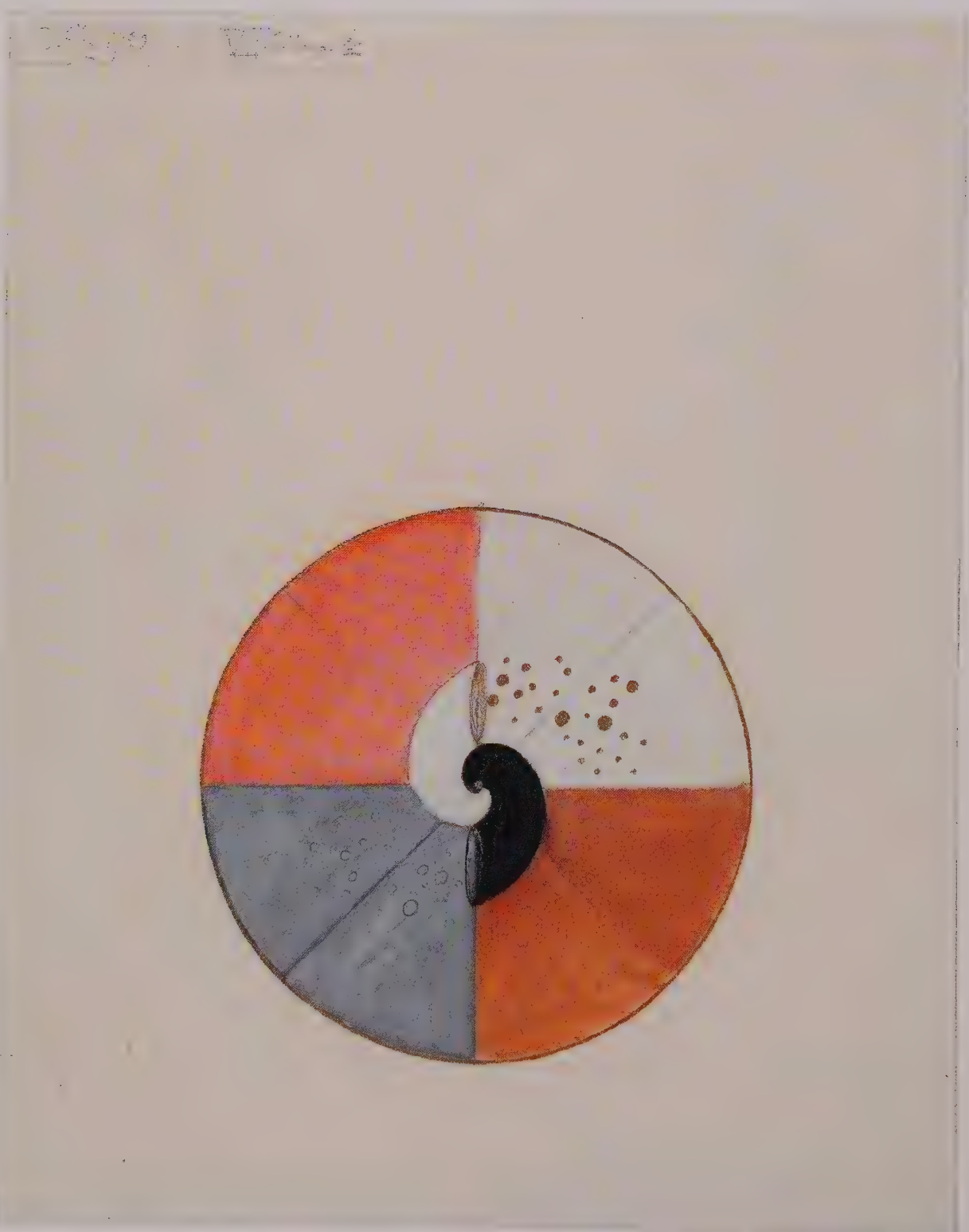
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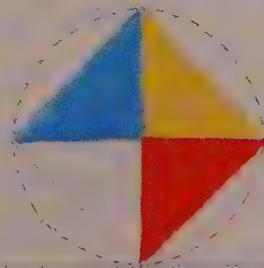


3<sup>rd</sup> 1920 (2.8.11) Kapa a



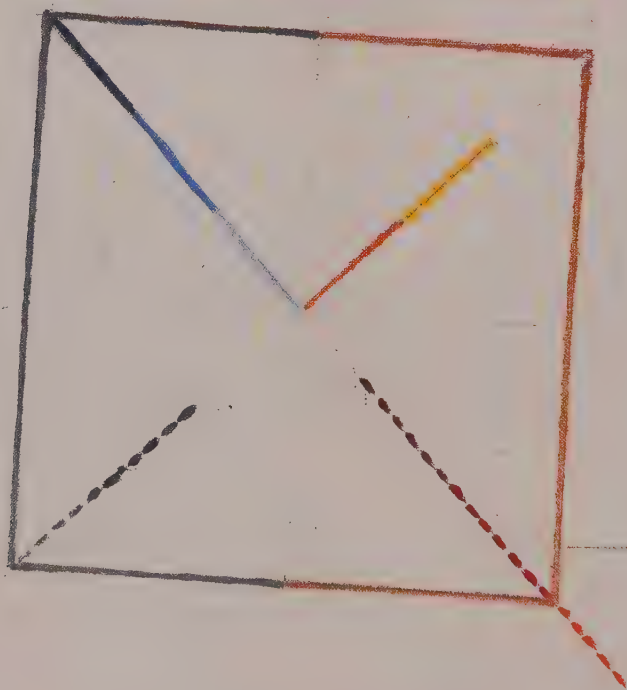
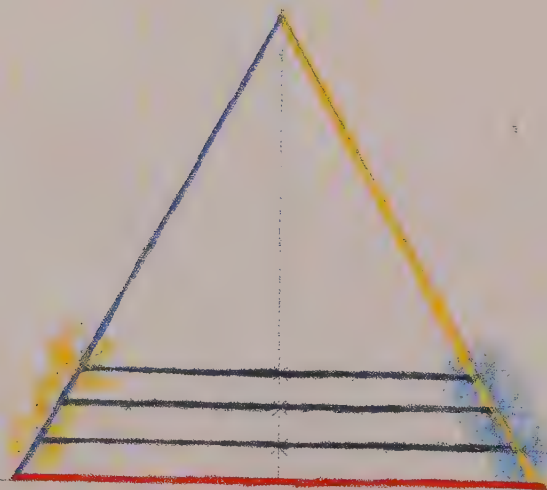


5. 2/6 1920 Im VII Hilma.

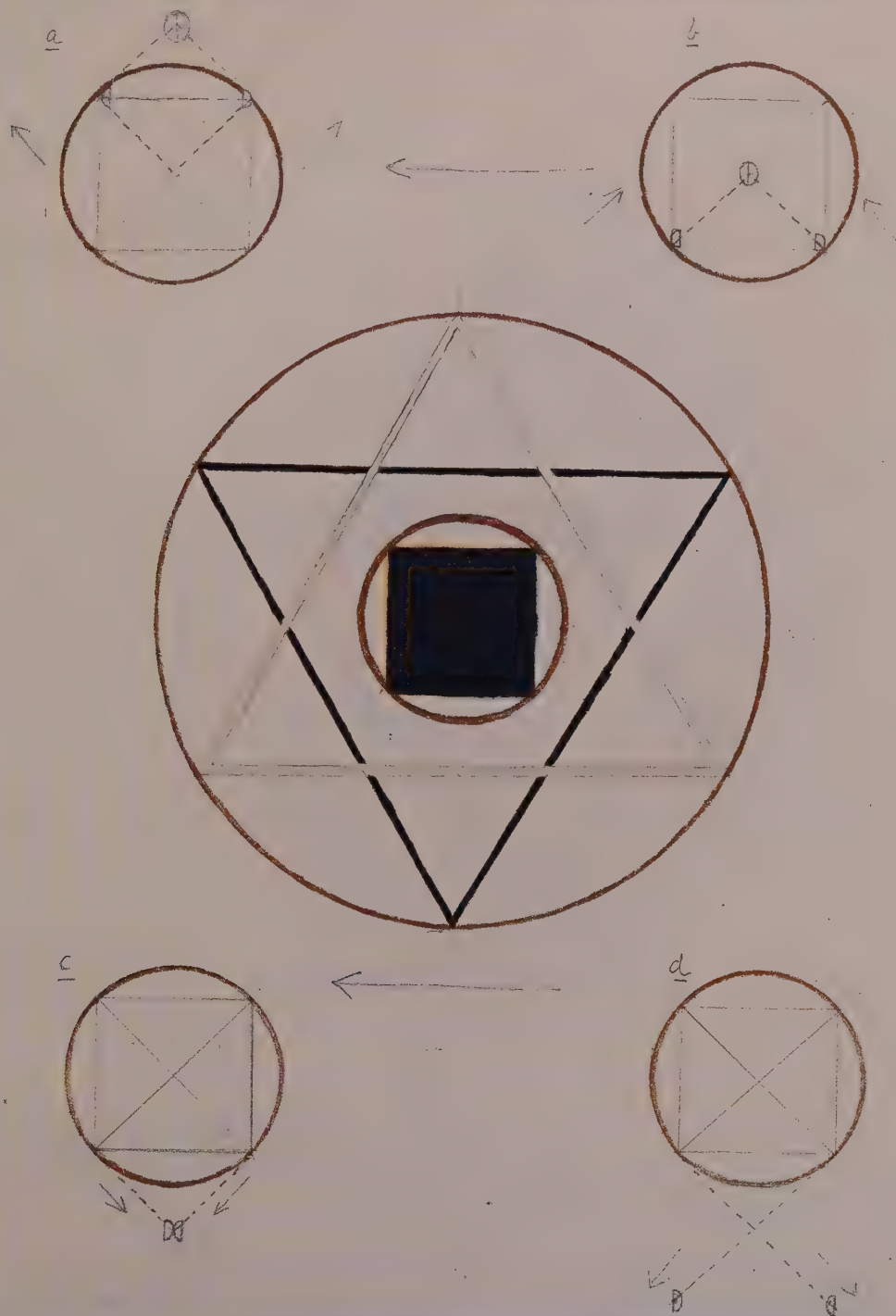


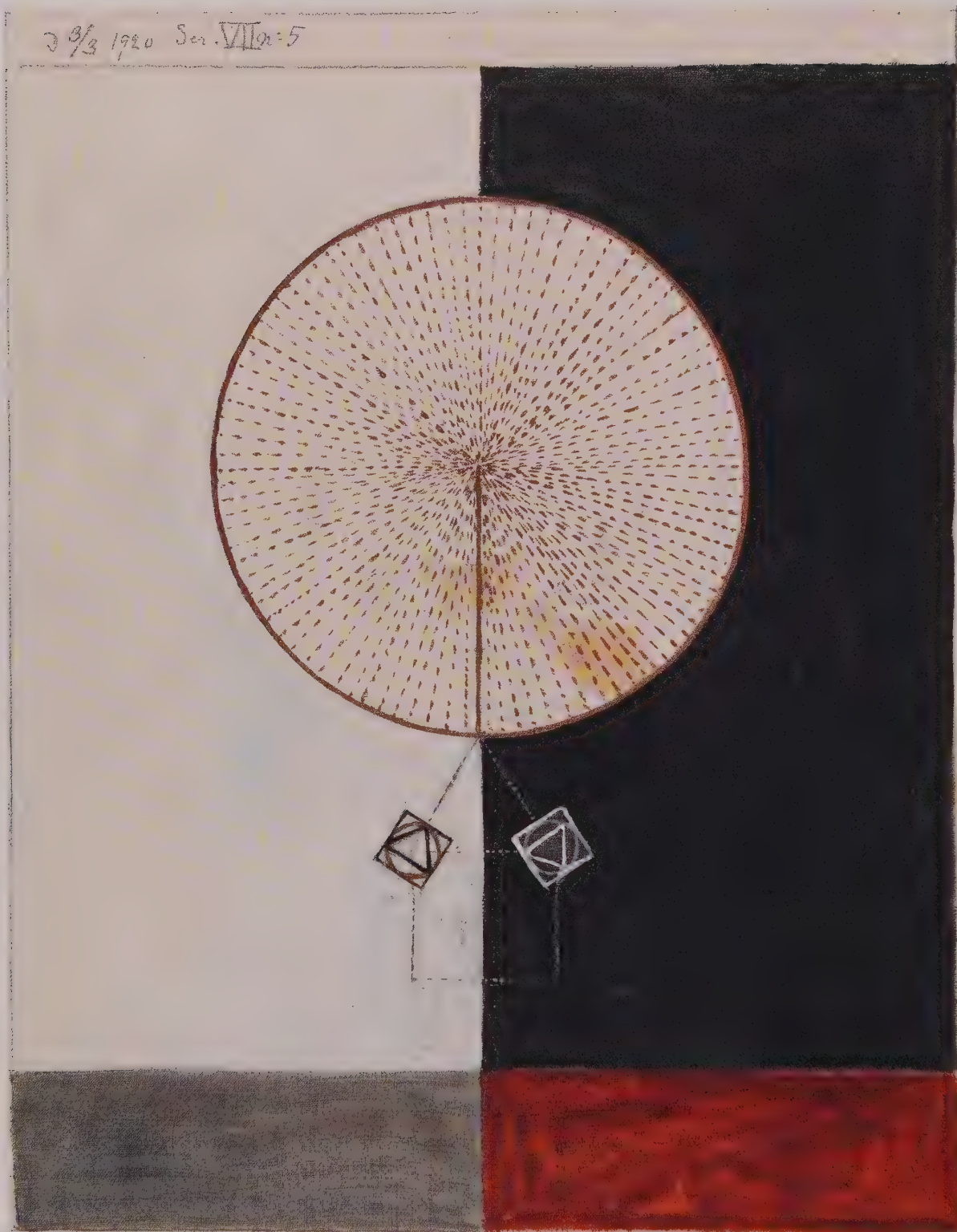


2 2/3 1920 Ser VII Group 2



D 1/3 1920 Ser. VII n=4











D. 7/3/1920 Ser. VII



Starting Image, Series VIII, 1920  
Hilma af Klint  
Museum of Modern Art, New York



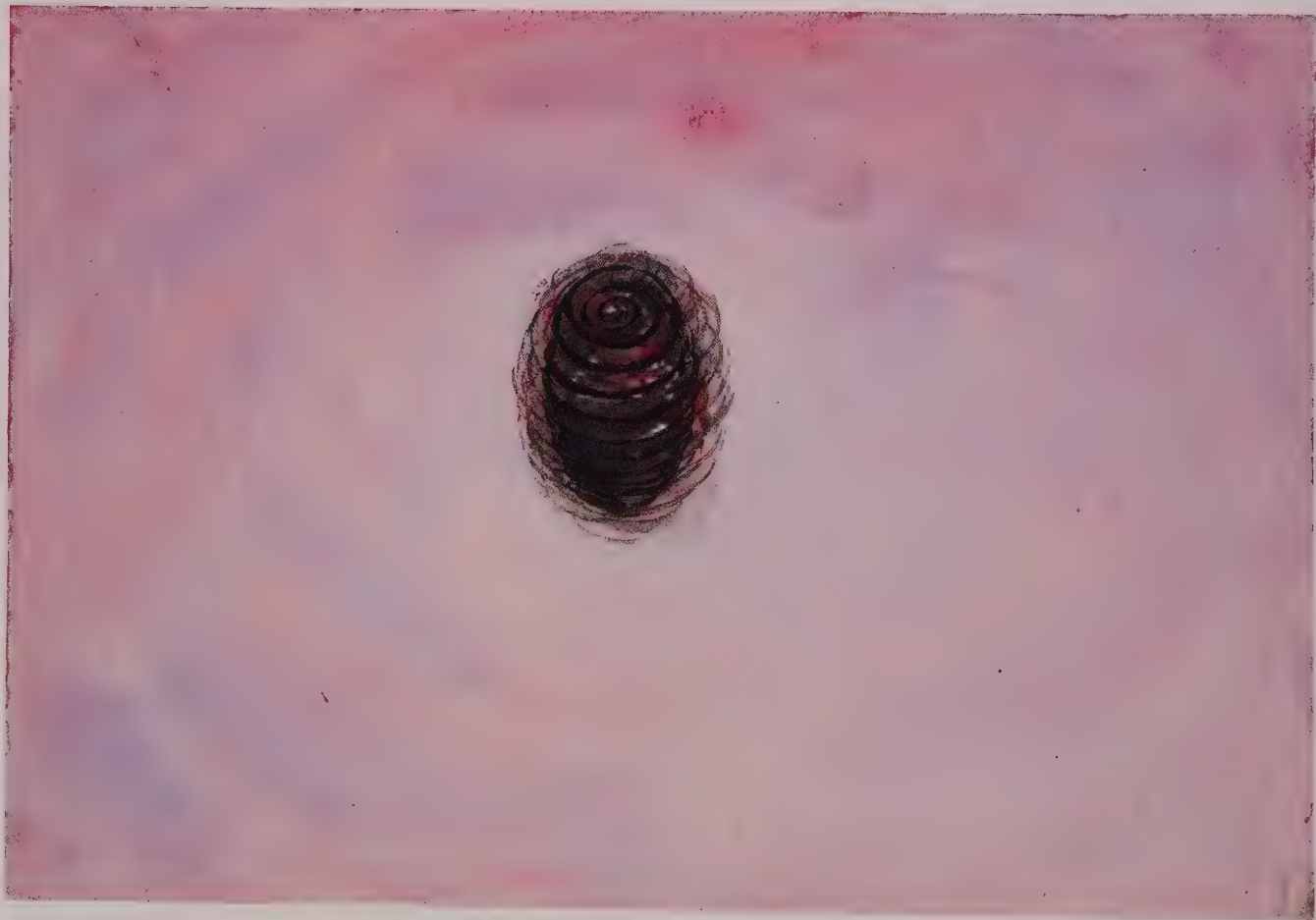








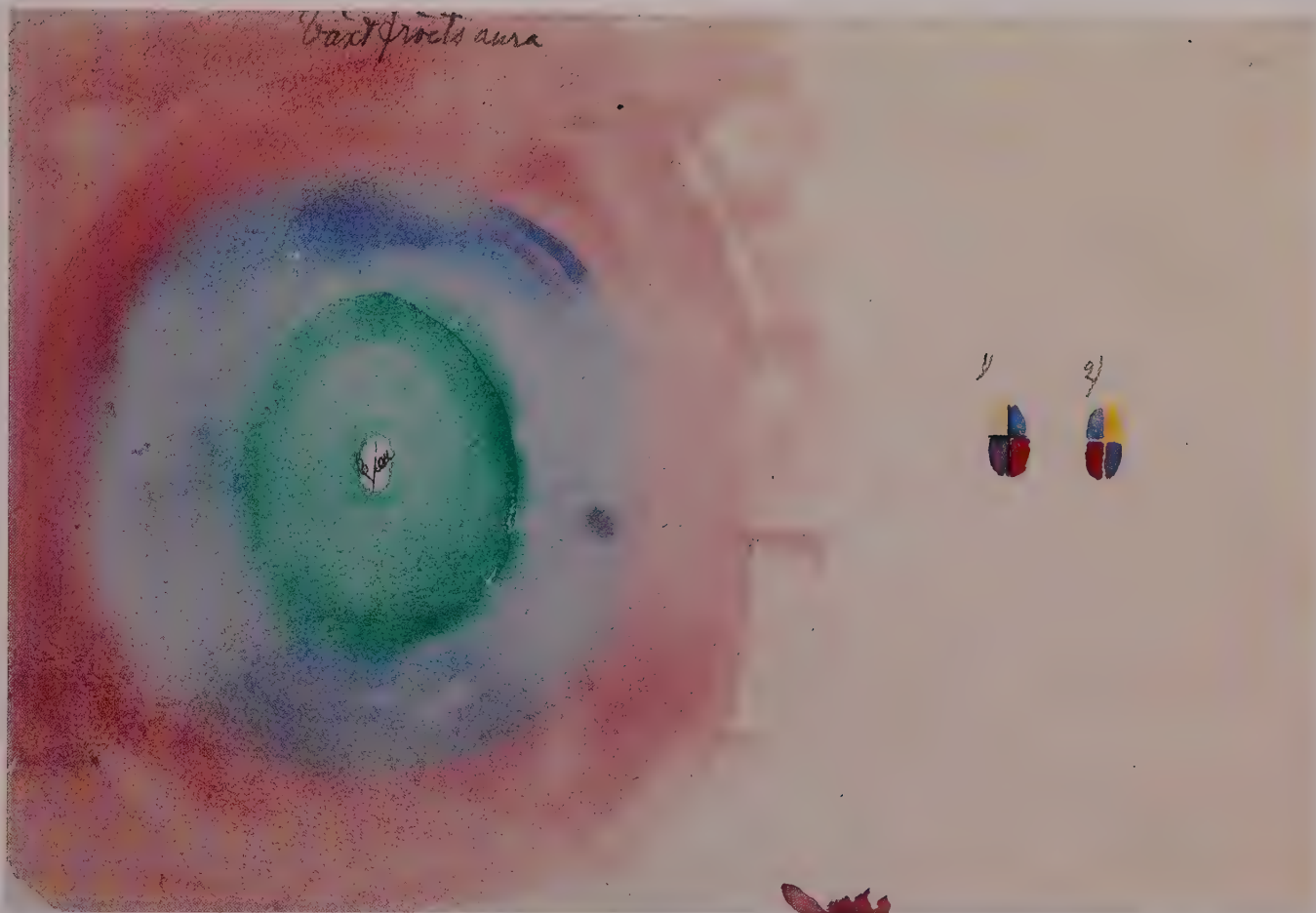


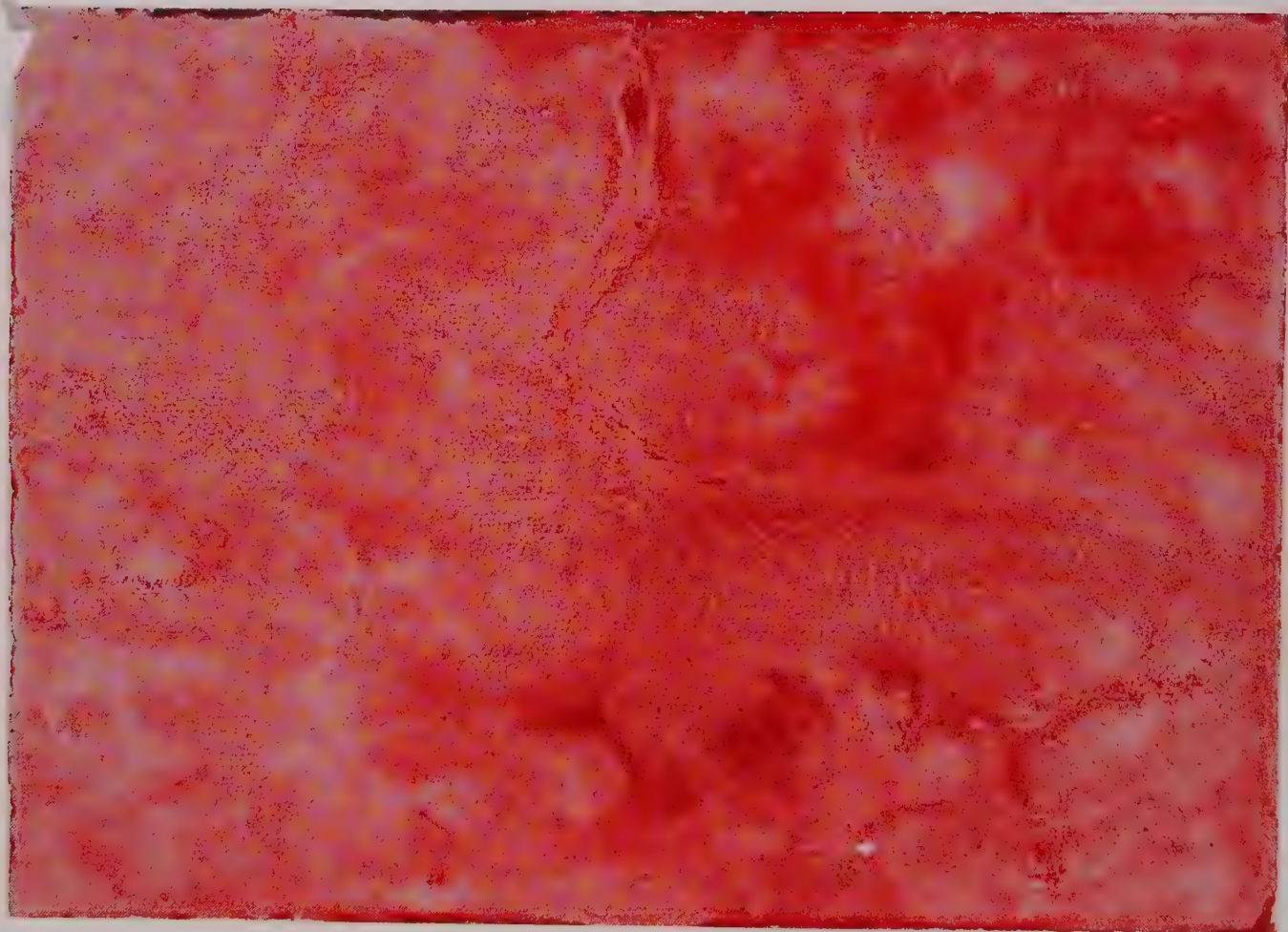






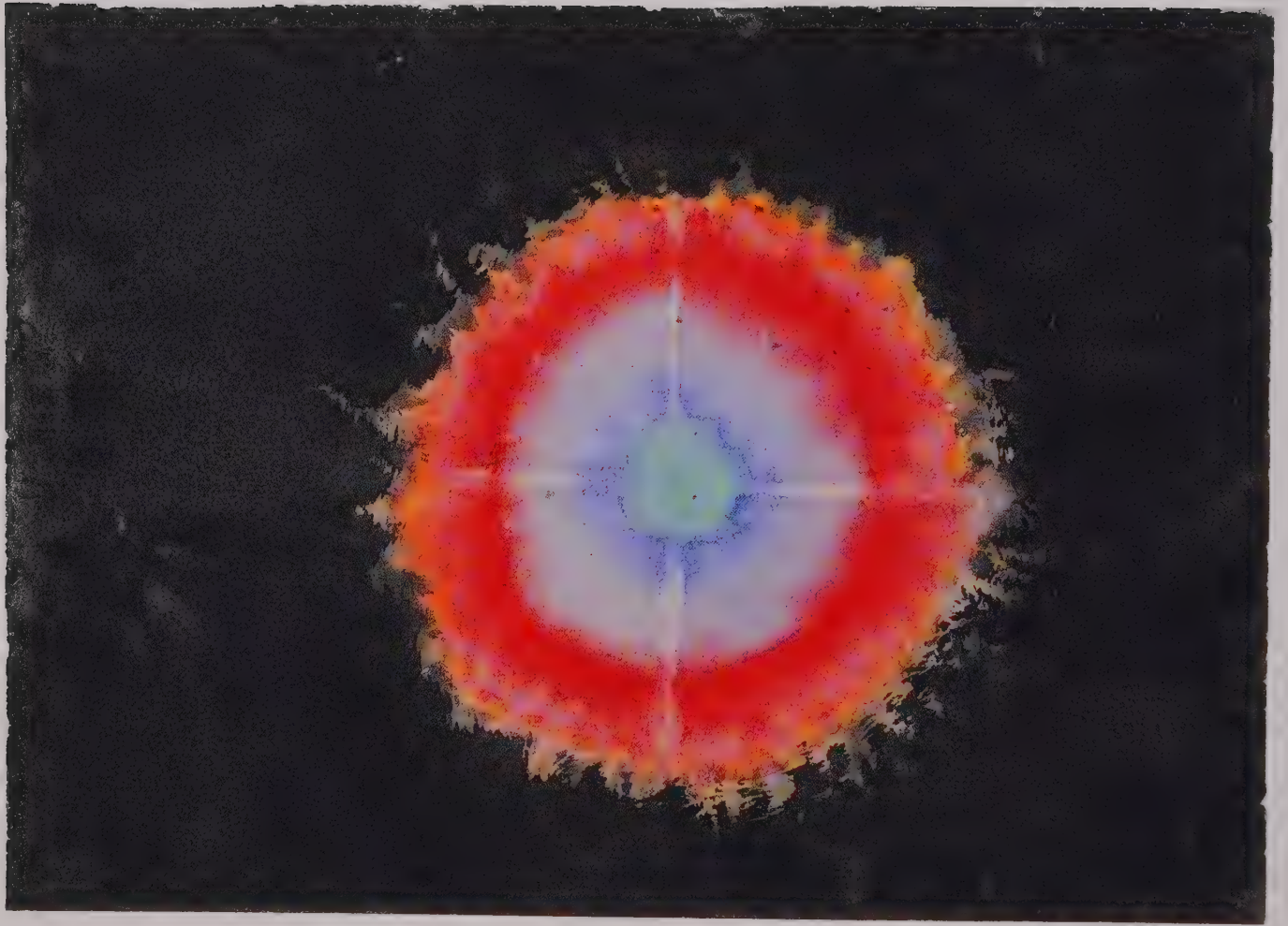




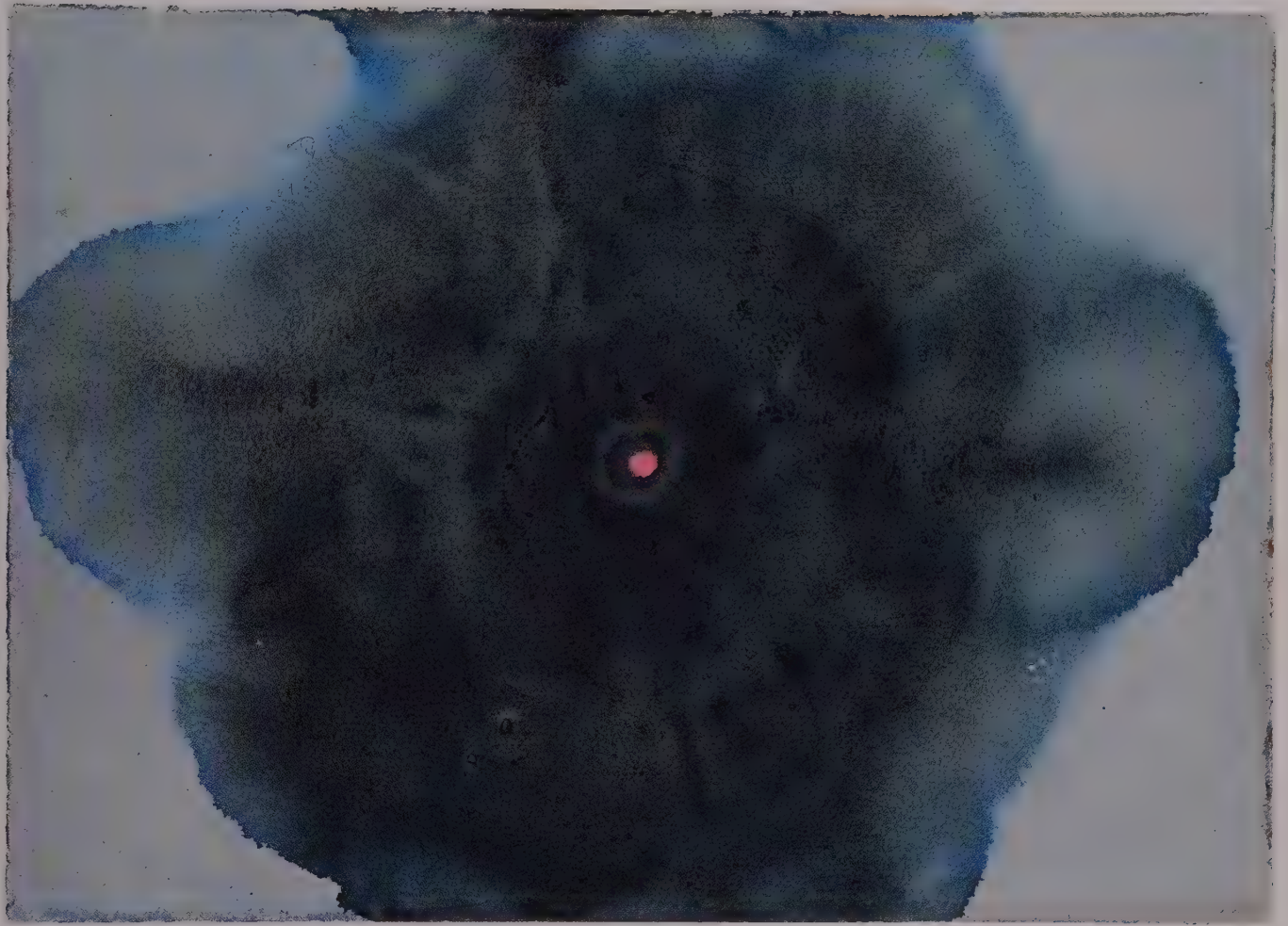








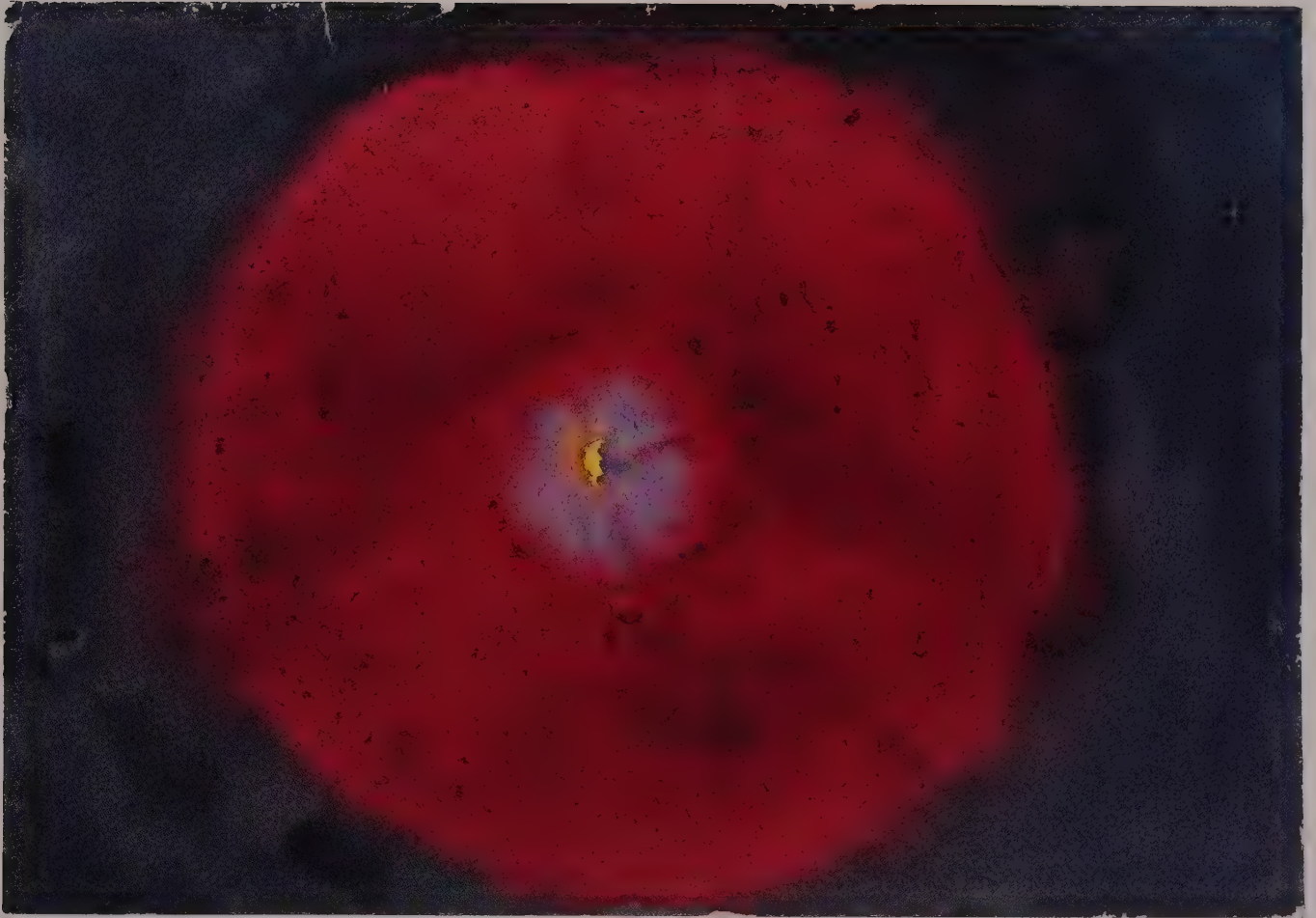


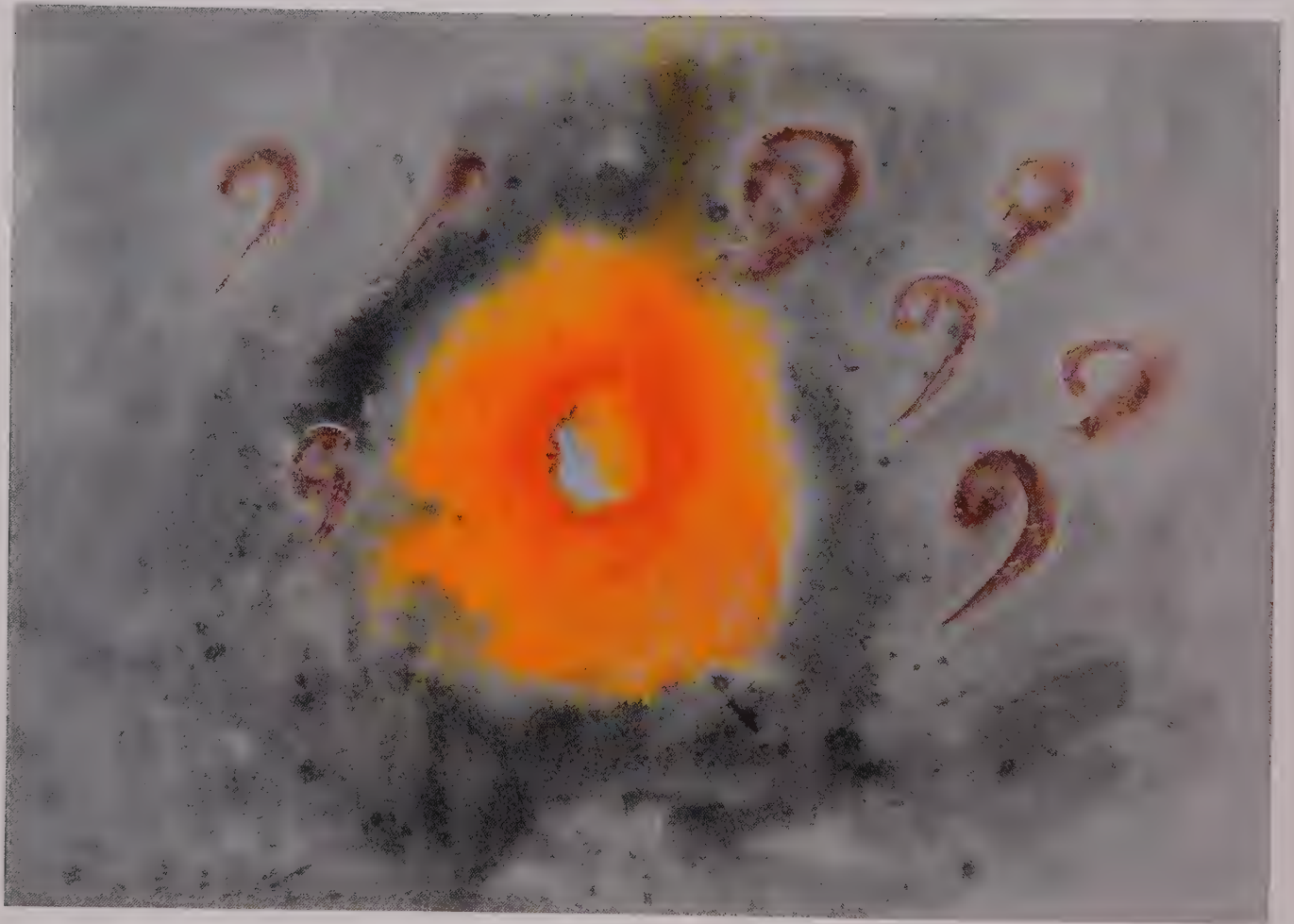


Hilma af Klint, *Untitled (On the Viewing of Flowers and Trees Series)*, 1922

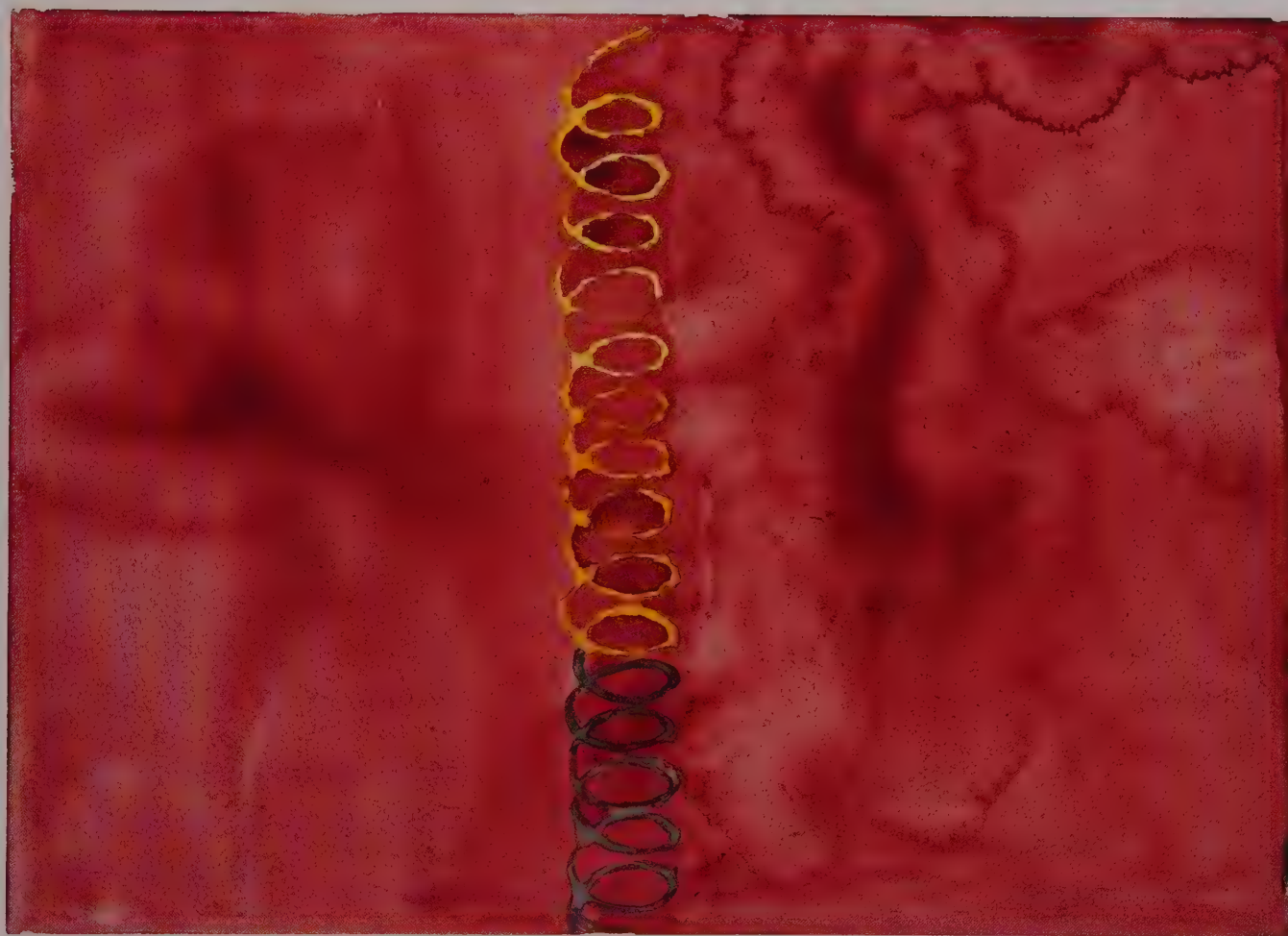














EMMA

K U N Z



# EMMA KUNZ

(1892-1963)

"My art is destined for the twenty-first century," the healer, researcher, and artist Emma Kunz said about her drawings, which she created from 1938 onward on graph paper with the help of a pendulum. These highly complex geometrical works are records of natural energy flows. They are to be seen in the context of the work and activity of this artist as a whole, who devoted her life to naturopathy and the exploration of the relationship between disease and health, microcosm and macrocosm, humankind and God. She explored natural forces and transformed damaging into healing energies; her drawings are the most directly tangible evidence of this mediumistic practice. It was not her intention to create art; the drawings were a means to an end, served as orientation, and are a visual expression of a philosophy of life. Interpretations of the drawings have been passed on only orally. It was later exhibitions which brought Kunz' graphic work into the context of art. It can, however, be surmised that its beauty and formal qualities did not remain hidden even to Emma Kunz herself.

■ Emma Kunz was born into a poor family of hand weavers in Brittnau in the Swiss canton of Aargau on May 23, 1892; she was the sixth of the ten children of Stephan Oswald Kunz and Rosina Kunz, née Gugelmann. She attended the village school in Brittnau. In 1909, her alcoholic father committed suicide; two of her siblings died the same year.

At the latest at the age of eighteen, Emma Kunz became aware of her talents in medicine, telepathy, and prophecy and began practicing radiesthesia, divining with the help of a pendulum. Important in this context was her older sister Hulda, a trained nurse and member of the local Reformed Church, who introduced her to the foundations of medicine and Christianity. Emma Kunz also drew and sketched in notebooks, which she took with her on walks and excursions. She saw drawing as a form of research and investigation, a perspective that might have been inspired by her great-grandfather: The village teacher Stephan Kunz had researched the history and topography of Brittnau.

In 1911, she traveled alone to the United States to track down a childhood sweetheart, the son of the Protestant village pastor. Nothing is known about this one-year journey, except that Kunz returned to Brittnau unsuccessful and disappointed. The villagers nicknamed her "Philadelphia." She would never marry or start a family.

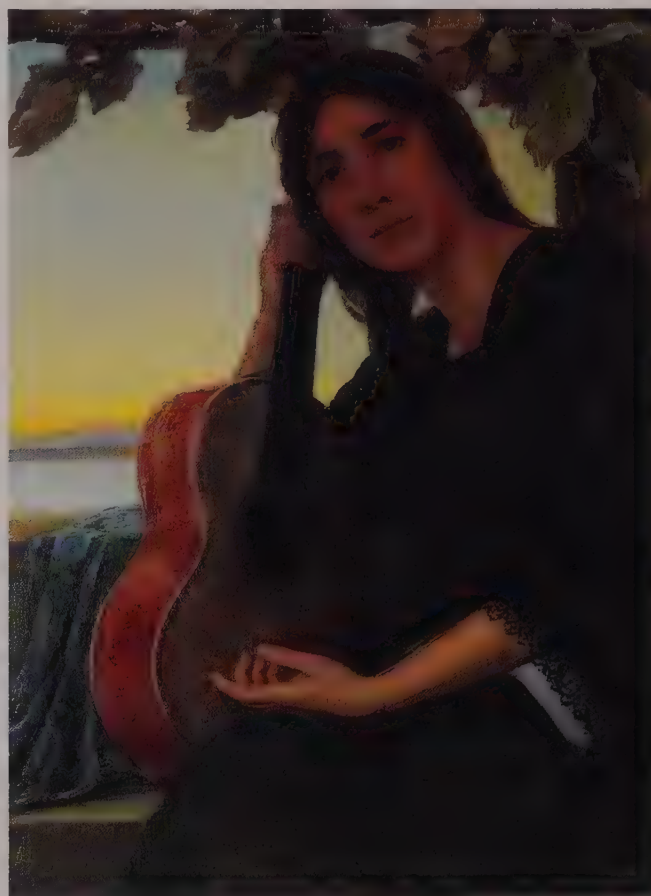
In 1912, she found work in the Künzli knitting factory in the neighboring community of Strengelbach and resumed her healing activity. From 1923 to 1939, she lived

as a housekeeper and companion in the home of the painter and art critic Jakob Friedrich Welti in the canton of Obwalden, initially only for the summer in Lungern; in 1933, she moved with the Welti family to Engelberg. Little is known about her precise position and function within the Welti family, though two pictures can serve as a clue: Welti painted an elegant portrait of her with a guitar in the style of the time, and a photograph depicts her sitting together with the family in a summery meadow. It appears as though she was treated more like a member of the family than as an employee. In this environment, she began to take her own drawing and writing more seriously. In 1930, she published her first book, an anthology of poems titled *Leben* (Life), with Gutzwiller in Zurich.

In 1938, at the age of forty-six, Emma Kunz began to devote herself fully to understanding the laws and forces of nature and their positive utilization, which she saw as her true destiny. She created her first large-format drawings on graph paper. Kunz moved in with her sisters Hulda and Mina in Brittnau, where she remained until 1947. Among her friends, she took on the name "Penta," which, on the one hand, stands folk etymologically for the swinging of the pendulum, and on the other hand also refers to the pentagram, a five-pointed star drawn in one line (from the Greek *penta*, five). She delved intensively into numerical symbolism in mysticism and the Kabbala, so that she would have been familiar with other interpretations of the pentagram, from a sign of health among the



Emma Kunz in Engelberg, 1936



Jakob Friedrich Welti, Portrait of Emma Kunz, 1923, oil on canvas, 80.5 × 67 cm, Emma Kunz Center, Würenlos



Pythagoreans to a symbol of the microcosm. From then on, she worked exclusively as a healer, researcher, and artist.

For her large-format, square drawings which generally measured one by one meter, the artist used graph paper, graphite pencils, colored pencils, and oil crayons in large quantities. She received the materials as a gift from someone she had healed.

The works on paper were always created in the same way, using a pendulum in the form of a silver chain with a silver ball on one end and a jade ball on the other. Standing in front of the square sheet of graph paper lying flat on a table, she concentrated on the given theme and scanned the drawing surface with her pendulum, holding the jade ball in her right hand. This procedure revealed to her where the central locations and median lines lay, which she then noted in the form of dots on the paper as initial

markings. Starting from this nucleus, the design of the sheet of paper became clear in front of her inner eye, and she then executed this without calculations or measurements. The only tools she used were a planed wooden board, a draftsman's compass, and a small wooden board with incised symbolic orientation lines, a navigational compass of sorts. She knew which colors, line thickness, and shapes to choose, each of which had its own specific meaning. She condensed certain areas with reticularly intersecting lines and filled in surfaces with color. Such a drawing was created in one working process, in most cases without interruption. Highly concentrated, she worked on some pictures for more than twenty-four hours until, completely exhausted, she finally finished them. It is said that Kunz herself sometimes stood in amazement at the result, which now required an interpretation.



Emma Kunz (center, front) with the Welti family, ca. 1920. Welti's daughter holds the guitar that her father included in the Portrait of Emma Kunz, 1923

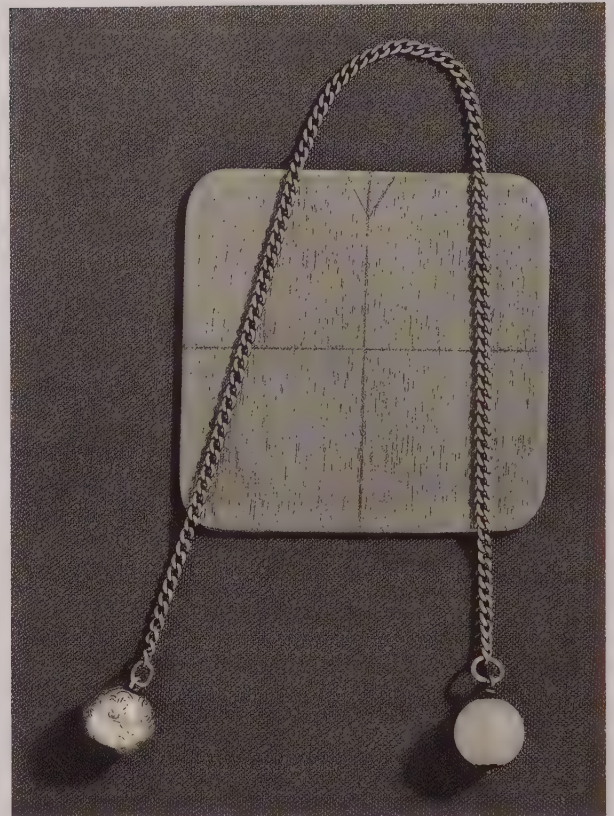
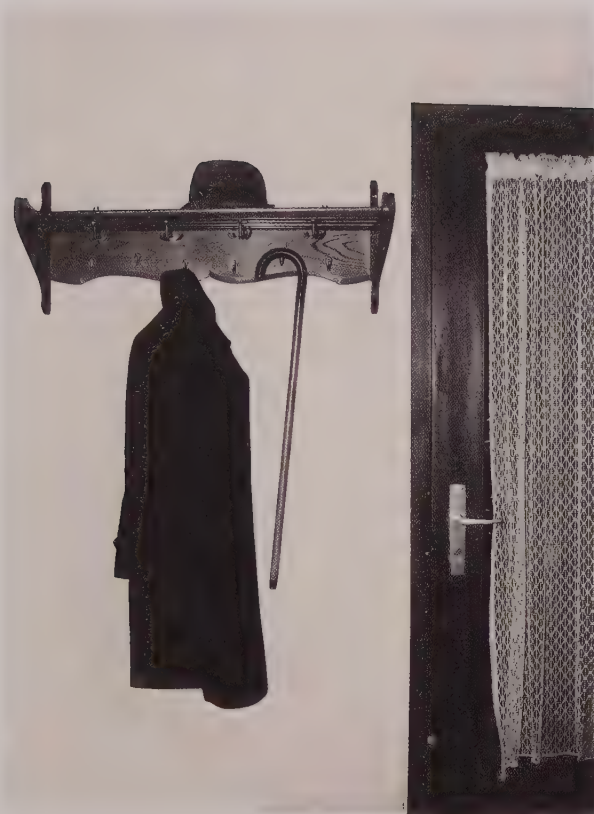




Emma Kunz at her worktable in Waldstatt, 1958

Emma Kunz used her drawing to search for natural laws and spiritual connections, always taking concrete situations and problems as her starting point. Complex geometrical structures predominate, and occasionally figures can also be discerned from the network of lines. Webs of relationships and polarities, numerical relationships and color symbolism provided her with concrete information. During conversations, she was able to explain the resulting drawings in detail; her explanations were,

however, not recorded in writing: She mistrusted words, since they could be too easily misunderstood—"The time will come when my pictures will be understood." Kunz hung completed and analyzed sheets on the wall, at times ten to twenty sheets on top of each other. A finished picture contained statements on various levels and could also be used later to answer a particular question. The drawings thus served both as a basis for discussions with people seeking advice and as meditation templates. At their



Man's hat and coat with a cane (as a protection against unwanted guests) in the foyer of the house in Waldstatt

Pendulum with jade and silver balls and the wooden tablet used for orientation

Cross of Emma Kunz with transparent, i.e. "overcome" crossbeam



highest level, they also addressed intellectual and philosophical issues.

In 1953, Emma Kunz self-published two books on her drawing method using the pendulum: *The Miracle of Creative Revelation* and *New Methods of Drawing*. Both are subtitled *Design and Form as Measure, Rhythm, Symbol, and Transformation of Number and Principle*.

Healing was part of Emma Kunz' practical research; she was interested in the laws of health and disease. Her research laboratory was equipped with microscopes and technical measuring devices, including a Geiger counter. Her approach was holistic; she criticized the training of medical specialization, which often did not address the overall context of a given disease. She was of the opinion that one should not treat a disease, but rather the person affected by it. She saw the power of healing as part of an all-encompassing force in the universe, which every being who lives in harmony with the cosmic laws can tap into. Each disease is caused by an unbalanced relationship to nature; excessive intellectuality and materialism block one's access to the forces of nature.

The success of Kunz' healing efforts also caused a stir in scientific circles; reports vary greatly depending on the perspective, from efforts to remain objective to the creating of a legend. She is said to have healed by empathizing with other people's illnesses through her own body and thus overcoming them—a magical act of sorts. She herself believed that her intuitions were based on laws and facts, stating, "There are no miracles—only principles! The question is whether we can work with these."

For Emma Kunz, healing was also a form of Christian charity; she did not connect any material goals with this. She had little money and lived for the most part on gratuities from her deliberately small circle of friends and patients. In 1940, she cured the eye disorder of a pastor, who had previously visited various eye specialists without success, and determined that the ailment had been triggered by damage to the patient's left kidney. In 1941, she magnetized cancer cells; and in 1942, she treated the five-year-old polio patient Anton C. Meier, the son of a quarry owner in Würenlos near Baden in the canton of Aargau. In this quarry, which had once been used by the Romans, she discovered strong energy fields and a healing rock, to which she gave the name "AION A" (Gr. *aion*, "without

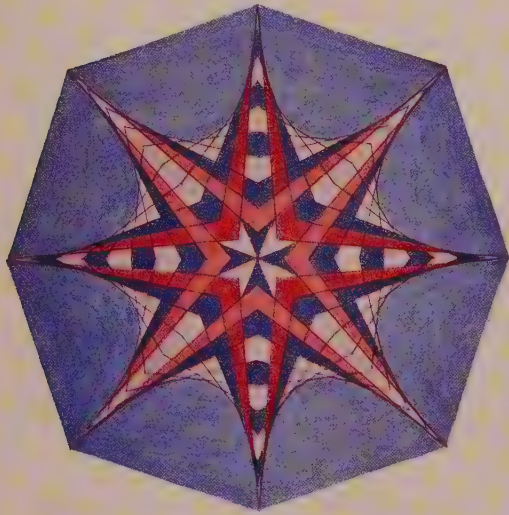


The healing rock AION A from Würenlos in its current packaging

limitation") to emphasize its universal therapeutic possibilities. Anton C. Meier, who attributed his recovery to Emma Kunz, took over her estate from her relatives after her death in 1963, documented eye-witness reports on Emma Kunz' life and activities—partly in cooperation with the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann—fulfilled her wish to mine AION A, and established a meeting center. In 1986, he founded the Emma Kunz Center, where holistic naturopathic methods are fostered and the estate is managed; since 1991, it is also home to a museum dedicated to Emma Kunz' artistic work. The massive stone grotto of the quarry, which Emma Kunz perceived to be a special place of power, is named after her and has been made publicly accessible.



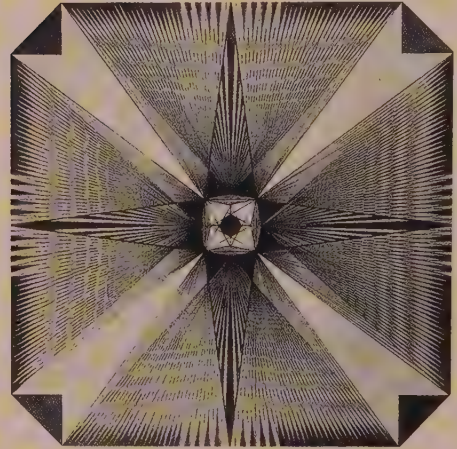
## NEUARTIGE ZEICHNUNGSMETHODE



GESTALTUNG UND FORM  
ALS MASS, RHYTHMUS, SYMBOL UND WANDLUNG  
VON ZAHL UND PRINZIP

EMMA KUNZ

## Das Wunder schöpferischer Offenbarung



Gestaltung und Form  
als Maß, Rhythmus, Symbol und Wandlung  
von Zahl und Prinzip

E. KUNZ

The two books self-published by Emma Kunz in 1953

Kunz' practice included clairvoyance, with the ability to see both past and future events, as well as telepathy, the gift of being able to transmit thought. Pendulum-swinging and the resulting drawings served to verify her visions. A frequently described example of her visionary talent is an ability we possibly all wish we possessed: Emma Kunz repeatedly amazed people by grasping the contents of a book by the mere laying-on of hands and being able to discuss the most difficult texts, including those from the fields of medicine, chemistry, botany, and the humanities. She said of herself that, out of principle, she did not read. Only one book was found among her possessions: A publication entitled *Our Medicinal Herbs*. It has also been reported that she had excerpts from the works of

Paracelsus read to her. Well-informed as she was, despite her reclusive lifestyle, she was also interested in Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy. To avoid being influenced, however, she did not travel to his Goetheanum in Dornach, but instead sent a friend, who was to report back to her.

There are also widespread reports of how the forces of world history impacted on Emma Kunz' provincial life. One famous example is the request made to Emma Kunz by the financial adviser of the principality of Liechtenstein to "repolarize" Adolf Hitler. Despite her pointing out the intensity of the negative energies cumulated in this person, she was ultimately persuaded to risk an attempt. To the horror of all present, the 63-centimeters-long spiral

pendulum rod allegedly struck Kunz repeatedly with full force and finally flew across the room. She refused to give any further explanations to what had taken place. She is also said to have foreseen the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert many years before the fatal events. And it has also been handed down that her work No. 020 is a representation of the atomic bomb.

Although she by all means followed world affairs, Emma Kunz saw her place exclusively in Switzerland. The Indian mystic, philosopher, and poet Sri Aurobindo sent three delegations to invite Kunz to India as a teacher. She refused on the grounds that she was against missionary work and could only make use of the resources of her own culture in the context of its inherent vibrations, while the sphere of action of her guests was India. She transferred this understanding to architecture by recommending the use of only regional building materials—and by analogy to food as well. She also found it reprehensible to impose monoculture for export to other parts of the world, thus making them economically dependent rather than contributing to their development.

Emma Kunz' healing practice was viewed critically by local authorities: In 1947, she was harassed by the Aargau cantonal physician, which is why she left Brittnau. From 1948 to 1951, she lived in Lungern (Obwalden) because "Brother Klaus," Nicholas of Flüe, had lived here. He was an important mystic, the patron saint of Switzerland, and peacemaker of 1481 (Diet of Stans). In the canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden, traditionally a stronghold of alternative medicine and related fields, she was able to pursue her natural healing practice and research undisturbed for the last twelve years of her life: From 1951 on, she lived in Waldstatt with a view of Säntis, her chosen sacred mountain, in her own house with a lush garden where she grew medicinal herbs for her salves and tinctures. The cantonal chemist Franz Decurtins produced medications according to her instructions in his own laboratory, "Rochus." Her magnetic and spiritual powers were also used to energetically influence nature. In 1953, she succeeded in "polarizing" marigolds, which is documented in photographs. Within a few days, the number of subsidiary blossoms she predetermined grew from the calyx of the mother blossoms. She explained, however, that with this experiment, which has not been repeated to this day, she had merely made a law of nature visible.



The marigolds "polarized" by Emma Kunz in 1953. A mother blossom with (above) nine and (below) thirteen subsidiary blossoms





The Emma Kunz Grotto in the Roman quarry in Würenlos

“Everything happens in accordance with a specific system of law, which I feel within me, and which never allows me to rest.” This is how Emma Kunz formulated her life motto. She died of cancer in Waldstatt on January 16, 1963, at the age of seventy-one and was buried in Brittnau. In 1973/74, ten years after her death, her drawings, of which roughly five hundred have been preserved, were presented to the public for the first time. Heiny Widmer, then director of the Aargauer Kunsthhaus in Aarau, curated

the exhibition and wrote the first description of her art and her activity, for which he interviewed numerous acquaintances of Emma Kunz. Since then, Kunz has received wide international attention, not least thanks to the major thematic exhibitions curated by Harald Szeemann, in which she has often been prominently represented.



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All works:

Emma Kunz Zentrum, Würenlos

Work No. 002, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 107 × 70 cm

► see ill. p. 177

Work No. 003, n.d.

Oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 96 × 96 cm

► see ill. p. 179

Work No. 004, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 104 × 104 cm

► see ill. p. 181

Work No. 008, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 68 × 68 cm

► see ill. p. 183

Work No. 009, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 101 × 101 cm

► see ill. p. 184

Work No. 011, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 90 × 90 cm

► see ill. p. 185

Work No. 012, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 110 × 110 cm

► see ill. p. 187

Work No. 013, n.d.

Crayon and ink on graph paper with brown lines, 99 × 99 cm

► see ill. p. 189

Work No. 015, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 93 × 93 cm

Work No. 018, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 101 × 101 cm

► see ill. p. 191

Work No. 020, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 79 × 79 cm

► see ill. p. 193

Work No. 021, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 69 × 69 cm

Work No. 023, n.d.

Original: Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper (facsimile), Dia. 95 cm

► see ill. p. 195

Work No. 025, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 70 × 75 cm

Work No. 044, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 109 × 105 cm

► see ill. p. 196

Work No. 051, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 98 × 98 cm

► see ill. p. 197

Work No. 052, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 78 × 75 cm

Work No. 069, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 70 × 70 cm

Work No. 070, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 80 × 75 cm

Work No. 083, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 101 × 105 cm

Work No. 086, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 90 × 90 cm

► see ill. p. 199

Work No. 094, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 98 × 98 cm

Work No. 100, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 74 × 75 cm

Work No. 102, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 74 × 62 cm

► see ill. p. 201

Work No. 106, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 90 × 90 cm

► see ill. p. 203

Work No. 117, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 104 × 104 cm

► see ill. p. 205

Work No. 125, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 104 × 109 cm

► see ill. p. 206

Work No. 127, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 120 × 105 cm

► see ill. p. 207

Work No. 132, n.d.

Crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 96 × 100 cm

Work No. 136, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 110 × 105 cm

► see ill. p. 209

Work No. 140, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 94 × 94 cm

► see ill. p. 211

Work No. 142, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 110 × 105 cm

Work No. 163, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 98 × 96 cm

► see ill. p. 213

Work No. 167, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines, 110 × 105 cm

► see ill. p. 215

Work No. 168, n.d.

Original: Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper (facsimile), 70 × 70 cm

► see ill. p. 216

Work No. 172, n.d.

Original: Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper (facsimile), Dia. 94 cm

► see ill. p. 217

Work No. 307, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines, 109 × 105 cm

► see ill. p. 219

Work No. 359, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
79 × 75 cm

Work No. 360, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
66 × 66 cm

Work No. 367, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
72 × 75 cm

Work No. 371, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
70 × 70 cm

Work No. 372, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
75 × 75 cm

Work No. 375, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
80 × 75 cm

Work No. 382, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
76 × 75 cm

Work No. 384, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
70 × 70 cm

Work No. 390, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
68 × 68 cm

► see ill. p. 221

Work No. 392, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
70 × 70 cm

► see ill. p. 223

Work No. 393, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
70 × 70 cm

► see ill. p. 225

Work No. 395, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
66 × 66 cm

Work No. 396, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
42 × 42 cm

Work No. 399, n.d.

Pencil, crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
71 × 70 cm

Work No. 416, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
49 × 75 cm

► see ill. p. 226

Work No. 417, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with brown lines,  
50 × 75 cm

► see ill. p. 227

Work No. 464, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
94 × 94 cm

Work No. 508, n.d.

Pencil and crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
108 × 105 cm

Work No. 514, n.d.

Crayon and oil crayon on graph paper with blue lines,  
70 × 70 cm

► see ill. p. 229



## "Emma Kunz Saved My Life"

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■ I spent the summer holidays of 1943 with a friend of my father's, a pastor in the Principality of Liechtenstein. I was eight years old, very bright, independent, and had a good time with the boys of the village. Before she went to the field, Anna, the housekeeper, had prepared a piece of bread and some small pears for me. I wanted to pep up my *zvieri* [snack] and took some of her small chocolates. A splendid opportunity, since it was wartime; we never saw any chocolate otherwise. During the course of the afternoon, I ate the whole box. Inside the chocolates were iodine tablets. Anna took them because of her goiter. That evening, everything came to light. The village doctor immediately drove me to the hospital in Vaduz, where my stomach was pumped out. Too late! The iodine was already in my blood. I returned home the next day. Professor H., my pediatrician, had been notified by telephone. His diagnosis after consultation: Severe iodine poisoning. He explained to my mother that it made no sense to take me to the children's hospital. There was no adequate remedy. I instinctively sensed that I might perhaps die.

The next day, Pastor K. came for lunch. He heard about the unfortunate incident and immediately phoned Emma Kunz, who had cured him of an eye condition. Emma Kunz never wanted to know the medical diagnosis. She told K. that she wanted to "have a look" and call back later. She called, said nothing about my ailment, and summoned us to Brittnau the following day. She received us in a white doctor's smock, greeted us briefly, and added: "Do not say

anything!" Without saying another word, she began to swing the pendulum. She was highly focused; every word was a disturbance. I often experienced the same thing in later years. She swung the pendulum for what was surely a half an hour. An eternity for me! Finally, she said: Peter has a severe medicinal intoxication! My father confirmed this: Iodine poisoning. Emma Kunz continued "working." She always called swinging the pendulum "work." It was hard physical labor. She then said to my father: "We can save the boy if you follow my instructions to a T." For my father, there was no question.

The following day, Emma Kunz came to us and stayed for several days. She asked me to call her "Penta." In the meantime, I could barely walk; my entire organism was in a very critical state. Penta worked several hours each day in the next room. From hour to hour, other organs needed to be energized and supported. If one had collapsed, this would have led to a domino effect with fatal consequences. In support of her spiritual work, my heart was cooled with an ice pack, for which my father constructed a special frame. Shortly thereafter, I was given milk with pressed garlic, light rubbing with oil in the abdominal area, a cold compress on the lower legs, and a warm compress for the liver. Unfortunately, none of these treatments were documented anywhere. No one had time for this. It was a question of my survival. And there was also the family business that had to be attended to.

After three or four days, the worst of the crisis was over. Penta left us. My mother was to call her twice a day. By remote treatment, Penta energized those organs that needed it the most. She later “prescribed” heavy cream, butter, eggs, and lemons in substantial quantities. These were remedies for me, she said. But all these things were difficult to obtain while the war was still raging. There were no lemons anywhere; it seemed impossible to get them! I remember Penta staring at my father once, saying, “You *will* get them!” My father was serving in the military in Ticino, in the southern part of Switzerland, where he found Italian smugglers who could procure lemons, but had to take other goods as well, which was forbidden and severely punished. But my father did it on behalf of Penta and for his son. He was convinced that he would not get caught. And the other, strictly rationed “remedies” also came to us through the end of the war in a variety of ways!

I was weak and had to stay in bed the whole time, but had no pain. My school-absence chart shows that I had missed altogether 125 days. I read the whole day long. Later, according to Penta’s instructions, I had to lie down immediately after returning from school and was not permitted to do any written homework. I grew little until the age of twelve. On Penta’s advice, my parents sent me to a monastic school in the mountains, at an altitude of 1,100 meters. I spent three years there. I was the smallest of 150 students. I didn’t really start growing until towards the end of my fifteenth year. I continued growing until I was twenty-one and eventually became nearly six-feet tall.

Penta was clear and strict in her instructions. One day, she said to me: “If you stick to what has been revealed to me on your behalf, you’ll be fully grown by the time you’re twenty-one!” This statement turned out to be true in every way. Today, I am eighty-three years old and healthy.

When I now think about the dozens of hours I spent sitting at Penta’s feet while she swung her pendulum, the impression of the highest level of concentration remains. She would reprimand me quite brusquely if I moved at all. In her battery of questions, her whole being was obviously highly strained—the more so since she never wrote anything down. Her statements were always very clear, brief, and resolute.

I met Emma Kunz when I was eight years old; she was fifty-one. In the years that followed, she barely changed at all. Only when treating seriously ill people, she often looked fatigued, even winced in pain. She then often went to “drain off,” as she told me, holding her forearms and hands under cold running water, often for several minutes.

During my visits, I often saw Penta drawing. It was incredible how fast she drew dots on graph paper. The whole sheet was strewn with hundreds of dots, the positions of which she determined by swinging the pendulum. It was a mystery for me how she knew which points to connect afterwards. Each picture was made in one “session,” even if this lasted a whole day and night. She also told me that, at the beginning of each, she never knew what the finished picture would look like, but it represented the complete answer to her questions. She never commented on their contents.

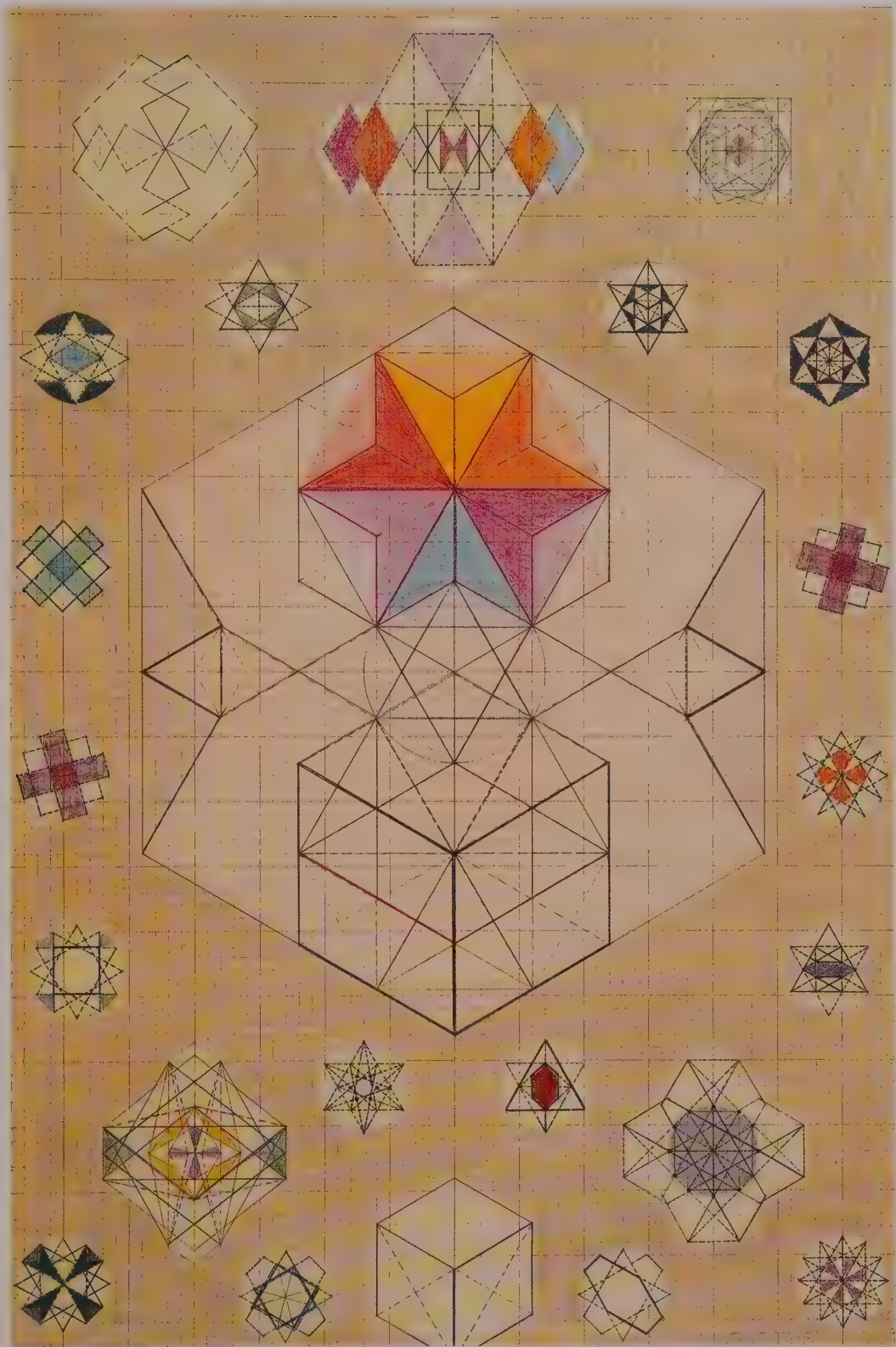
In later years, Emma Kunz “drew” much more than she healed in “practice.” When she was asked to use the pendulum, she no longer swung it as intensively as I had known her to do before. Among dozens of drawings, she sought the one most appropriate for the respective “case.” She once said that the answer was contained in these pictures, even though the question posed prior to their execution was different. Her drawings were later viewed as artworks. For the inexpressible, she had chosen geometry, much like her contemporaries, the quantum physicists, had chosen mathematics. They worked on the same theme: The communication and mutual influence of mind and matter.

I owe my life to this great woman and my parents’ tireless efforts in putting her instructions into practice.

**Peter Burri, Switzerland**





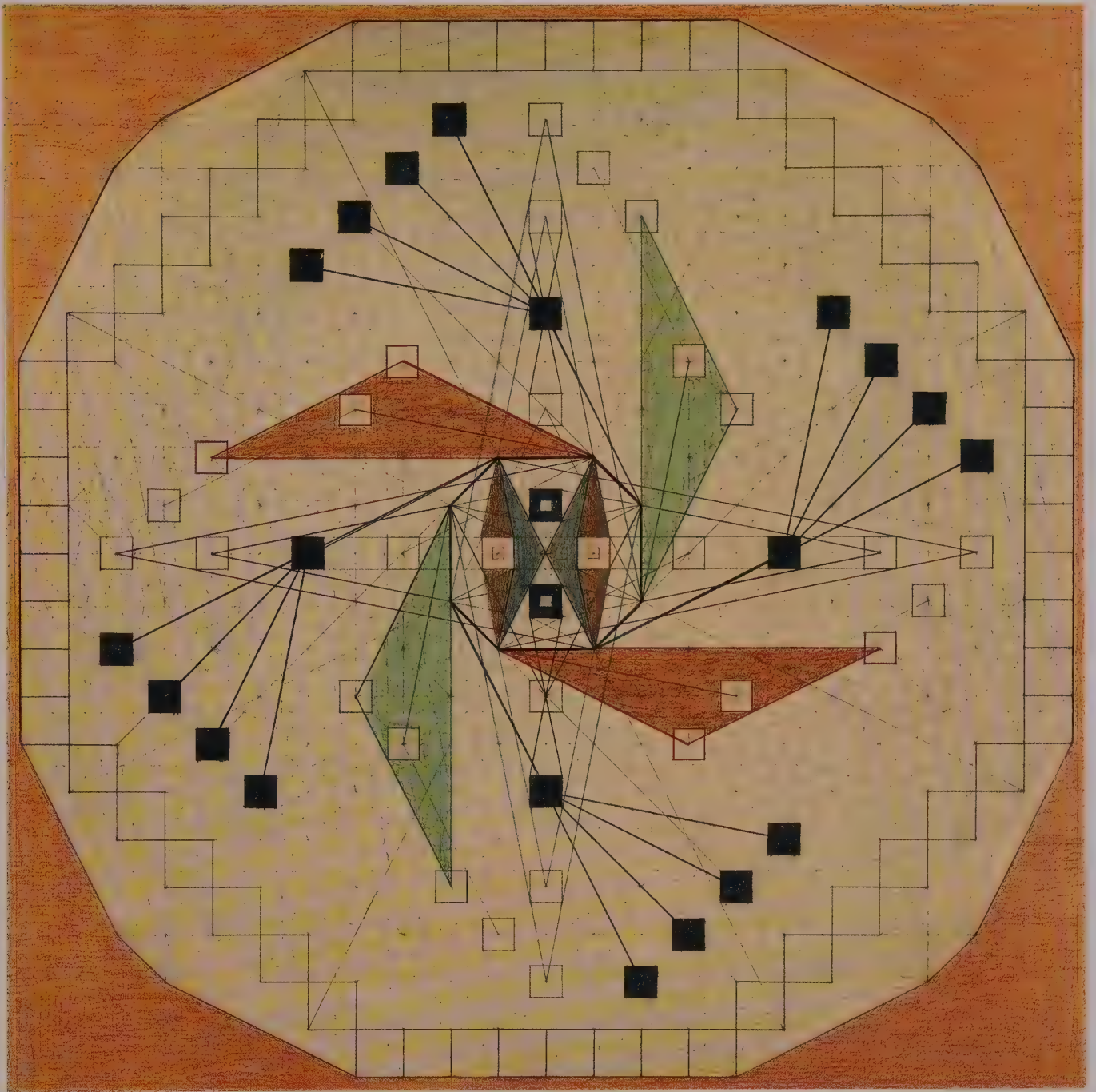






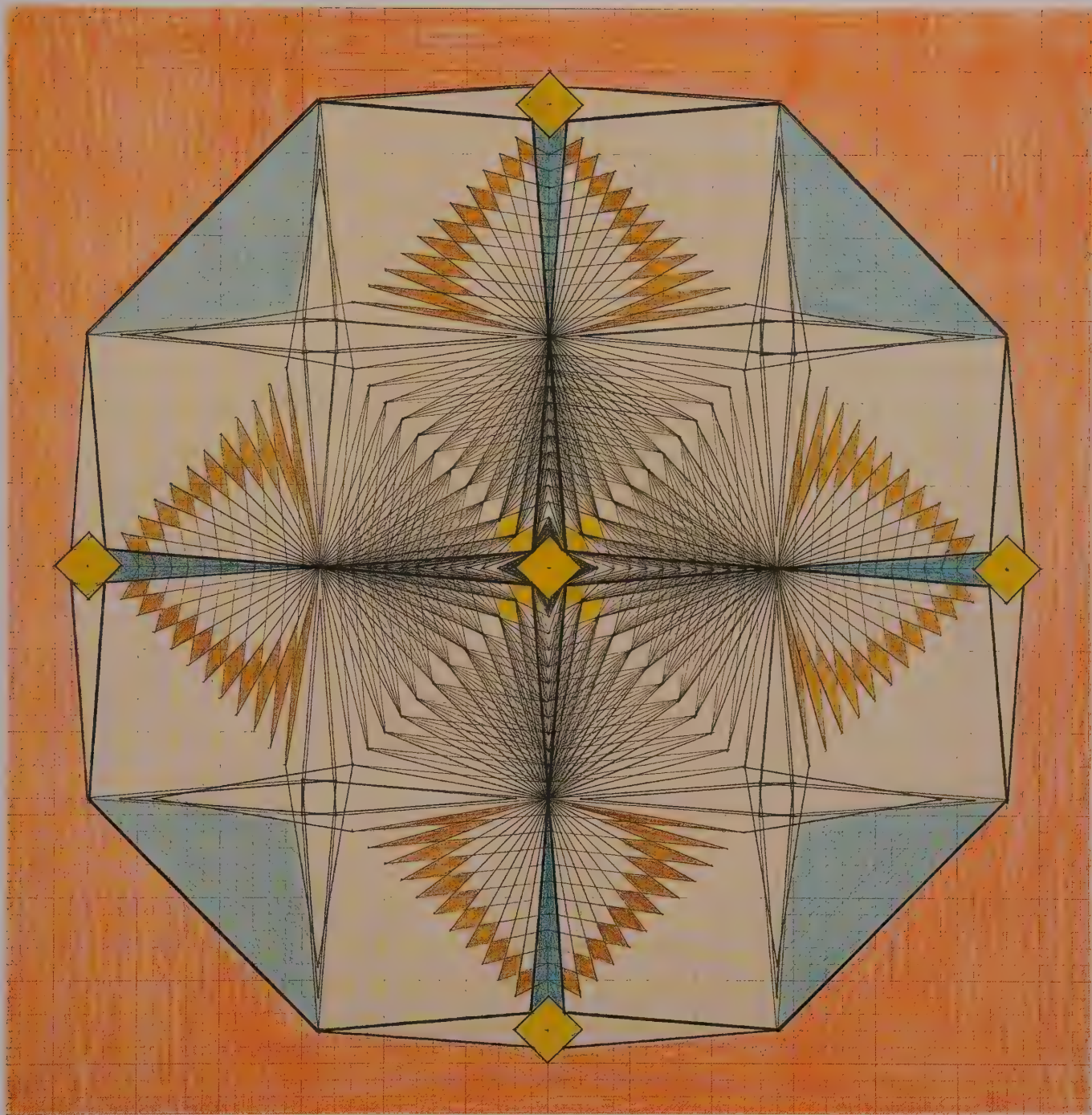


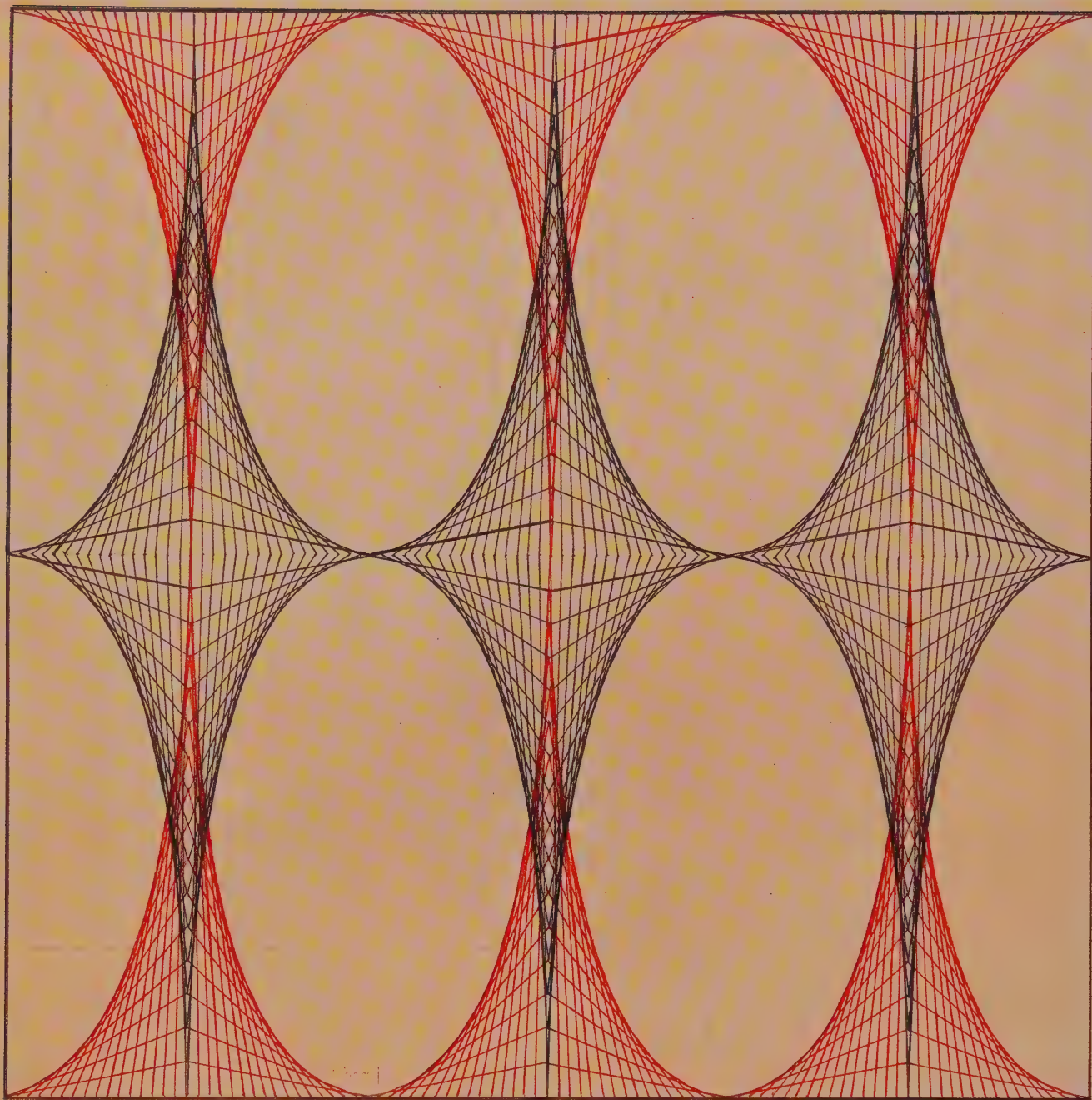




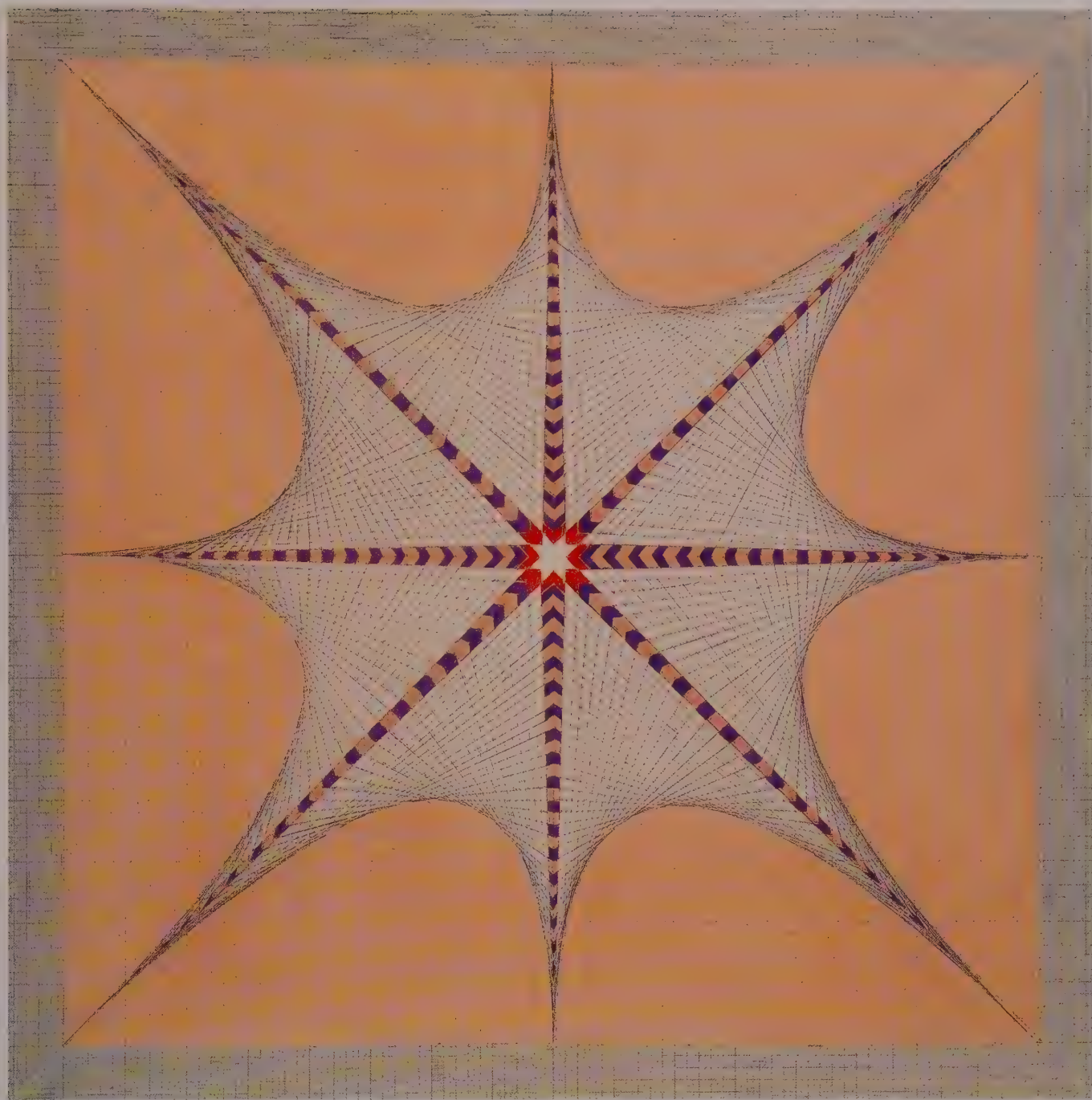












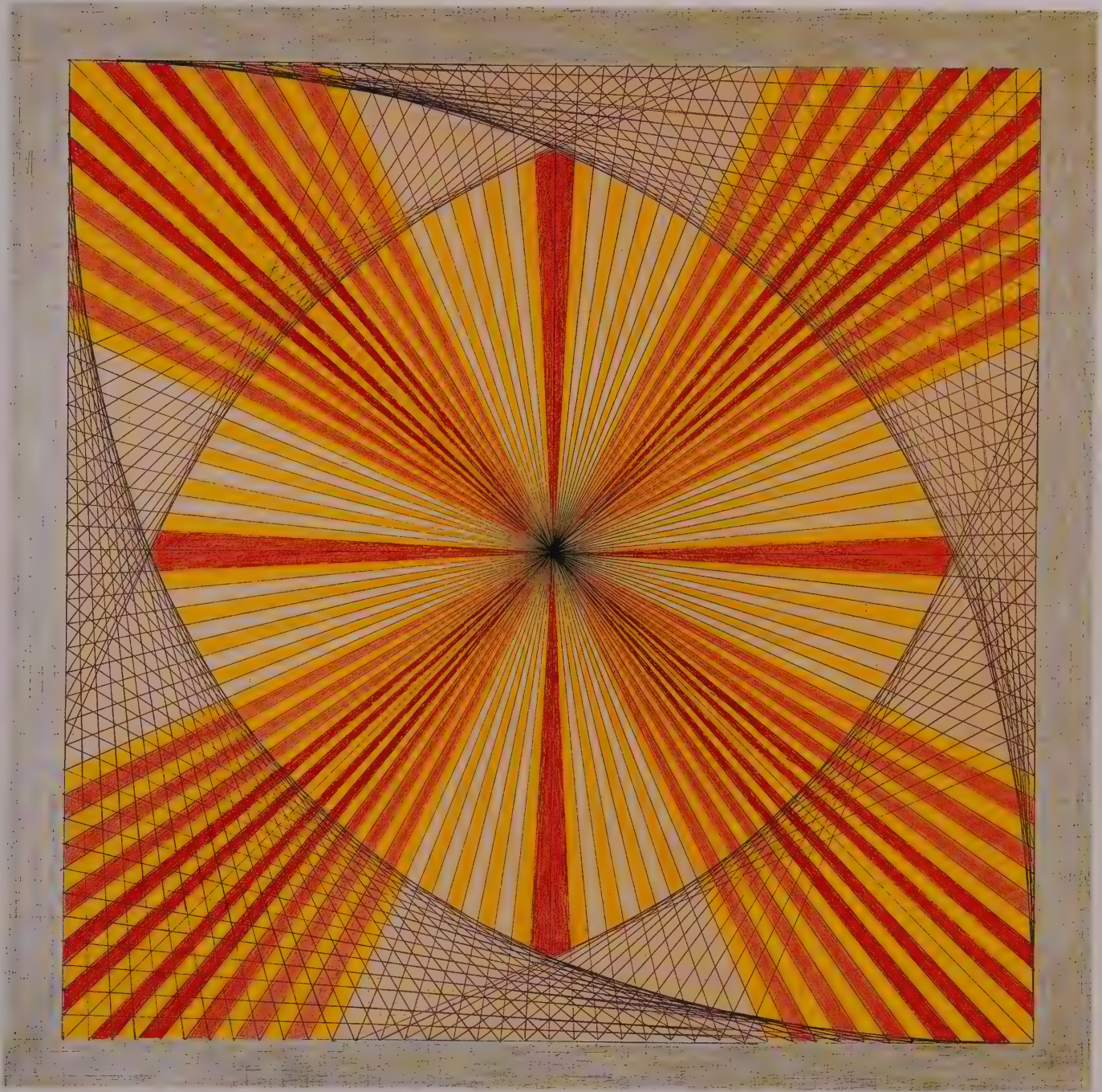






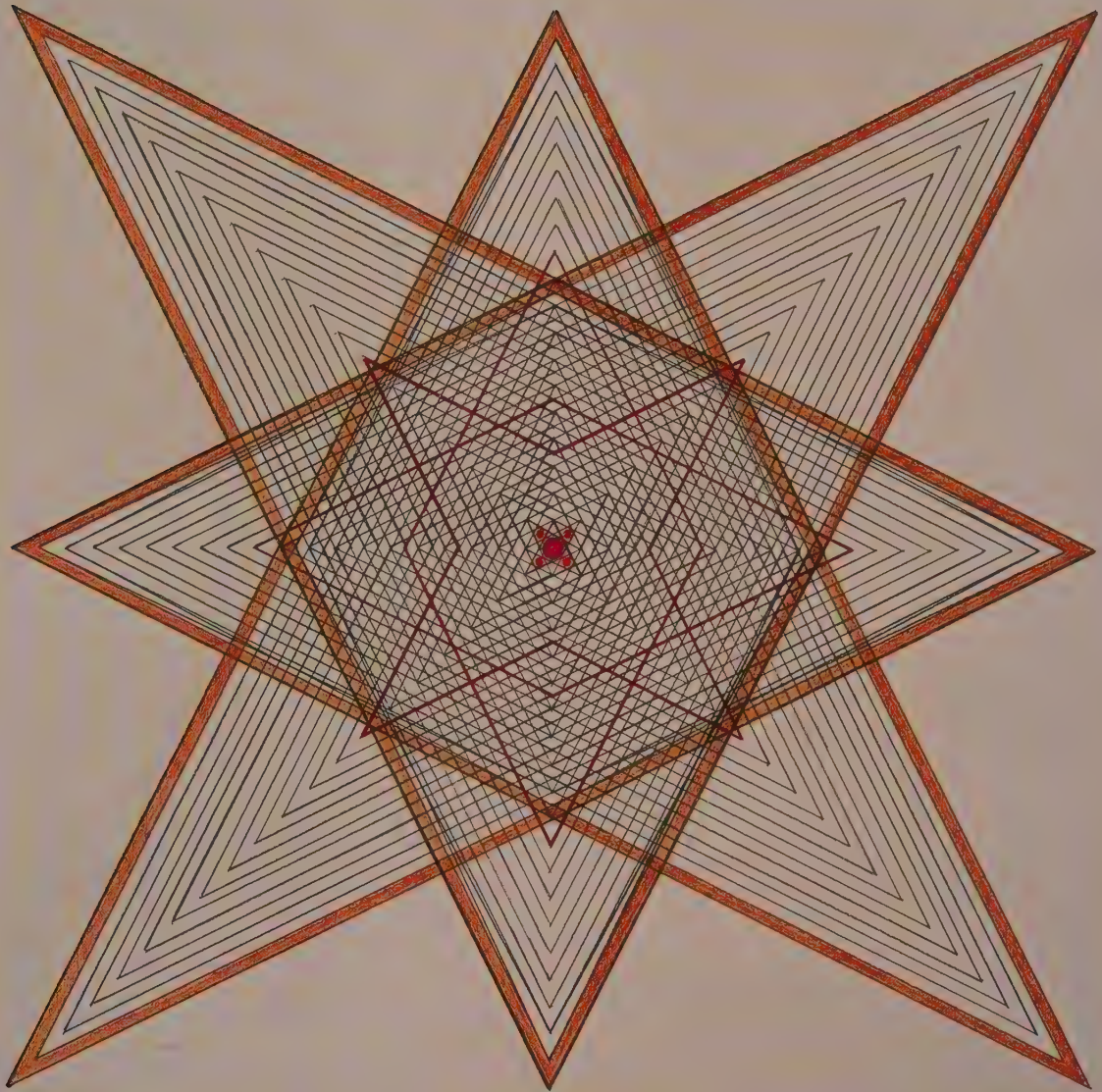






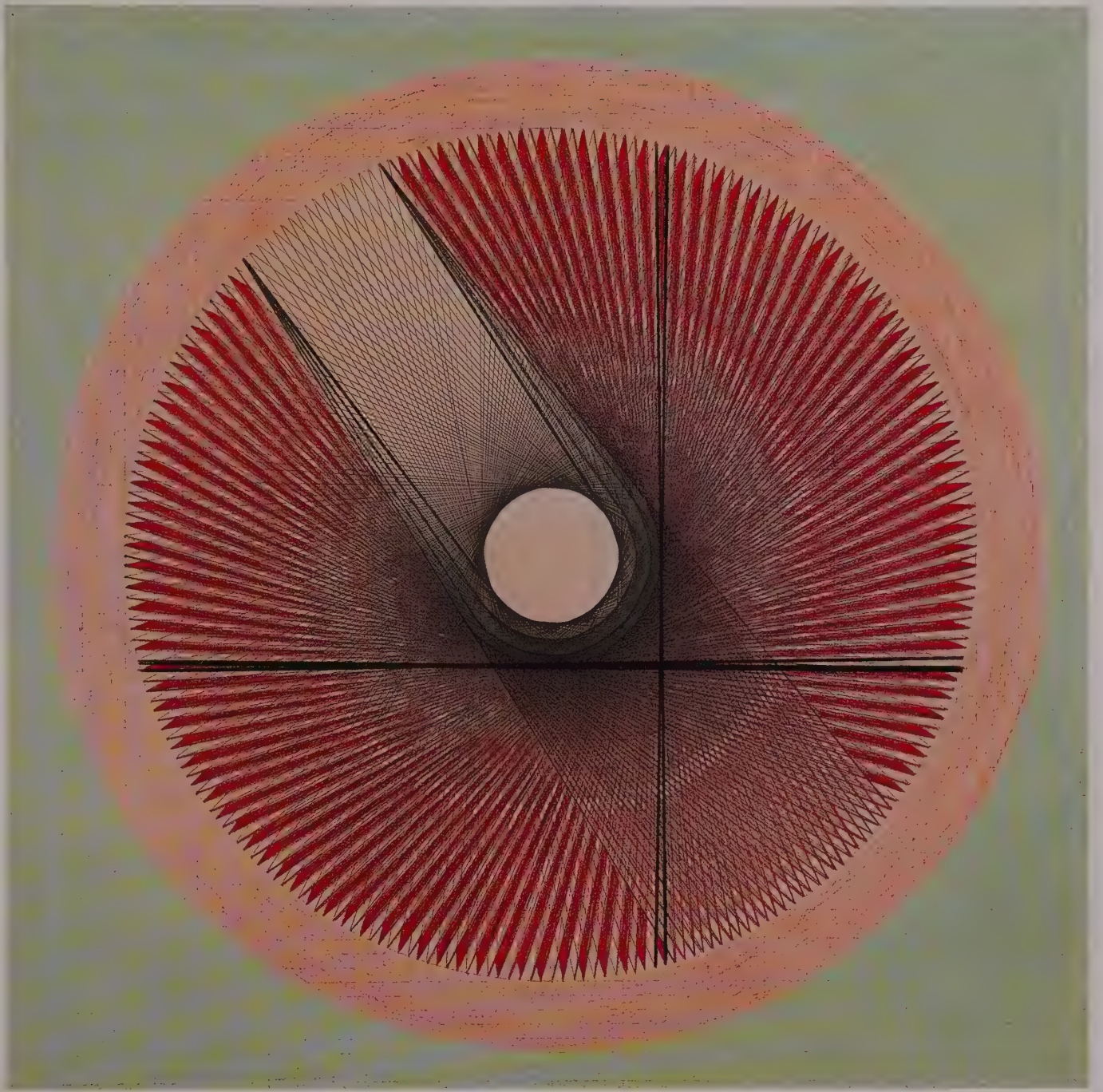






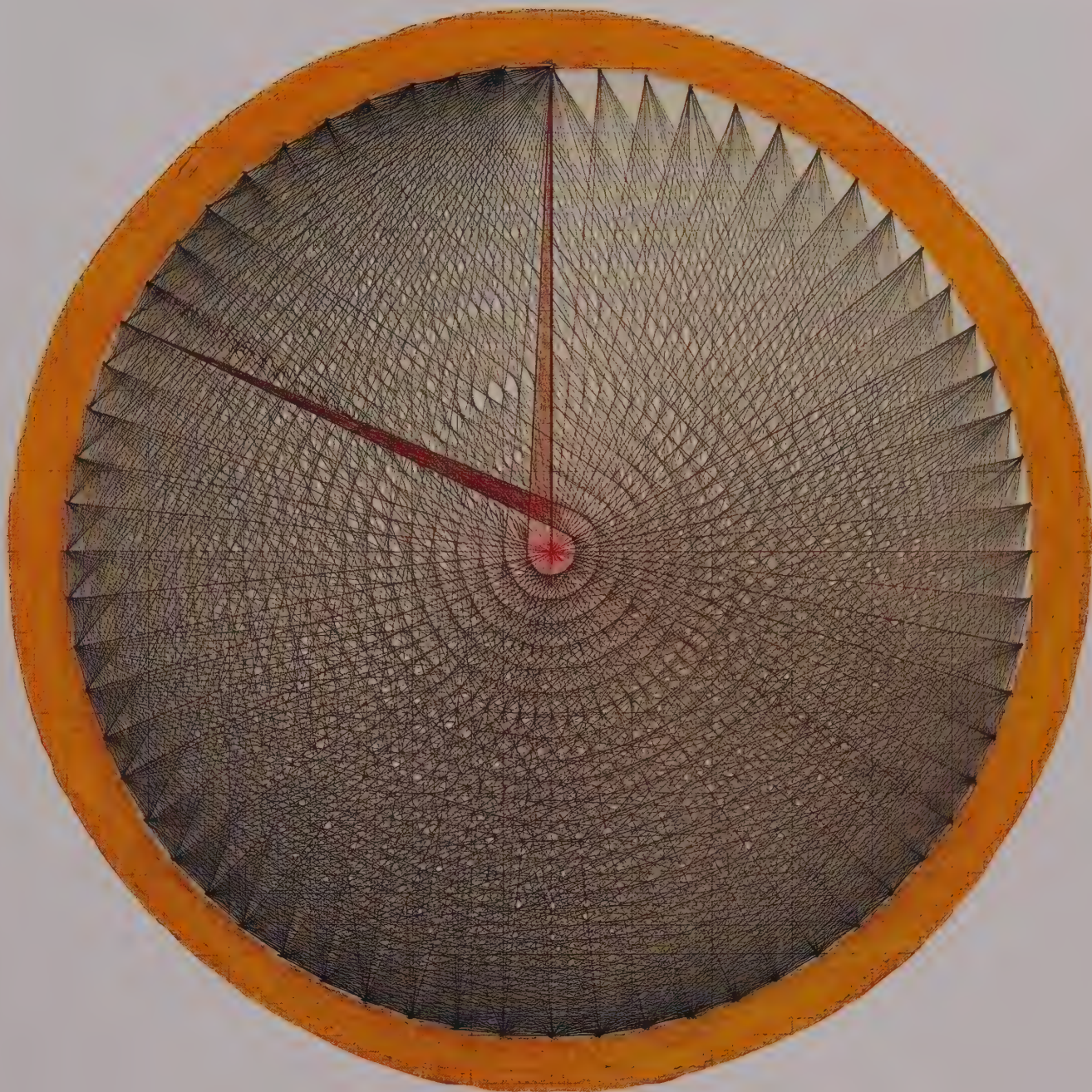




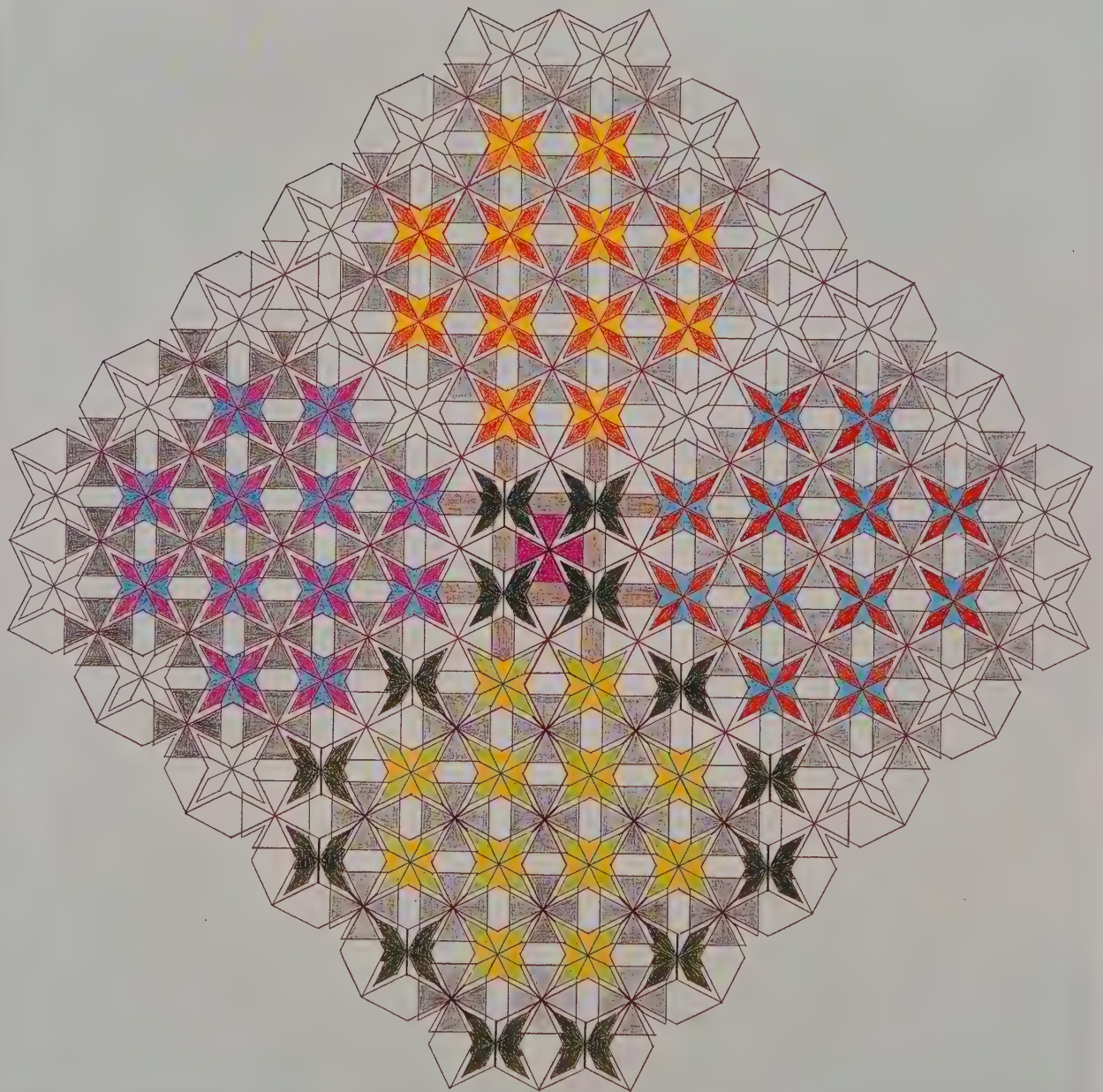


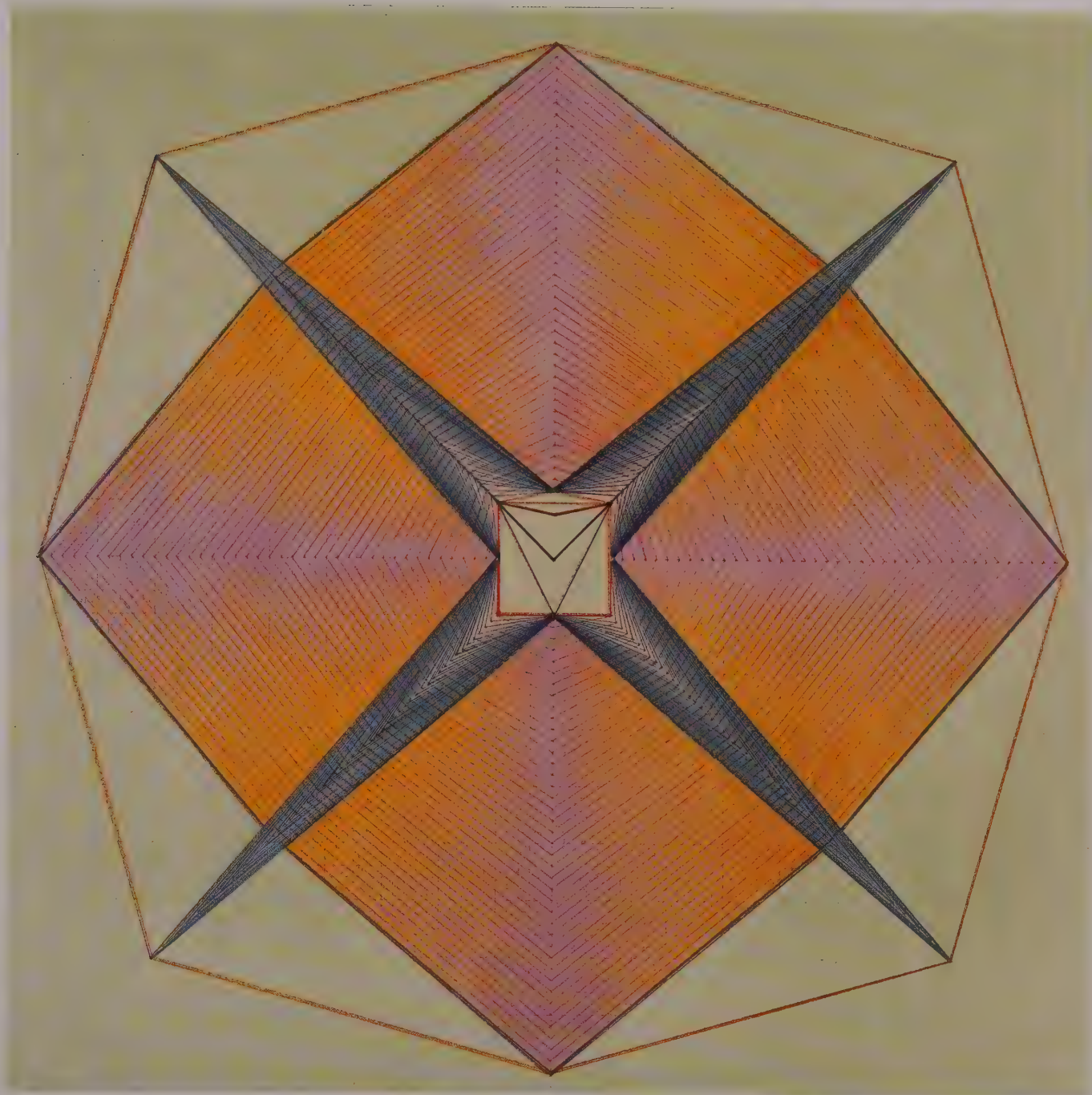






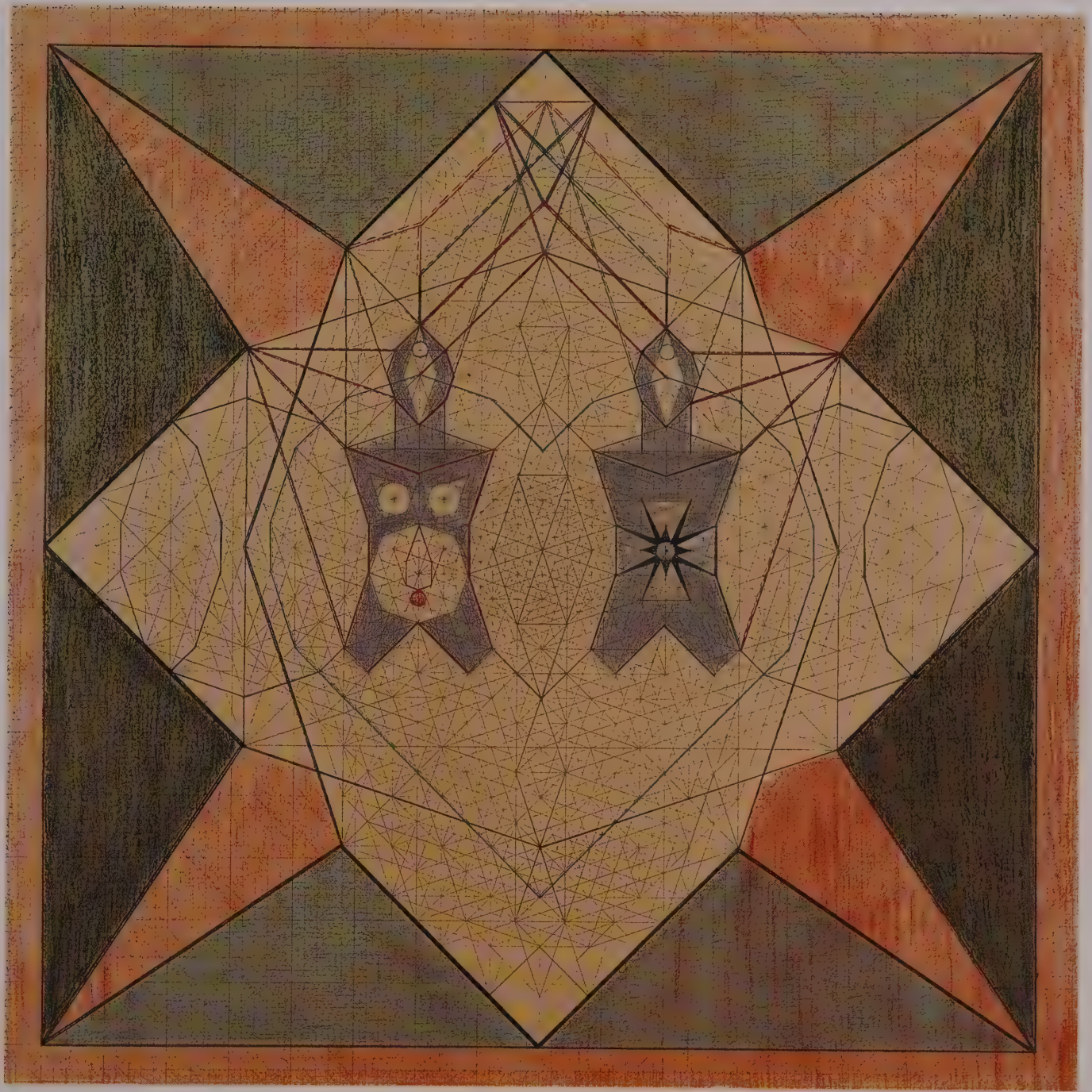


















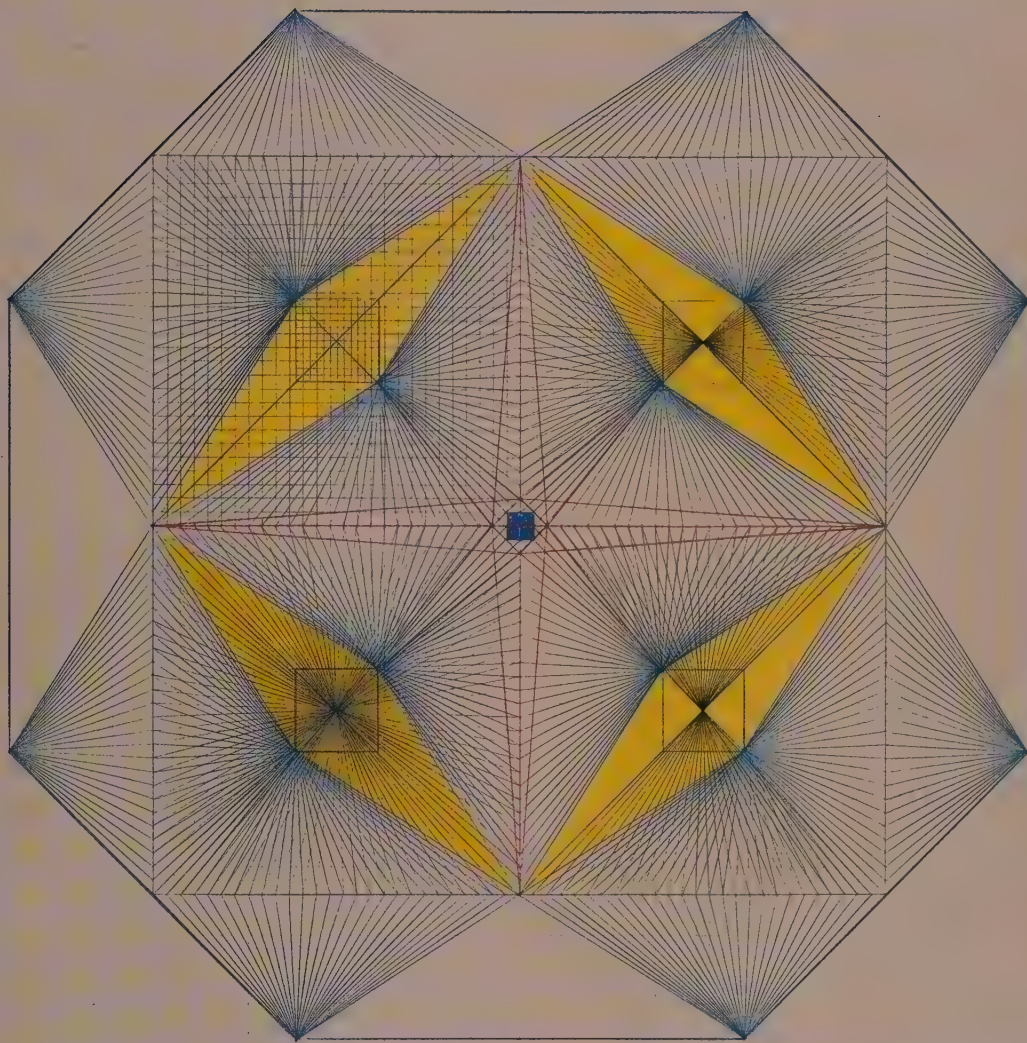


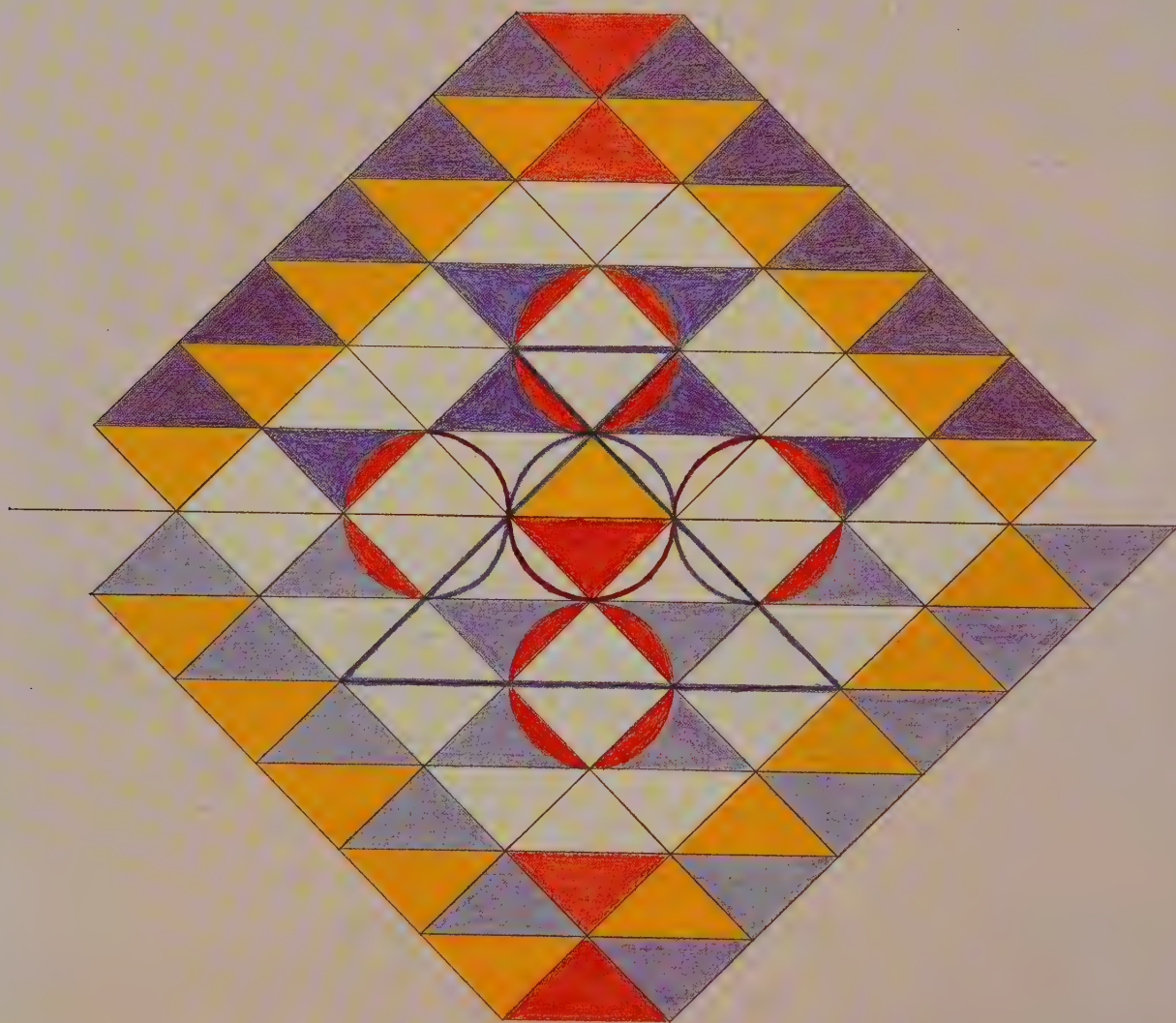




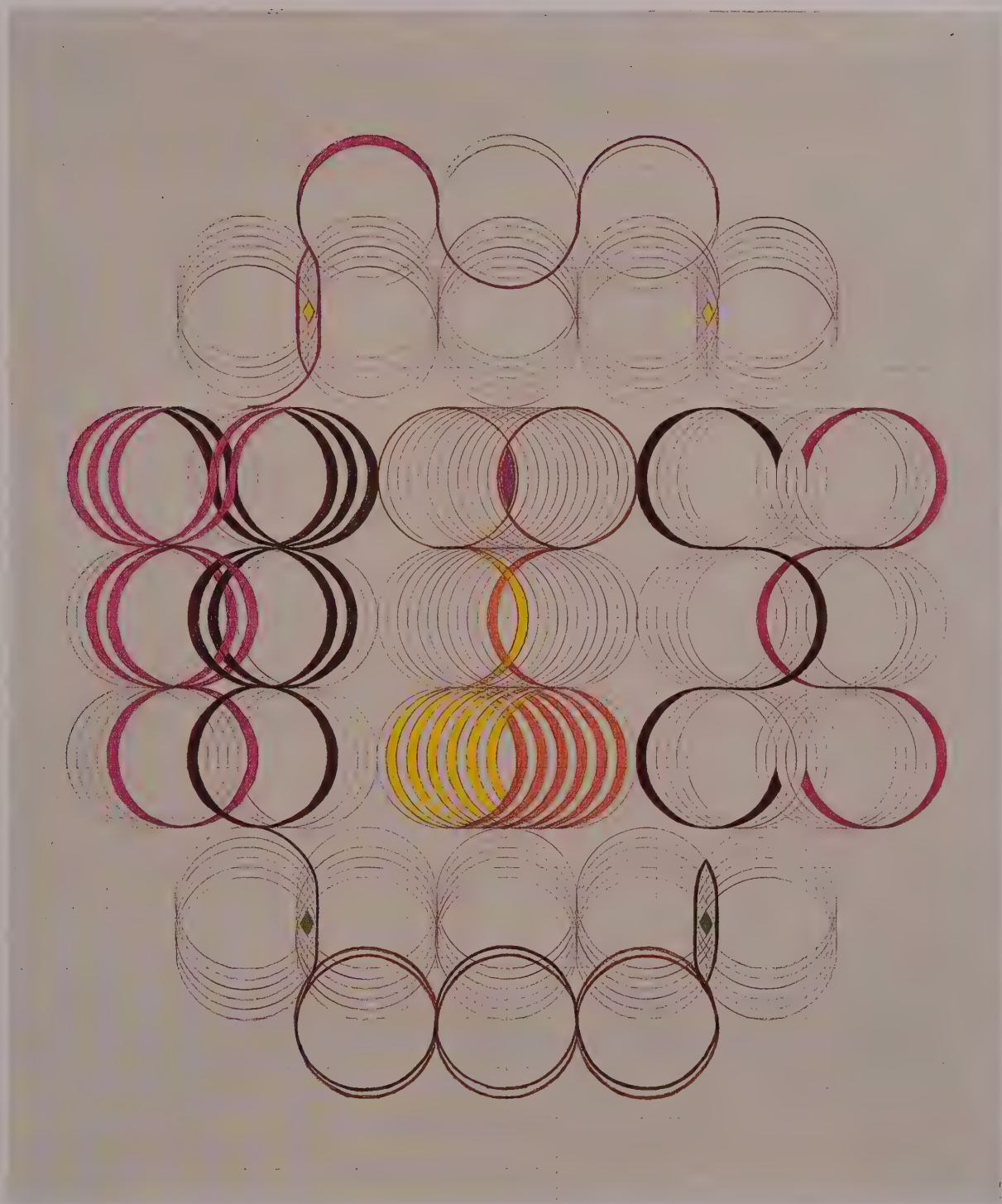




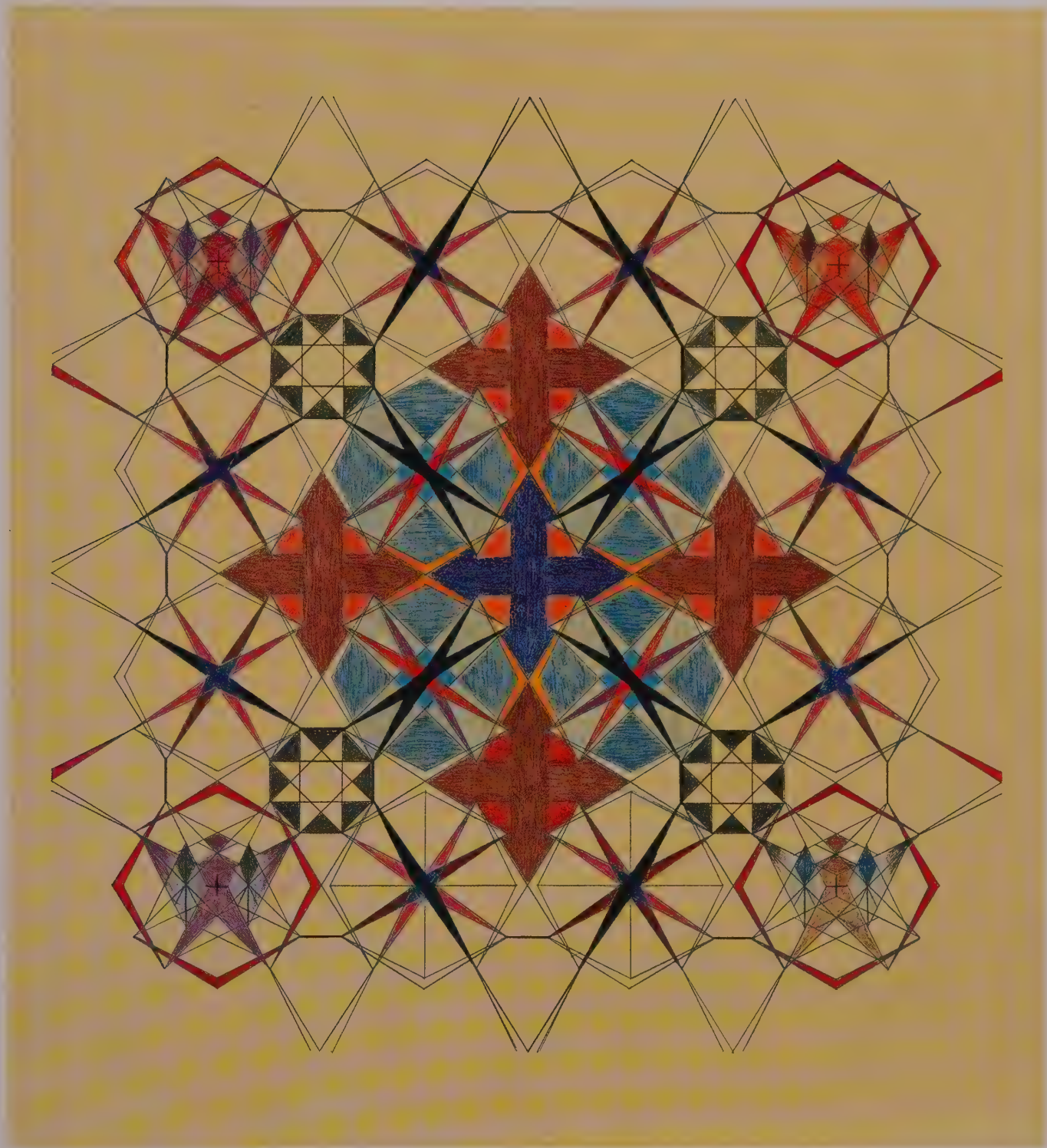






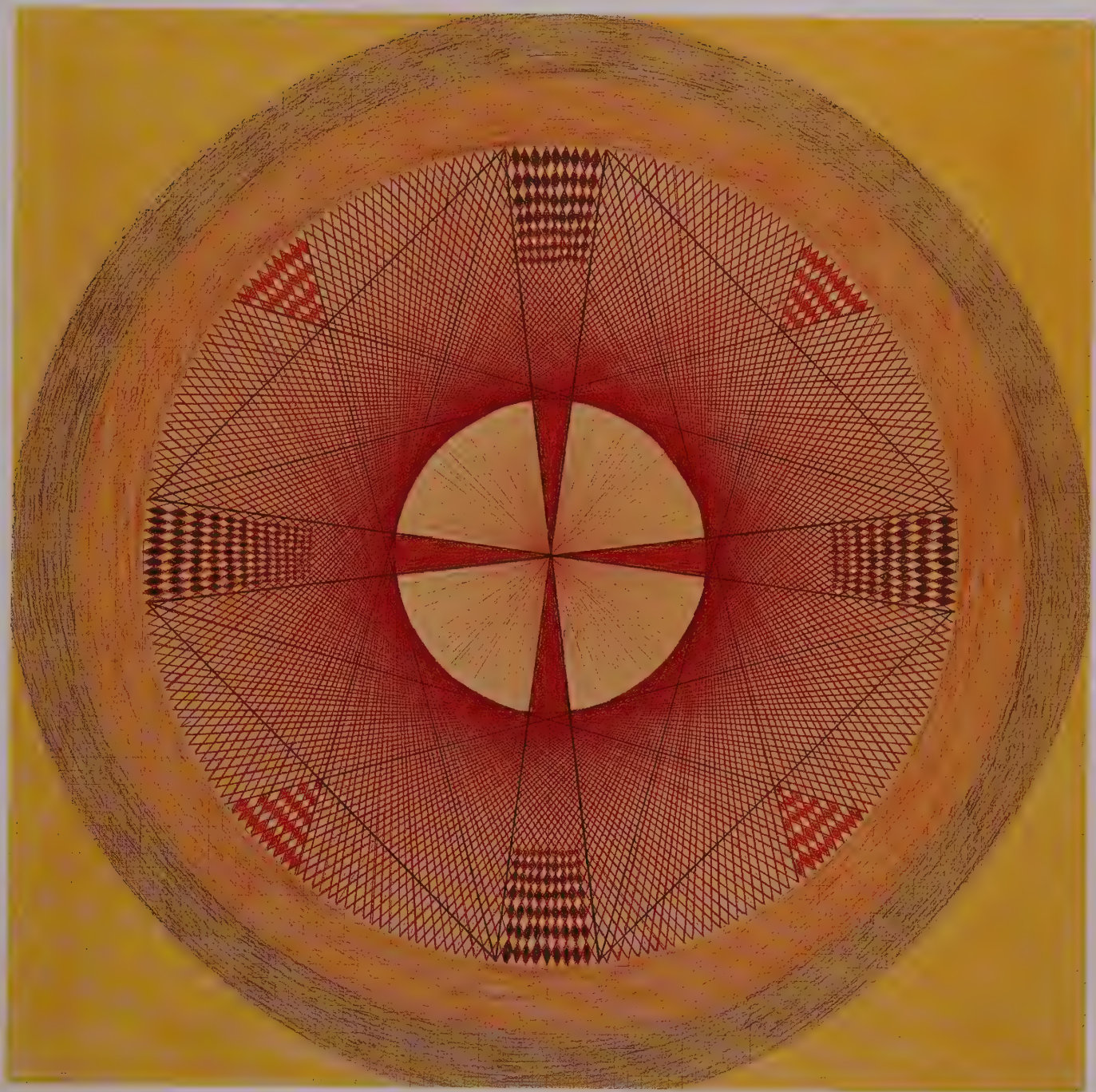






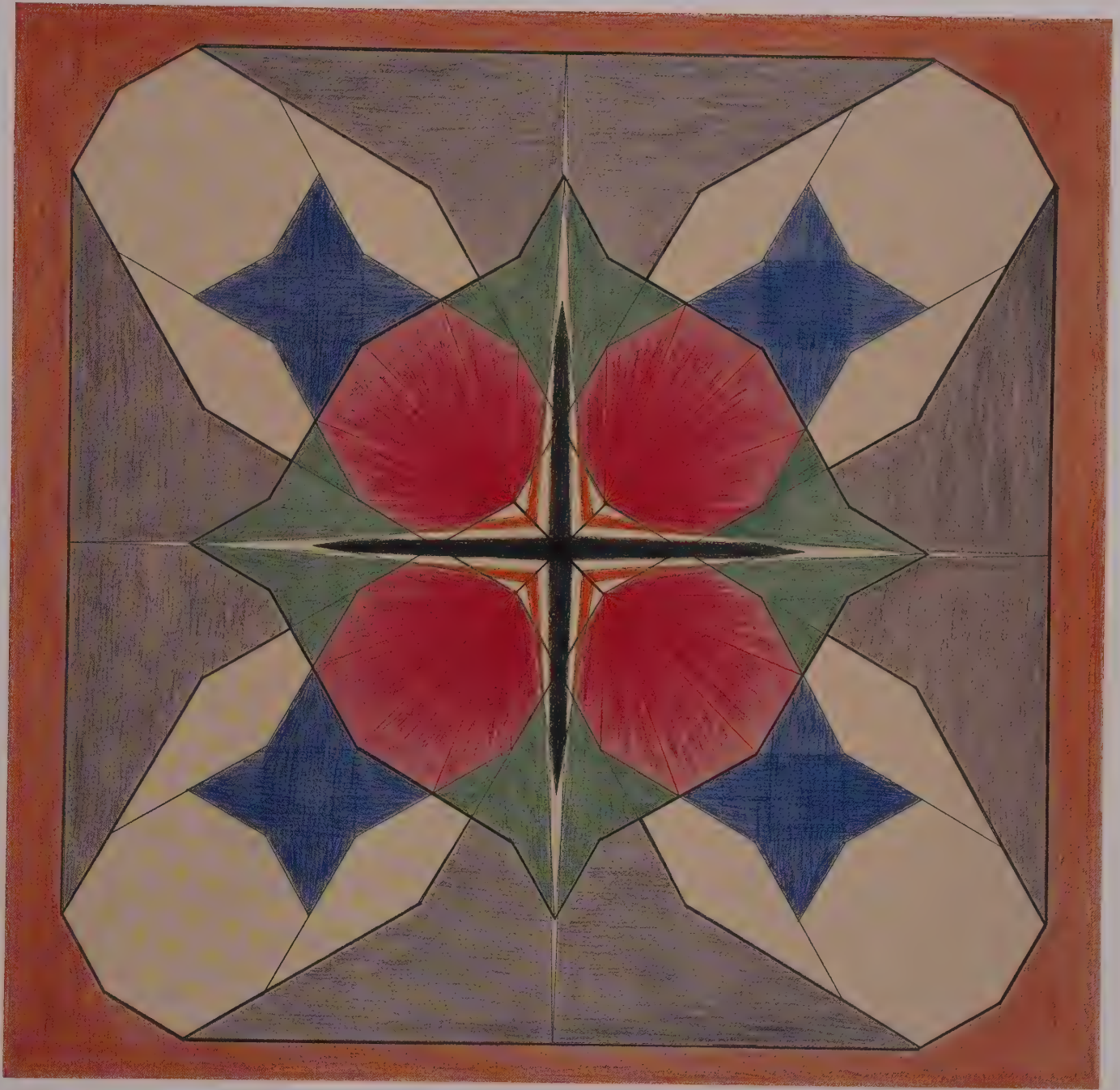






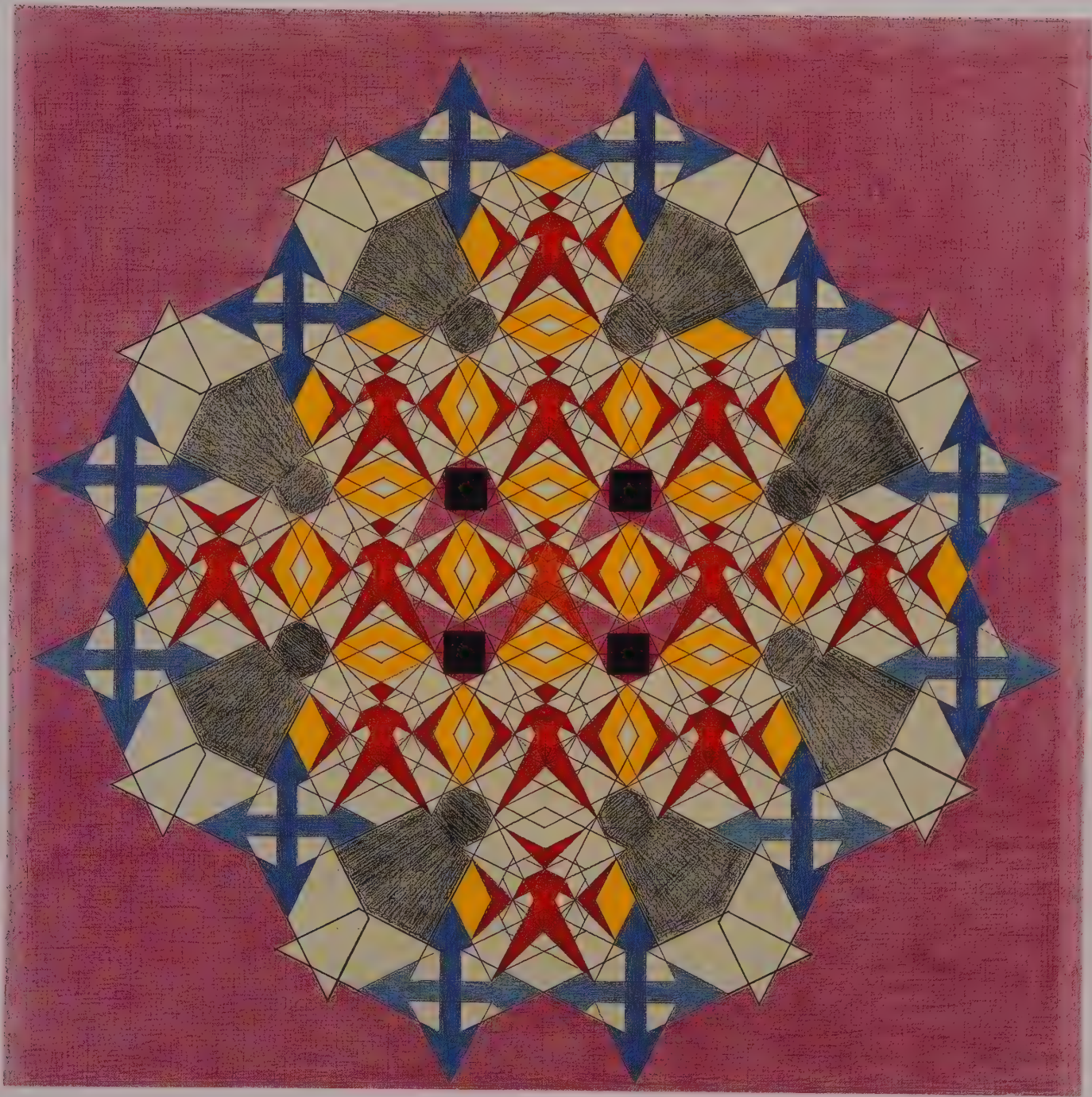














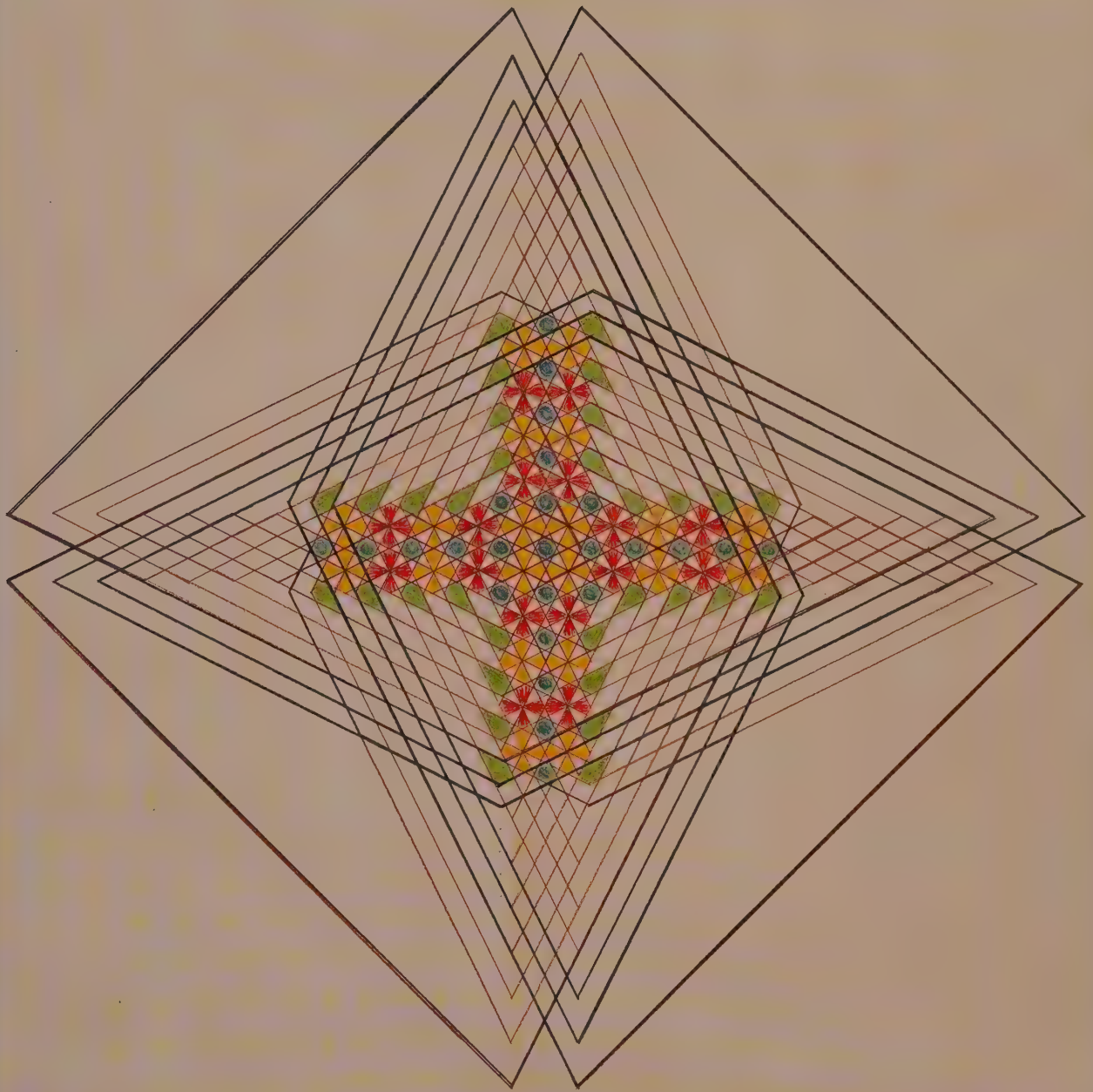




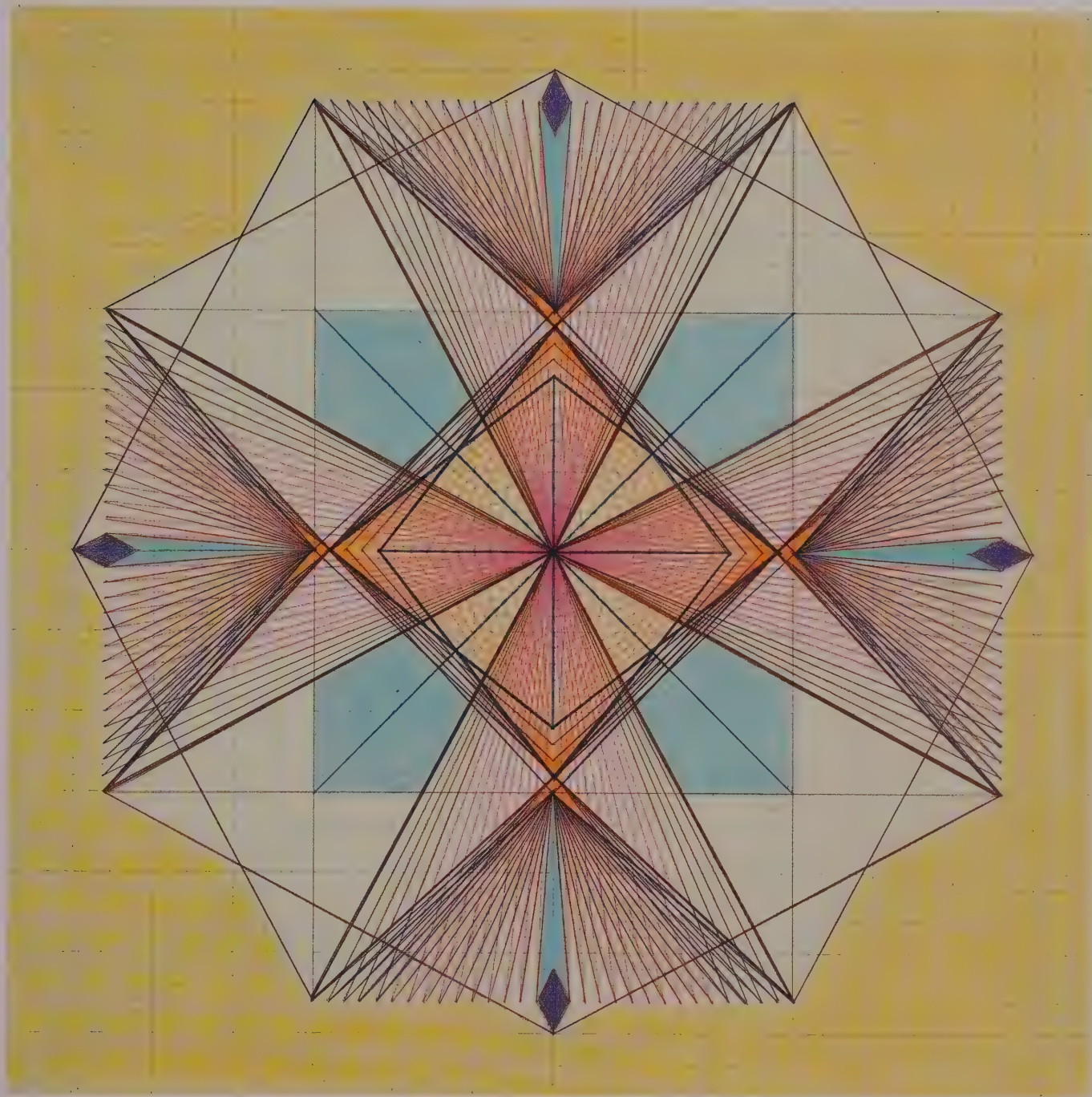






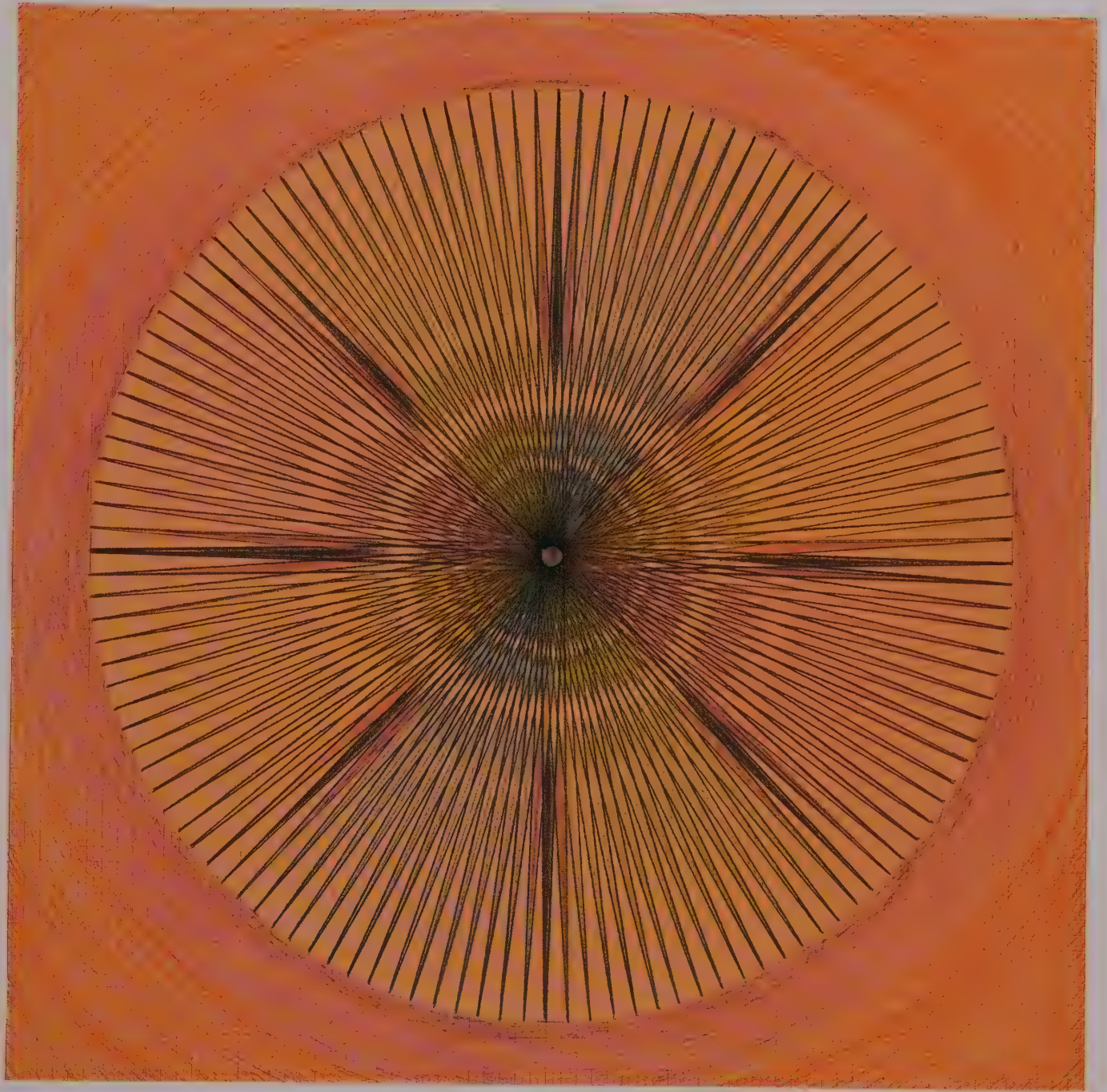






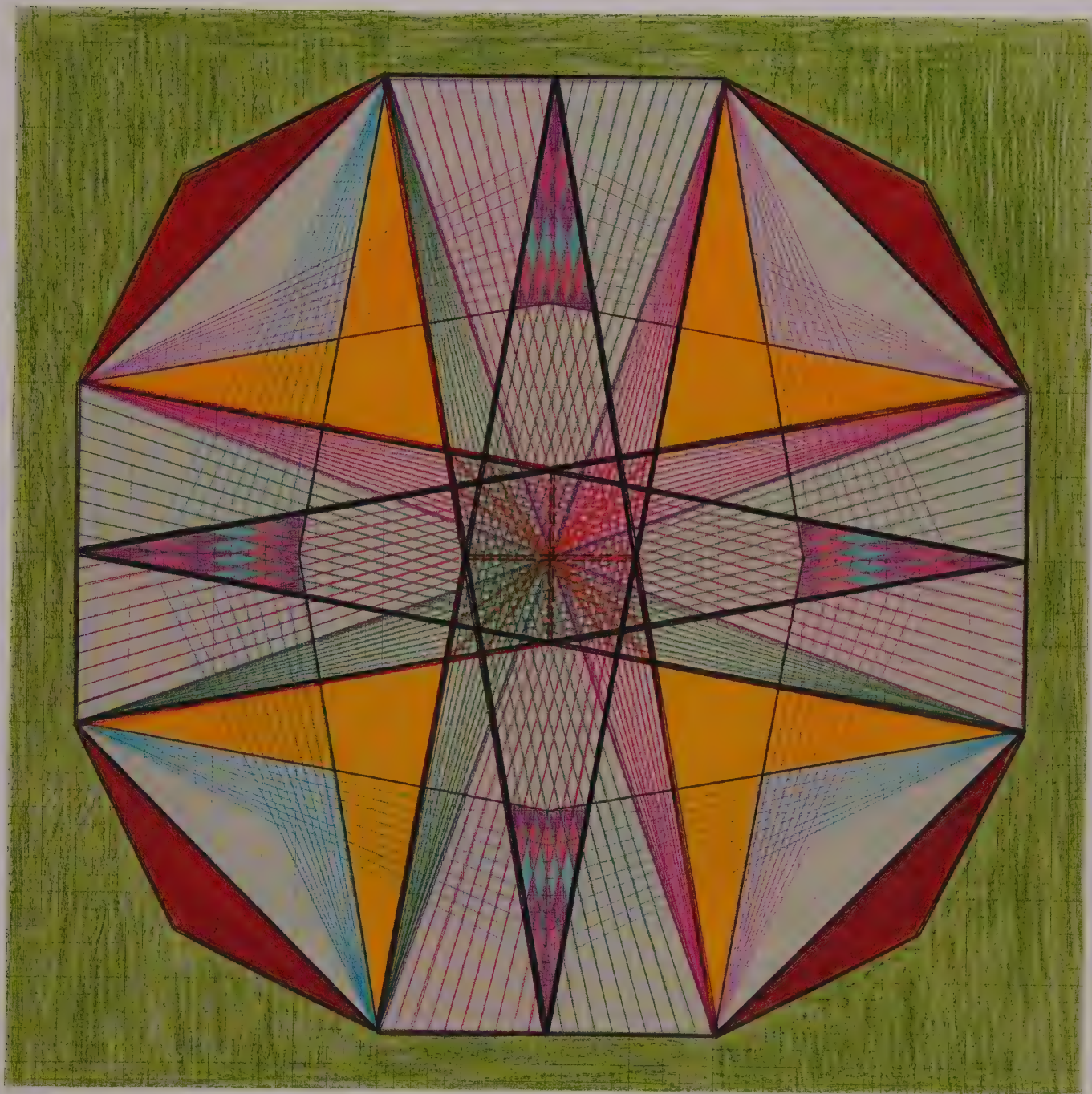


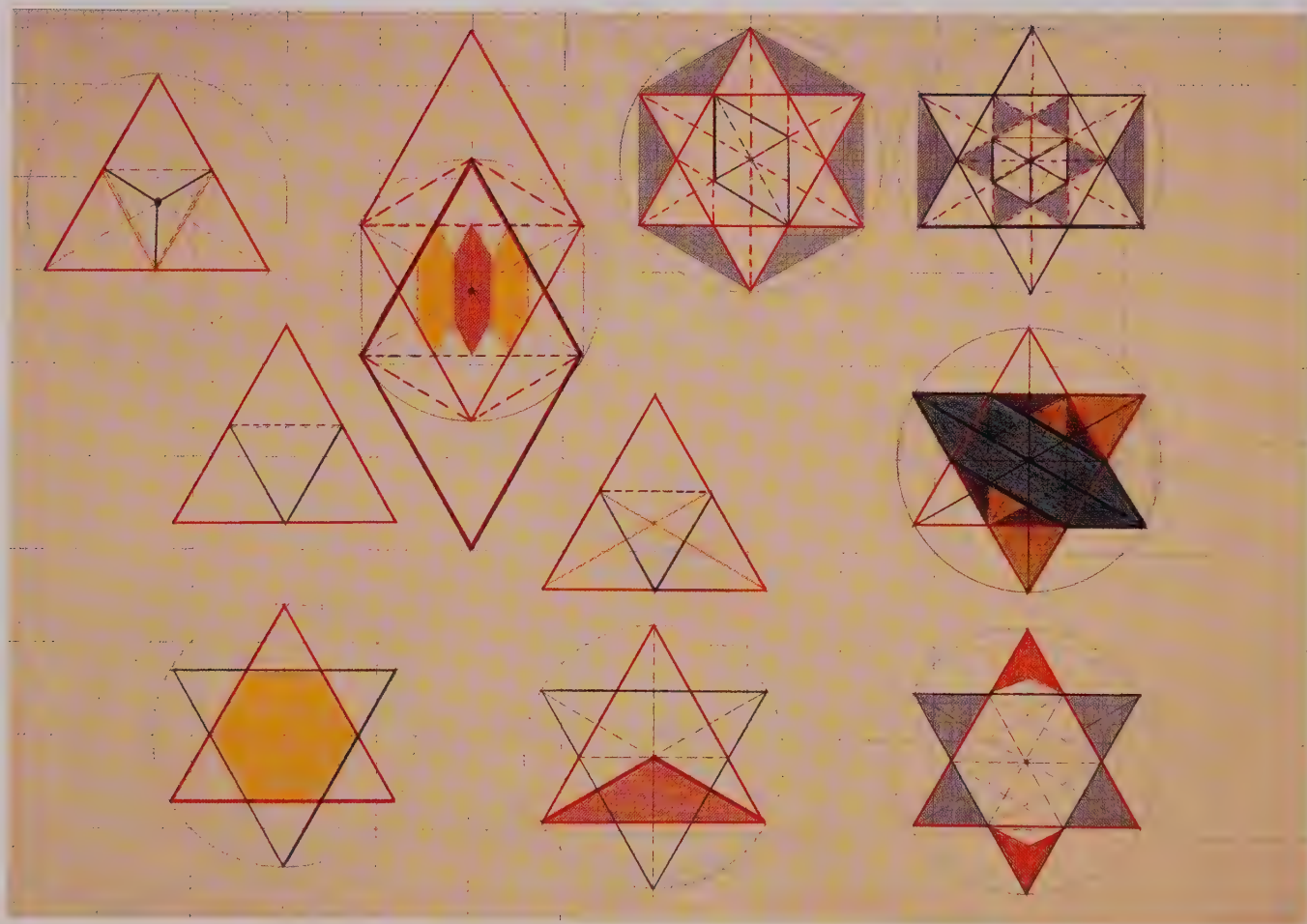




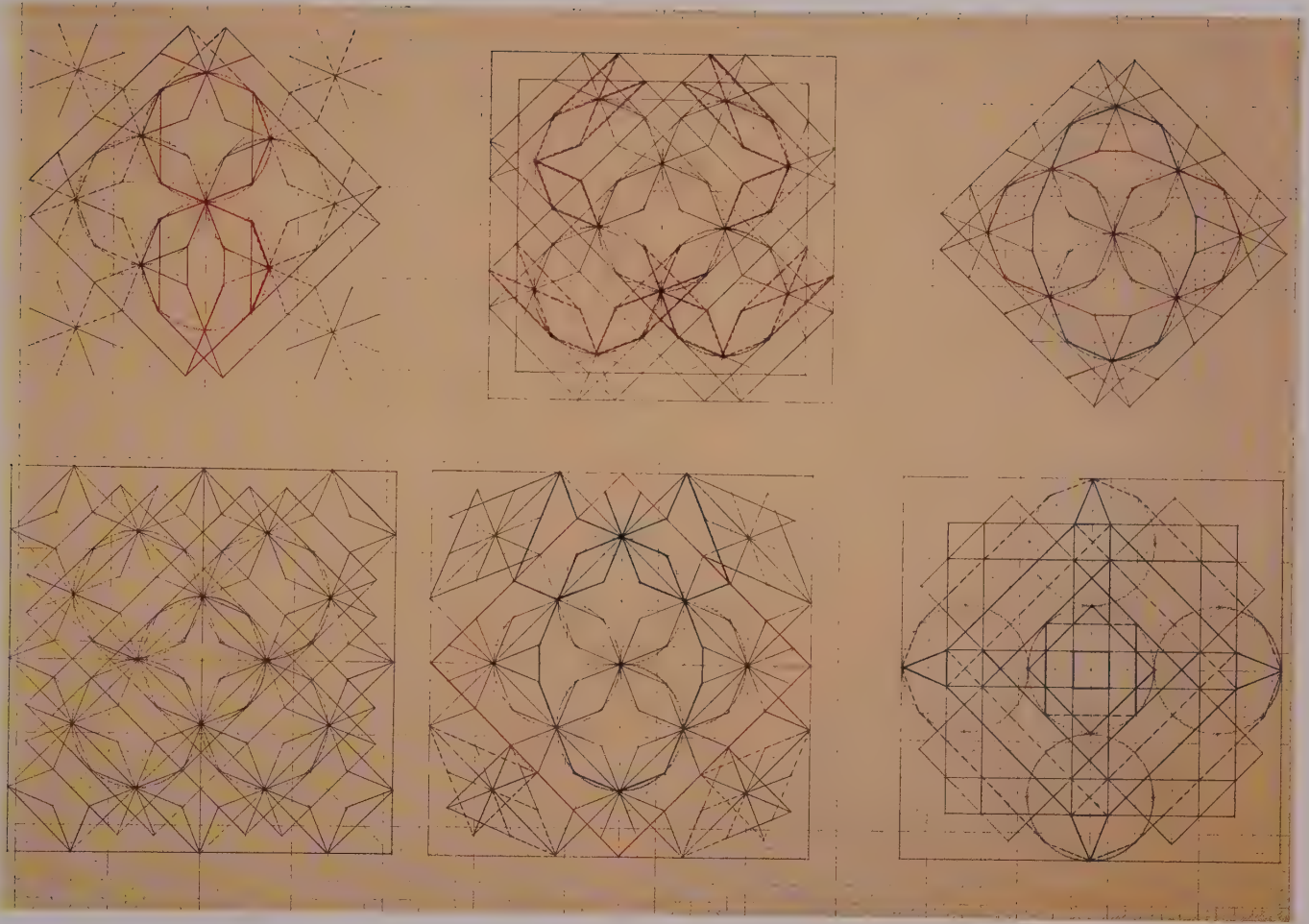






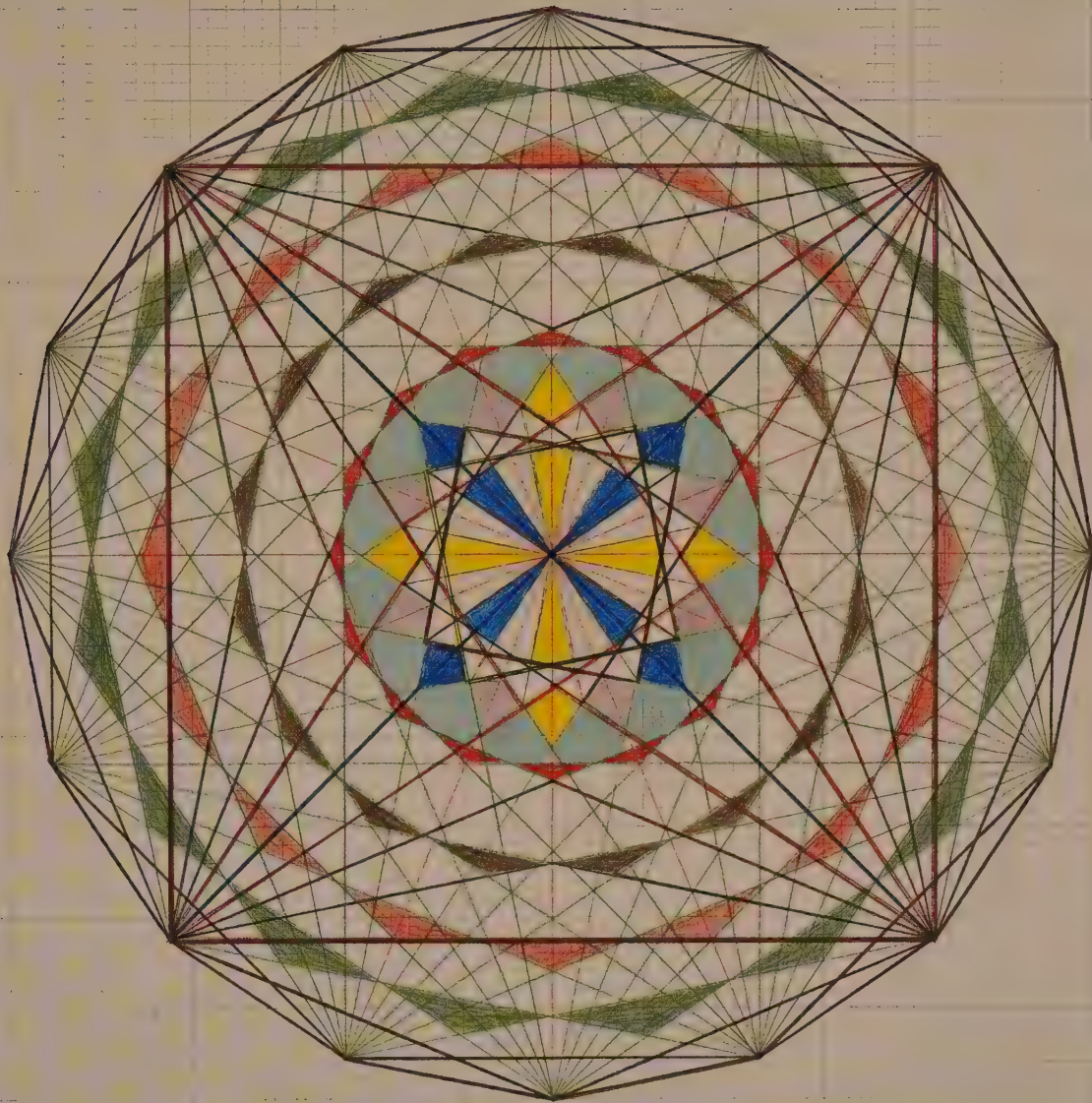
















CLUB OF VISIONARIES.  
THE ABSTRACT FILMS OF  
HARRY SMITH AND  
JOHN AND JAMES WHITNEY

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Sebastian Schneider

■ California in the 1940s: The prospering defense industry makes the West Coast the leading center of technology in the United States. In the climate of rampantly spreading urbanization, a new consumer culture emerges, not least fueled by Hollywood's film industry. Unprecedented prosperity follows the Great Depression. Beyond mass culture, a young art scene strives to develop its own identity in relation to the dominance of New York and the European avant-garde.

Harry Smith and John and James Whitney were active in such circles in San Francisco and Los Angeles respectively. They picked up on ideas of non-objective art originating in Europe and impressively integrated these into the new medium of film. In the context of bohemian culture (Smith) and the dawn of the computer age (the Whitneys), the artists created innovative works of abstract art.

The focus of my analysis is on Smith's hand-painted films and the films co-produced by the Whitney brothers in the first half of the 1940s. In doing so, I attempt to specify what is visualized in the films. How did the artists generate their respective visual language, and which conceptual strategies went along with this? In approaching these questions, two prominent figures in art history are of key importance: Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian. Since the 1930s, the two Europeans had become figureheads of abstraction in the USA; their works and concepts also had a significant impact on Smith and the Whitneys. For Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Kandinsky's biomorphic forms represented an intermediate stage of non-objective painting, while in Mondrian's geometry he saw the paradigm of abstraction fully realized.<sup>1</sup> Barr's formalistic approach to abstraction decisively influenced American discourse. In Smith's reference to Kandinsky and that of the Whitneys to Mondrian, Barr's distinctions seem to continue to some extent. In the following, I will repeatedly pick up on the history of the reception of abstraction in the USA and shed light in particular on the Californian context.

Smith and the Whitneys knew each other personally: They met when Smith visited Los Angeles. Smith appreciated the work of the brothers, from whom he acquired his technical knowledge, which was useful to him in his own film production. It is, quite possible that, in 1946, he mediated the Whitney's participation in the film series *Art in Cinema* at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The contact between

the three was, however, limited to a short period of time—at the latest with Smith's move to New York in 1951, contact broke off completely. Nevertheless, the aspiration to make non-figurative worlds visible in film persisted in each of them. I will investigate this below and will analyze both the commonalities and the differences between the two positions during this early stage.

## HARRY SMITH

*"In worldly life the limits imposed by the material state keep us from comprehending the ultimate physical unit or the ultimate spiritual unit [...]. My films so far have been examinations of these forces."*<sup>2</sup>

Harry Smith began to be interested in the culture of the indigenous people of North America as a teenager. He visited the reservations in the region around his hometown of Bellingham, Washington, and attended a variety of ceremonies there. During school vacations, he often spent several weeks in the reservations to explore the lives of the various ethnic groups. Despite his youth, he used professional ethnographic methods: He catalogued (religious) objects, compiled dictionaries, and made sound recordings of rituals and ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> He was frequently accompanied by his school friend Bill Holm. The hypnotic festivities, which appealed to all the senses, exerted a strong fascination on the two. In retrospect, Holm impressively described the course of a dance ceremony: The venue was filled to the last seat, many of the participants wore traditional clothing. A repetitive, monotonous beat of a drum opened the ceremony. Smoke poured out, and the dancing participants were increasingly drawn under the spell of spirits. When the chief initiated the climax of the ritual, Smith began recording in an effort to seize the ecstatic moment.<sup>4</sup>

In an interview, Smith described his research interest as the capturing of the unknown life of the indigenous population.<sup>5</sup> In this interview, he also commented on his motivation and the procedures used: "In an effort to write down dances, I developed certain techniques of transcription. [...] Diagramming the pictures was so interesting that I then started to be interested in music in relation to

existence.”<sup>6</sup> This short statement reveals the remarkable transfer which Smith strove to accomplish: He sought to transform the temporal-performative structure of dance and music into the static-visual structure of an image. He called the form he used for this a “diagram.”

In art history, diagrams are defined as geometric drawings with evidential value; they appear as synthesizing representations of topological references such as left/right, up/down, or central/peripheral, the relations of which can be further refined graphically. Diagrams serve as means for the intellectual mediation of complex facts and represent an effective instrument for the constitution of meaning beyond the combination of text and image.<sup>7</sup>

The reference to the diagram as a “synthesizing representation” proves to be revelatory for Smith’s practices. Synthesis is an additive process that combines several components into something new. Its methodological opposite is analysis, in which an object is broken down into its individual parts for examination. Although the lexical definition used above refers primarily to the structural composition and formal appearance of the diagram, in the case of Smith, the synthesizing character should be understood in a broader sense: For him, the diagram was the ideal instrument to *synthesize* the temporal-performative structure of music in graphical form in accordance with his research. The geometric abstraction of the diagram appears as an independent pictorial form, which is non-objective in the sense that it translates mental processes into graphic signs. It thus defies any logic of mimetic representation.

How did Smith’s anthropologically motivated work of his youth affect his later artistic practice? From 1946 on, he lived as a painter and film-maker in the Bay Area and immersed himself in the jazz scene of San Francisco. With paintings such as *Manteca* (ca. 1948), he took up his attempts to translate music into visual forms: “It is a painting of a tune by Dizzy Gillespie called ‘Manteca.’ Each stroke in that painting represents a certain note on the recording.”<sup>8</sup> Smith’s statement suggests that his image is a diagram or, more precisely, a graphic notation. In order to be readable as such, it would have to comply with a set of formal criteria. Surprisingly, however, the painting does not seem to fulfill such demands from a formal point of view: In front of a black background, a free arrangement of luminous organic forms blends into a successful composition. More than transcription, the work seems to be



Harry Smith, *Manteca*, ca. 1948, whereabouts unknown, Harry Smith Archives

committed to the inner logic of an autonomous work of art. Smith’s assertion that all sounds, phrases, and motifs of the tune in his painting met a visual equivalent, cannot be deduced from mere observation. We remain dependent on the artist and his verbal explanations: “This is the main theme in there, which is a-doot-doot-doot-doot-doot-dootadooddoot—those curved lines up there. See, ta-doot-doot-doot-doot-dootadoot-dootadoot, and so forth. Each note is on there.”<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the question regarding the form-finding process remains unanswered. How can one paint a picture of a song? Even more so, when, as in the case with *Manteca*, it is a song without a text, and an illustration of the content is thus superfluous? An answer to these questions might lie in Smith’s synesthetic perception. Acoustic stimuli triggered in him both auditory and visual sensory impressions: When listening to Bessie Smith, “colored



balls” appeared in front of his inner eye, and with Dizzy Gillespie “all kinds of colored flashes.”<sup>10</sup> To enhance these effects, he resorted to a variety of drugs—during the years in San Francisco, especially marijuana was his drug of choice.

His statements suggest that another instance is involved in the translation process from music to image—though Smith wanted his painting to be understood in direct relation to music. In this instance, it is the artist’s fantasy, in which acoustic stimuli evoke internal images. It thus seems clear that Smith’s early paintings are not notations, but rather abstract compositions that arise from the desire to make inner images visible to the outside world. Taking into account the psychological aspects that play a significant role in this transfer, Smith’s equation of music and image would have to be expanded to include the artist as a mediating instance. What we see on the canvas can be understood as a pictorial representation of a highly subjective mental process. Unlike his diagrams, here the synesthete’s fantasy becomes the spiritual resource of his painting.

In San Francisco, Smith saw numerous avant-garde films by artists such as Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye, and Hans Richter that inspired him to make his own films. Like Lye, he painted directly on the filmstrip<sup>11</sup> but soon developed methods that are unprecedented in their degree of experimentation: He thus used bottle corks to stamp simple geometric shapes on the filmstrip. He let bleach and dyes act directly on the celluloid and thus achieved impressive color effects. He also resorted to batik and covered selected areas of the filmstrips with a layer of wax before dipping them into a dye bath.

In this way, he created his first three films in the late 1940s: *No. 1: A Strange Dream* (ca. 1946), *No. 2: Message from the Sun* (ca. 1946/47), and *No. 3: Interwoven* (ca. 1948). Their production process was exceptionally tedious—for one second of film, he processed twenty-four individual images by hand. With his experiments, he achieved innovations in the areas of texture, coloring, and variety of forms, which are unparalleled in the field of artistic animated film of this time. Artists such as Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter, and Walter Ruttmann had already created sophisticated animated films with abstract forms in the 1920s—but Smith’s feverishly unbridled, yet precisely composed imagery far exceed the severity of the Europeans.

*Film No. 1: A Strange Dream* (ca. 1946) begins with a free play of swirling squares and triangles against colorful backgrounds. After some time, the forms disappear, and the translucent backgrounds thus reveal themselves to be a defining pictorial element. In their different shades and textures, the variegated, seemingly *tachist* color surfaces develop a strong sensuous power. On this background, black drawings appear in rapid succession. They can be divided into three groups: circles or shapes that form circles, anthropomorphic forms reminiscent of amoebas, and organic forms that penetrate each other. The drawings are arranged as comic-like outlines and lie on top of the transparent areas of color, whereby some forms have been filled with color by a lavish brush stroke. In both cases, the black outline has no exclusive limiting function: The colors “spill over” the lines and dynamically liberate themselves from their corporeal borders.

Not only does this detail contribute greatly to the aesthetic quality of *Film No. 1*, it also calls to mind Sixten Ringbom’s reflections on formal aspects in Wassily Kandinsky’s work. The art historian was one of the first to look into the significance of occultism for the “invention” of abstract painting in the early twentieth century and placed the work and biography of Kandinsky at the center of his analysis. He believed that the visual descriptions and illustrations of supernatural phenomena, as these were made popular in the Theosophical writings of Annie Besant, Charles W. Leadbeater, and Rudolf Steiner, determined—or even anticipated—Kandinsky’s breakthrough to non-objectivity.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of to what extent one agrees with this assessment,<sup>13</sup> Ringbom arrives at a coherent analysis of Kandinsky’s work taking esoteric aspects into consideration. His reflections are also revealing in relation to Smith’s free play of colors and lines. In Kandinsky’s artistic production around 1911/12, Ringbom discovers the emergence of free-floating clouds of color, which appear not to be bound to any figurative representations. He attributes these color clouds to Kandinsky’s reception of the influential book *Thought-Forms* (1901) by Besant and Leadbeater, in which the authors not only describe auras, but also illustrate them. Ringbom concludes that Kandinsky’s color clouds are also visualizations of such spiritual forms. This is an important step “towards the complete elimination of material objects in the paintings of the artist.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to the color clouds, Ringbom identifies another stylistic



Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 19*, 1911, oil on canvas, 120 × 141.5 cm, Lenbachhaus Munich

device in Kandinsky's paintings of this period, which prepares the artist's path towards abstraction: colors that flow over the outline of bodies. Ringbom uses Kandinsky's painting *Improvisation 19* (1911) to illustrate his observation: "[A] color field is no longer enclosed by a linear form, and conversely no color remains trapped within an outline. [...] These forms are drawn with thick contours; they appear transparent or hollowed out. The viewer looks through the colored mist, and he also discovers this mist in the forms [...]." <sup>15</sup> Smith's treatment of lines and painterly surfaces is strikingly similar to Kandinsky's.

Since 1912, Kandinsky's works had been presented in numerous group and solo exhibitions in the USA and were greeted with interest by the general public. <sup>16</sup> The German art dealer, collector, and artist Galka Scheyer played a special role in the history of Kandinsky's reception on the American West Coast. She had lived in Los Angeles since 1933 and strove to further support and promote the artist group *Die Blaue Vier* (The Blue Four: Feininger, Kandinsky, Klee, Jawlensky) in her new home. Despite intensive efforts, Scheyer was able to achieve only a few sales successes during her time in Los Angeles—in the early 1940s,





Harry Smith with diagrams for Film No. 18: Mahagonny, Hotel Breslin, New York City, 1980

the small number of public art museums tended to be rather standoffish vis-à-vis emergent art trends. In contrast, wealthy private collectors, such as Walter and Louise Arensberg, were of greater importance for the establishment of avant-garde tendencies in southern California. While their first-rate collection was not accessible to the general public, for many young artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Man Ray the stately Hollywood Hills mansion became a venue for meetings and exchange during their stays in California.<sup>17</sup>

It is unlikely that Smith was personally acquainted with collectors like the Arensbergs or came in contact with original works of art during one of his visits to Los Angeles. He was, however, well acquainted with the work of artists such as Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Rudolf Bauer through another prominent advocate of abstract art in the

United States: Hilla von Rebay, director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), which opened in New York in 1939. The two had met in California, and their subsequent correspondence provides insights into Smith's artistic reflections during these years. These letters also suggest that Rebay provided him with Kandinsky's writings. The two books that Smith studied "very carefully"<sup>18</sup> may have been *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926). In the late 1940s, Rebay had translated both books into English and thus promoted their distribution in the USA.

The content and rhetoric of his letters prove how strongly Smith identified with Kandinsky's reflections: "To me, the soul is expressed in the relationship between the physical world and the rhythm of the spiritual world."<sup>19</sup>



Even if it is highly likely that the then twenty-seven-year-old Smith was trying to impress his patron Rebay with such lines, it clearly demonstrates that he located his own imagery beyond the material world of things in the realm of the spiritual.

Does the comparison between Kandinsky and Smith thus exhaust itself in the realization that the latter merely picked up on the themes of his role model and carried this forward to another time? In relation to this question, great importance must be attached to the fact that Smith worked with the medium of film. With the moving image, he was able to address themes related to form and content in a way that—due to its static nature—is always withheld from painting: In the temporal structure of film, the flowing and floating of colors can be experienced; the animated drawings illustrate the transformational processes of material reformation, which Kandinsky could only partially suggest in his painting. With a view to Smith's technical experiments, it can be said that they led him to lucid textures that appear to literally *embody* the etheric awareness of colors in esotericism. Furthermore, his unorthodox production methods and the sexual innuendos in *Film No. 1* ("hand-drawn animation of dirty shapes - the history of the geologic period reduced to orgasm length")<sup>20</sup> provide Kandinsky's seriousness with a refreshing headwind.

What also speaks against a purportedly epigonal relationship of dependency between Kandinsky and Smith is the fact that both artists cultivated a completely different definition of the work of art. Smith did not see his films as completed works of art that could exist only in the hermetic atmosphere of an exhibition space. On the contrary: From 1950 on, he invited jazz musicians to improvise live to the films. In a letter to Rebay, he reported on the great success of these events: "Since I showed my films at the museum here using live musicians improvising from the images rather than from a score, the musicians [...] have asked me to bring my projector to their 'Jam Sessions' several times, because now everyone wants to try playing while looking at the film."<sup>21</sup> Later in the text, Smith emphasizes that the musicians who were enthusiastic about his experiments were on the margins of society and often had no musical education—which made them highly receptive to an intuition-based artistic practice.<sup>22</sup>

The linking of social deprivation with purportedly unclouded access to creativity appears problematic. His

main intention was to use his films to trace the sources of artistic creativity, which is why he opened his works to participatory intervention. As abstract scores for musicians, the works of art are no longer limited to their fanciful imagery, but rather open themselves up to individual experience, which takes place during the translation from image to sound.

## JOHN AND JAMES WHITNEY

*"An art fundamentally related to the machine"*<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the careers of John and James Whitney was the desire to produce films that combine abstract forms and sounds according to autonomous principles. With their interest in the analogies of music and image, they picked up on artistic experiments that had enjoyed great popularity among artists in California since the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> Unlike these experiments with color organs and similar apparatuses, however, they turned to the medium of film for a more permanent format; their abstract films<sup>25</sup> set new standards, both formally and with regard to production technology. In their early days, they worked together and created the series *Five Film Exercises* (1943–1945). The films present a choreography of abstract forms in bright colors, synchronized with an electronic soundtrack. They produced the soundtrack using a specially developed machine that could expose an optical audio track directly onto the film material. Henning Engelke concisely summarizes the functioning of the machine: Inside it was an "arrangement of pendulums of various lengths on cables winches connected with a prism in such a way that the swinging of the pendulums controlled the inclination of the prism. Its inclination in turn regulated the incidence of light on the film passing underneath. Technically, the audio track produced in this way corresponded with the format of commercial films and was thus playable with conventional projectors. But the film did not—as would usually be the case—register the electrical currents of a microphone transformed into light signals, which responded to external acoustic signals: The sounds were created synthetically; the apparatus in the studio recorded mute pendulum vibrations."<sup>26</sup> The brothers also

resorted to experimental methods for the film sequences developed analogously to the sound apparatus: "They first filmed paper stencils on a matt screen illuminated from below. [...] They then processed the material thus obtained on an optical printer [...] by copying it in color-filtered light, superimposing it in multiple exposures, mirroring it, running it backwards, and manipulating it with optical apertures."<sup>27</sup> The technical processes developed and implemented by the Whitneys for these films differ significantly from the manual techniques that had been predominantly employed until then in the field of animated film. Even without knowledge of their technical subtleties, the *Five Film Exercises* are convincing works of art: The futuristic forms in bright colors, synchronized with technoid sounds, are more reminiscent of the aesthetics of the digital age than of the war years. It almost seems as if the films were transmitting a message via Morse code from another world or, to put it in the words of the film historian William Moritz: "The effect was shocking and 'electrifying': the visual imagery had the eerie glow of neon lights, and the sound introduced many ears to the pure sine waves, aggressive tonal attacks, and the extravagant range of sound placements and seamless glissandi that a decade later would become familiar as electronic music."<sup>28</sup>

The Whitneys were also aware of the innovation potential of their films. It is clear from an artist statement from 1944, however, that they made no claim to a unique artistic position as a result. On the contrary: They identified with a young generation of artists who, driven by ingenuity, seized on new technologies to create art works with new media.<sup>29</sup> With their plea for an emancipatory use of media, they also distanced themselves from the widespread practice in animated film of illustrating already existing music with abstract moving images. Instead, the Whitneys argued for a more complex relationship between image and sound, in which the two fields are structurally related to each other: "A more fruitful, less mechanistic approach is possible today, for truly creative possibilities arise when the image structure dictates or 'inspires' sound structure and vice versa, or when they are simultaneous conceptions. This obviously is best realized when both parts have common creative origins."<sup>30</sup> The brothers sought a form of abstract film that would replace the logic of illustration with the logic of correlation. This aspiration is realized in the *Five Film Exercises*:

Generated synthetically, the sound emerges from the "marks" on the audio track; the graphic sign is translated into an acoustic stimulus.

In this regard, the works of the Whitneys and those of Smith reveal similarities. The three artists used different strategies of translation to reverse a separation of senses of perception. These strategies can be described as technological processes in the case of the Whitneys and as synesthetic processes in the case of Smith.

In another statement, published in 1946, the Whitneys further developed their artistic self-image and named artistic positions that influenced their work. Among others, they referred to Piet Mondrian: "During this time, in painting, spatial limitations of the particular, human, real world have generally given way to a concern with a conceptual simultaneity of space-time. Mondrian sought 'a truer vision of reality' by destroying the particular of representation, thus liberating space and form in terms of equilibrium."<sup>31</sup> After his beginnings in Impressionism and Cubism, Mondrian had in fact increasingly liberated himself from any mimetic references. For him, the forms arranged on the canvas in mathematical precision should neither represent nor symbolize the outer world. Instead, the relationships between the forms and their arrangement on the canvas became the focus of attention, a process often associated with musical principles. Already in the 1910s, Mondrian had dealt intensively with the points of contact of music and painting and increasingly intensified the rhythm of the forms. This tendency reached its climax in his last paintings, the *Boogie Woogie* series created in New York.

With his departure from the logic of representation, Mondrian not only eliminated the objects, but also the space in which they are anchored. The question arises as to what replaces this newly created vacuum. In the view of Simon Baier, Mondrian thus conceived a novel, anti-illusory pictorial space which assigns the painter an unfamiliar role: "The technically cool vocabulary characterizes the painter as an operator who creates an equilibrium of opposites in the field of the tableau. [...] The surface, into which the lines and colors enter, marks [...], an immaterial, adimensional universality beyond existential standpoints. At the same time, however, it is the material tableau, in which the abstract elements attain their temporal and space-bound visibility [...]."<sup>32</sup> The description of the

artist as an operator also seems to apply to the Whitneys—what is more: In them, such a figure finds its kinetic continuation. Baier's reference to an ethereal place where abstract forms "attain their temporal and space-bound visibility" proves to be just as enlightening in the context of the *Five Film Exercises*: The images do not imitate real spaces bound by laws of perspective, instead, an autonomous pictorial space manifests itself "solely through the relationships of moving forms"<sup>33</sup>—a space which the two artists developed with intrinsic methods.

## THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

The Whitneys attributed critical importance to the technical procedures implemented here: "By a mechanical destruction of the particular we believe it is possible to approach anew [Mondrian's] problem."<sup>34</sup> They did not see the restrictions of the machine as a disadvantage. On the contrary: They deliberately placed the role of the apparatus above that of their artistic ego and accepted that their "work is limited and its character is determined by [their]

mechanical means. [Their] very realm of creative action is implicit in the machine."<sup>35</sup>

An artistic self-understanding is expressed here in which the subject is not placed in the center as the creator but rather acts as a mediator between a hidden and a (not yet) visible world. In the innovative storage medium of film, these contacts become visible in the works of both the Whitneys and Smith. Aldous Huxley's self-experiments with hallucinogens prove that the interest in exploring hidden worlds in post-war California was not confined to the visual arts. They helped him realize that our mind functions as a regulator and prevents a variety of sensory impressions from even appearing in the first place. With the help of substances such as mescaline, it is possible to open the "doors of perception"<sup>36</sup> even further and thus gain a deeper understanding of one's own anchoring in the world. From the 1960s on, Huxley's ideas were enthusiastically received by the hippie movement in California and promoted the spread of LSD. Through his later films, especially James Whitney strove to convey similar states of consciousness, whereby he did not resort to drugs but rather applied meditative techniques. It is once again evident that, with the Whitneys—but also with Smith—the medium of film served as a tool to explore other worlds.



- 1 See Alfred H. Barr Jr., "Cubism and Abstract Art," in: Maria Lind (ed.), *Abstraction*, London 2013, pp. 28–33.
- 2 Letter from Smith to Rebay dated June 17, 1950, reproduced in: Andrew Perchuk and Rani Singh (eds.), *Harry Smith: The Avant-Garde in the American Vernacular*, Los Angeles 2010, pp. 261–264, here p. 262.
- 3 See Rani Singh, "Harry Smith, an Ethnographic Modernist in America," in: *ibid.*, pp. 15–61, here p. 16.
- 4 See *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 5 See P. Adams Sitney (Interview), in: Rani Singh, *Think of the Self Speaking: Harry Smith – Selected Interviews*, Seattle 1998, pp. 44–64. Reprinted from: *Film Culture*, no. 37, 1965.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 7 See Felix Thürlemann, "Diagramm," in: Ulrich Pfisterer (ed.), *Metzlers Lexikon der Kunstwissenschaft. Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe*, Stuttgart 2011, pp. 91–94, here 91–92.
- 8 Sitney 1998 (as note 5), p. 55
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 11 Smith claimed to have painted on film before Lye. This statement contradicts contemporary witnesses, such as Jordan Belson and William Moritz, on whom I rely here. The question as to who deserves the merit of innovation shall not be further discussed here.
- 12 Sixten Ringbom, "Kandinsky und das Okkulte," in: Armin Zweite (ed.), *Kandinsky und München. Begegnungen und Wandlungen 1896–1914*, exh. cat. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, 1982, pp. 85–101.
- 13 Raphael Rosenberg firmly rejects Ringbom's interpretation, arguing that it was not the artists who adopted visual ideas of Theosophy, but rather that an import of aesthetic ideas in the other direction took place. See Raphael Rosenberg, "Die Kartographie der Aura aus dem Geist der Wirkungsästhetik. Synästhesie und das Verhältnis von Kunst und Esoterik um 1900," in: Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth, and Markus Meumann (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, Berlin 2013, pp. 583–604.
- 14 Ringbom 1982 (as note 12), p. 97.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.
- 16 See Tracey Bashkoff, "Kandinsky and 'America in General'," in: Vivian Endicott Barnett et. al. (eds.), *Kandinsky*, exh. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009–2010, pp. 109–119, here p. 109.
- 17 See Andrew Perchuk and Catherine Taft, "Floating Structures: Building the Modern in Postwar Los Angeles," in: Glenn Philipps et al. (eds.), *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art, 1945–1980*, exh. cat. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2011, pp. 7–11.
- 18 Letter from Smith to Rebay dated April 4, 1950, reproduced in: Perchuk/Singh 2010 (as note 2), pp. 258–259, here p. 259.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 20 Sitney, P. Adams, "Absolute Animation," in: *idem.* (ed.), *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000*, Oxford et al. 2002, pp. 231–267, here p. 235.
- 21 Letter from Smith to Rebay, dated June 17, 1950, reproduced in: Perchuk/Singh 2010 (as note 2), p. 261.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262: "Hardly any of these people can read music and many have trouble even reading and writing English, but for these very reasons they are often in unknowing contact with the true sources of creativity."
- 23 James and John Whitney, "Audio-Visual Music and Program Notes" (first published 1946), in: John Whitney, *Digital Harmony: On the Complementary of Music and Visual Art*, Peterborough 1980, pp. 144–150, here p. 144.
- 24 See Henning Engelke, "Die Metaphern der visuellen Musik," in: *idem.* (ed.), *Metaphern einer anderen Filmgeschichte. Amerikanischer Experimentalfilm 1940–1960*, Marburg 2018, pp. 143–183, here pp. 145–147. I am grateful to Henning Engelke, who provided me with this chapter of his book before publication. My own work with the Whitneys owes his text important impulses.
- 25 The Whitneys found the term "abstract film" unsuitable. In 1944, they instead proposed the term "audio-visual-music." This reflects the equal importance of image and music, which is typical of their films. For better understanding, I nevertheless use the term "abstract film" and, in doing so, refer to both the Whitneys and Smith, as well as other experimental filmmakers of the twentieth century. See James and John Whitney, "Audio-Visual Music: Color Music – Abstract Film" (first published 1944), in: Whitney 1980 (as note 23), pp. 138–143, here p. 140.

26

Engelke 2018  
(as note 24), p. 150.

27

Ibid., p. 151.

28

See William Moritz, "Visual  
Music and Film-as-an-Art be-  
fore 1950," in: Paul J. Karlstrom  
(ed.), *On the Edge of America:  
California Modernist Art,  
1900-1950*, Berkeley et al.  
1996, pp. 210-241, here p. 229.

29

See Whitney 1980  
(as note 25), pp. 138-139.

30

Ibid., p. 142.

31

Whitney 1980 (as note 23),  
p. 147.

32

Simon Baier, "Piet Mondrian,"  
in: Bernhard Bürgi (ed.), *Piet  
Mondrian - Barnett Newman -  
Dan Flavin*, exh. cat. Kunst-  
museum Basel, 2013, pp. 33-39,  
here p. 37.

33

Engelke 2018  
(as note 24), p. 166.

34

Whitney 1980  
(as note 23), p. 147.

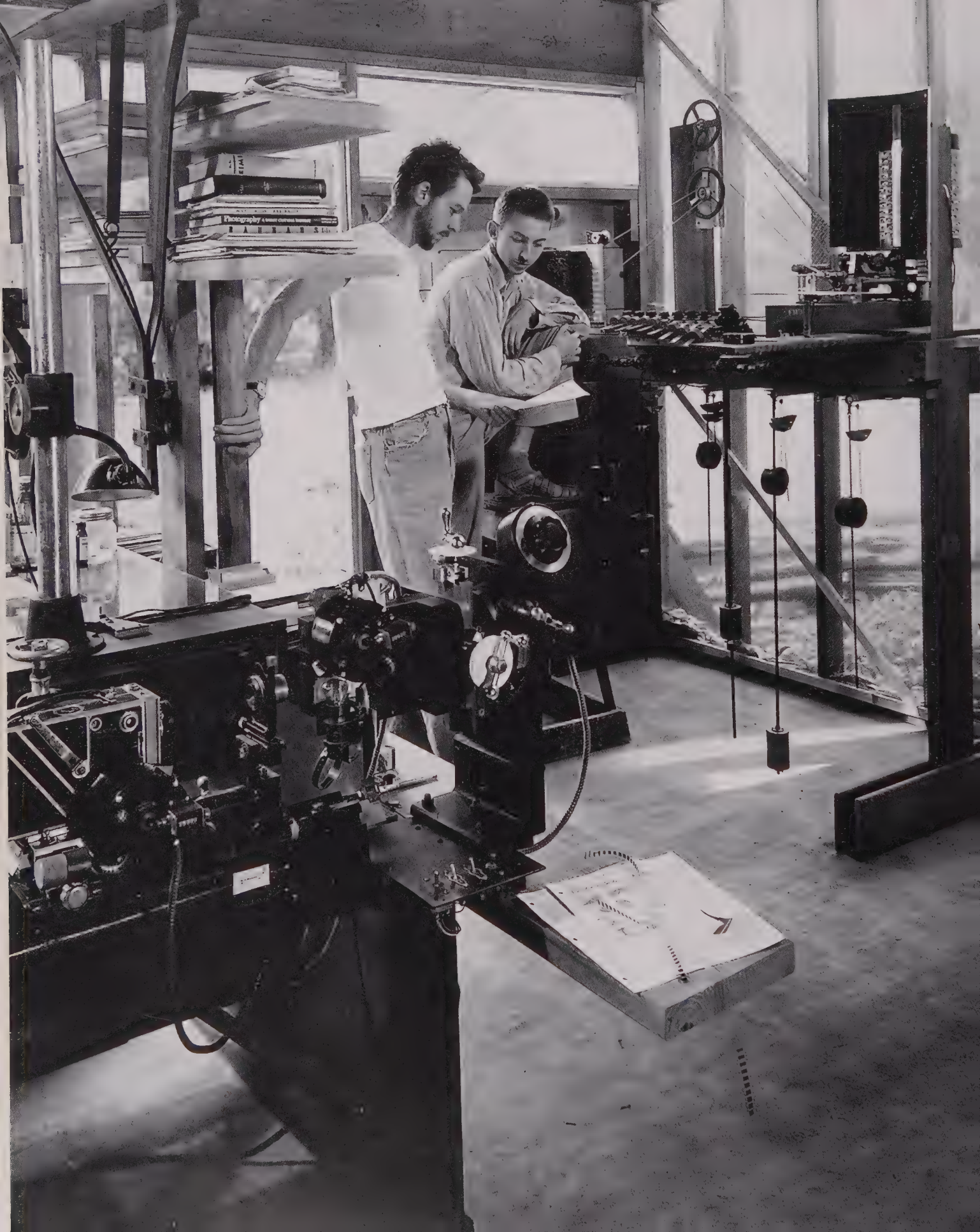
35

Ibid.

36

With the title *The Doors of  
Perception* (1954), Aldous  
Huxley referred to a quote  
from William Blake's book *The  
Marriage of Heaven and Hell*  
(1790-1793): "If the doors of  
perception were cleansed,  
everything would appear to  
man as it is, infinite." That  
Huxley's ideas were also taken  
up in pop culture, is evidenced  
by, among other things, the  
rock band The Doors, which is  
named after Huxley's book.







JOHN & JAMES

W H I T N E Y

# JOHN WHITNEY

(1917–1995)

# JAMES WHITNEY

(1921–1982)

Inspired by twelve-tone music and abstract film, the brothers John and James Whitney composed visual music in the 1940s which found expression in the medium of film. At the dawn of the information age, they developed experimental techniques for image and sound production that were closely linked to the advent of modern computer technology. The Whitneys decoupled the medium of film from its indexical connection to reality and created electronically generated, abstract imagery which they synchronized with self-composed music.

After working together in their early years, John began working in the film and television industry, while James increasingly combined his creative work with esoteric interests. In keeping with the Californian zeitgeist of the 1960s and '70s, James found inspiration in the broad field of Far Eastern metaphysics, which he briefly interconnected with the then latest developments in the fields of natural science and technology. His films served him as a means to communicate holistic convictions.

In their films, the Whitneys strove to combine art and music into a synthesis. In doing so, they continued a spiritual and artistic tradition that had given rise to abstract painting in Europe in the early twentieth century. The brothers are credited with having continued the European "invention" of abstraction in the computer age of California.

■ John Whitney was born in Altadena, a suburb of Los Angeles, on April 8, 1917. His younger brother James was born there on December 27, 1921. John Whitney became interested in technology early on and, as a teenager, developed a telescope and a camera. After graduating from high school, he began studying at Pomona College, but decided in the late 1930s to travel to Europe to become a photographer. In Paris, he made friends with the composer René Leibowitz, who aroused his interest in the twelve-tone music of Arnold Schoenberg. It was during his sojourn in Europe that he created his first abstract films.

All that is known about the academic career of James Whitney is that he studied painting and likewise spent time in Europe in the late 1930s. Due to the deepening political crisis, the brothers were forced to return to their homeland.

During the Second World War, California—not least because of the prospering defense industry—developed into



James Whitney during the production of *Five Film Exercises*, ca. 1945, Whitney Editions, LLC



John Whitney operating his pendulum apparatus, ca. 1945, Whitney Editions, LLC

the leading center of technology in the USA. Upon their return, the Whitney brothers also found employment in this sector. James began working as a technical draftsman at the California Institute of Technology. John was employed in a factory of the aerospace company Lockheed Aircraft, where he came into contact with military air defense devices. First and foremost, however, the two saw themselves as artists—John as a composer, James as a painter—and were active in the emerging art and film scenes in Los Angeles. In the Stendahl Gallery, they made the acquaintance of the film pioneer Oskar Fischinger, who had emigrated from Germany to California. Although the Whitneys appreciated the abstract quality of his films, they rejected both their sound-painting gestures and the use of instrumental music as overly associative.

Instead, the brothers were enthusiastic about the idea of setting a reduced geometric vocabulary of forms in motion in film according to musical principles: The musical

and visual compositions were to stand in direct reciprocal relation to each other. They combined their creative knowledge as composer and painter and worked together on their silent films in the series *Twenty-Four Variations on an Original Theme* (1939/40). For these 8mm films, they animated geometric color surfaces within a time structure that corresponded to Leibowitz's serial principles. In contrast to widespread attempts to create a harmonious combination of abstract forms and musical accompaniment in film, the music here has a structural effect on the visual appearance of the film. With *Variations on a Circle* (1942), James Whitney created a considerably longer film in the same style. The term visual music has established itself for such works—despite the fact that many of them do without sound entirely.

Nevertheless, through the use of electronic means, John Whitney strove to create not only visual compositions, but also innovative acoustic music. Together with his



brother, he worked from 1942 to 1943 on the development of a pendulum apparatus with which they could expose an optical audio track on the film material. In this way, they were able to create synthetic sounds. Analogous to the sound apparatus, the Whitneys also developed innovative methods to produce the optical image sequences and process these through optical interventions. These techniques were used to create their *Five Film Exercises* (1943–1945). Although John produced numbers 1 and 5 and James numbers 2, 3 and 4, authorship for all the films in the series is now attributed to both brothers.

While the brothers were busy making these films, they met the photographer Edmund Teske. He lived and worked at Hollyhock House, an estate in Hollywood designed by Frank Lloyd Wright but unfinished due to disagreements with his client, Aline Barnsdall. Through Teske's mediation, the Whitneys were able to set up a studio there. The photographer used the stately home to regularly host receptions and parties that brought together not only affluent people from the neighborhood but also prominent artists, many of whom had emigrated from Europe. Here, the Whitneys met artists such as Man Ray and Tony Smith, and even Bertolt Brecht paid a visit to the villa while in California.

Especially for James Whitney, Teske developed into an important interlocutor, since they shared an interest in Hinduism and Far Eastern teachings. Through Teske, he became involved with the Vedanta Society of Southern California—headed by the Hindu monk Swami Prabhavananda—where he deepened his spiritual interests and practiced yoga and meditation. The followers of Prabhavananda at the time included the British writers Gerald Heard, Christopher Isherwood, and Aldous Huxley. The latter described his self-experiments with hallucinogens in the famous book *The Doors of Perception* (1954).

John and James Whitney devoted themselves enthusiastically to their artistic projects and firmly believed in the significance of their visual music. In 1944, they even gave up their respective professions so that they could concentrate entirely on filmmaking. In October 1944, in an effort to spread their artistic ideas and raise funds for further projects, they wrote a letter of introduction to Hilla von Rebay. Although the correspondence between her and the much younger artists is riddled with instructive advice, it becomes clear that the work aroused the interest of the museum director. She even bought copies of the *Five Film*

*Exercises and Variations on a Circle* for the collection of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York (now the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) and presented the films on several occasions from 1944 onwards. Among the audiences were such prominent artists as John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Jackson Pollock. The latter had already come into contact with Theosophy in Los Angeles, through his teacher Frederick Schwanckovsky; after his move to New York, he followed the latest developments in the field of music visualization and abstract film with great interest.

James Whitney traveled to New York to maintain contact with Rebay and attend the screening of his works. Nevertheless, his and von Rebay's aesthetic demands on abstract film proved incompatible and contact between them ended.

After completing *Film Exercises*, the brothers developed in different directions and temporarily discontinued their cooperation. While James devoted himself to his esoteric interests with great dedication, John refined his technical innovations for animated films. At the end of the Second World War, he purchased from all over the United States decommissioned military analog computers which had been used in the war for air security. He managed to convert some of the equipment so that it could be used for the production of animated films. In the long term, his innovations did not go unnoticed in the Hollywood film industry: John Whitney developed graphic animations for the title sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958). Later, he founded a commercial studio for special effects, where he produced animated sequences for Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Parallel to this, he worked on his own films, for which he used his technical knowledge to achieve the most perfect synthesis of electronic music and visual abstraction possible. He published his aesthetic reflections on the link between art and music in computer graphics in his book *Digital Harmony* (1980).

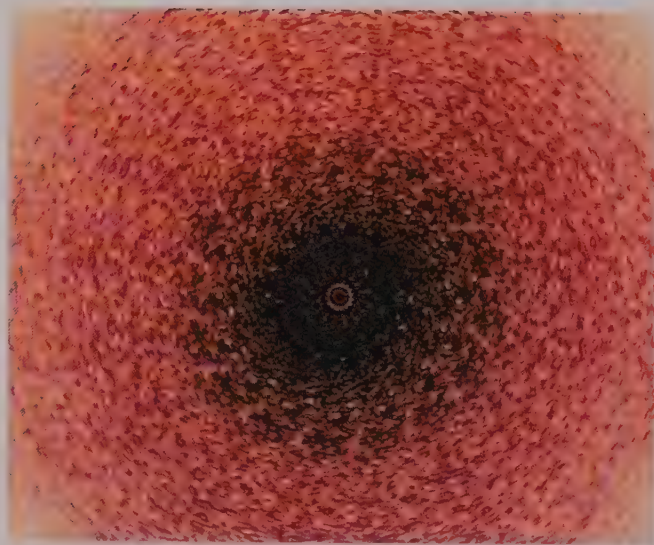
John Whitney's work in both artistic and commercial contexts was not seen as a contradiction in post-war California. On the contrary, it reflects a convergence of cultural, technological, and commercial sectors, which can be illustrated by other examples. From 1967 to 1971, for example, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) ran the *Art and Technology* program, bringing

together young artists and companies in California to develop new art forms. John Whitney benefited from a similar program and, beginning in 1966, received the first-ever artist-in-residence scholarship from the computer manufacturer IBM. Even the work by James Whitney, which owed a great deal to spirituality, developed further within the coordinates of art and technology. He thus participated with film contributions to the Vortex concerts, a series of light shows organized by Jordan Belson in the San Francisco planetarium. Their great success demonstrates that a mixture of art, technology, science, and spectacle found an affirmative public at that time.

After spending some time in the environment of the Vedanta Center, James Whitney turned to the teachings of Ramana Maharshi. According to the Indian guru, the divine nature of man is veiled by his intellect. It is essential to overcome the concept of the ego in order to discover one's true self and recognize its integration into the community of all forms of life. Following a comparative approach, James Whitney related Ramana Maharshi's teachings to concepts from Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and Occultism. He also delved intensively into Carl Gustav Jung's understanding of alchemy, as well as into quantum physics. The fascination for Ramana Maharshi was so great that James Whitney occasionally even considered joining his ashram in India. The lack of an electrical power supply there caused him to abandon these plans—in the late 1940s, he did not want to give up his cinematographic work at any cost. He firmly believed that certain cosmic principles could not be expressed verbally, but only visually. The medium of film offered him a suitable form of expression to make his spiritual insights visible and discussable.

The instrumental character of his works is already apparent in the title in the film *Yantra* (1957). Literally translated, the Sanskrit word means "tool" or "machine"; in a figurative sense, it can also refer to various systems, such as the mandalas used as aids to meditation.

*Yantra* depicts innumerable points, which come together against intensely colored backgrounds to build ever-new formations, only to dissolve again into their individual parts. For the production of the individual images, James Whitney used a needle to punch holes in small pieces of cardboard, which he then used as templates for the paintings animated in the film. He consciously reduced his visual vocabulary to the point as the only means of



James Whitney, *Lapis*, 1966, 16mm film (color, sound), transferred to HD Digital Video, 10 min., Whitney Editions, LLC

expression. This symbolized for him the indivisibility of the atom, as well as the concept of oneness in Buddhism and meditation. John Whitney was concerned with similar considerations—albeit much later than his brother. He defined the point as the smallest common denominator, as a building block of any pictorial representation. As such, it constantly builds new ornamental formations in his film *Permutations* (1968), which was produced entirely using digital computer technology. John Whitney related his work to pictorial considerations of Paul Klee. With the technology-savvy John Whitney, however, the hand-drawn point finds its equivalent in the electronic pixel.

Whereas John was continuously devoted to filmmaking throughout his career, James often interrupted his filmic work for several years at a time. During these phases, he dealt with other artistic practices, such as ink painting or pottery in the Japanese *raku* tradition. In 1963, after such a pause of several years, he began work on the film *Lapis* (1966). The Greek term used in the title means "stone" and also refers to the alchemical "philosopher's stone"—a connection that was of great importance to James Whitney.

For *Lapis*, he once again used the point as the sole means of artistic expression. A sheer infinite number of



flickering points form mandala-like circular shapes, which create an impressive meditative effect through the movements of light. The camera zooms out of the mandalas, suggesting an external viewing position or an over-viewing of a larger whole, the site of a never-ending play of stasis and change.

Whereas the Spiritualism of the nineteenth century was still founded on the assumption of an earthly and a celestial realm, to which contacts could be established by means of mediumistic practices, in the Californian (counter-)culture of the 1960s, the concept of a new holism emerged. Not least due to the publication of the first photograph of the “Blue Planet” in 1968, many came to the conclusion that everything on Earth must be connected to everything else. While the visionary practice of Spiritualist artists was aimed at the visualization of another realm, James Whitney sought in his art for cosmic harmony in the here and now.

This idea also found expression in his private life: He moved into a simple, prefabricated wooden bungalow, which he rebuilt in an L-form together with a friend, the architect Ted van Fossen, so that it was completely aligned with the garden. Numerous large windows negated the separation between indoor and outdoor space and made it possible to experience the cyclical path of the sun throughout the course of a day. His house served as a venue for tea ceremonies, using pottery tableware he

made himself. Throughout his life, James lived modestly and practiced yoga and meditation.

In the 1970s, he began work on a film trilogy and an accompanying filmic prologue, which was to deal with the four elements from a Taoist perspective. The films have not yet been restored and are largely unknown. What is more, James Whitney became seriously ill after the completion of *Dwija* (Fire) (1973) and *Wu Ming* (Water) (1977) and was unable to complete the third film, *Kang Jing Xiang* (Air). James Whitney died in Los Angeles on April 8, 1982. *Kang Jing Xiang* was posthumously completed to his specifications; the last film in the series, *Li* (Earth), remains unfinished.

Since the 1970s, John Whitney had worked exclusively with digital computer technology and became a pioneer in the field of motion graphics. In addition to his work in commercial and academic contexts—he was the first to teach Computer Graphics at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)—he perfected the technical processes for producing his animated films. *Arabesque* (1975) marks a high point in the field of abstract film from a formal and technical point of view. In the 1980s, John Whitney studied the symbols and music of the indigenous peoples of America. He developed an audiovisual composition program, which was used in his last film, *Moon-drum* (1989–1995). John Whitney died in Los Angeles on September 22, 1995.



All works:  
Whitney Editions, LLC,  
Los Angeles

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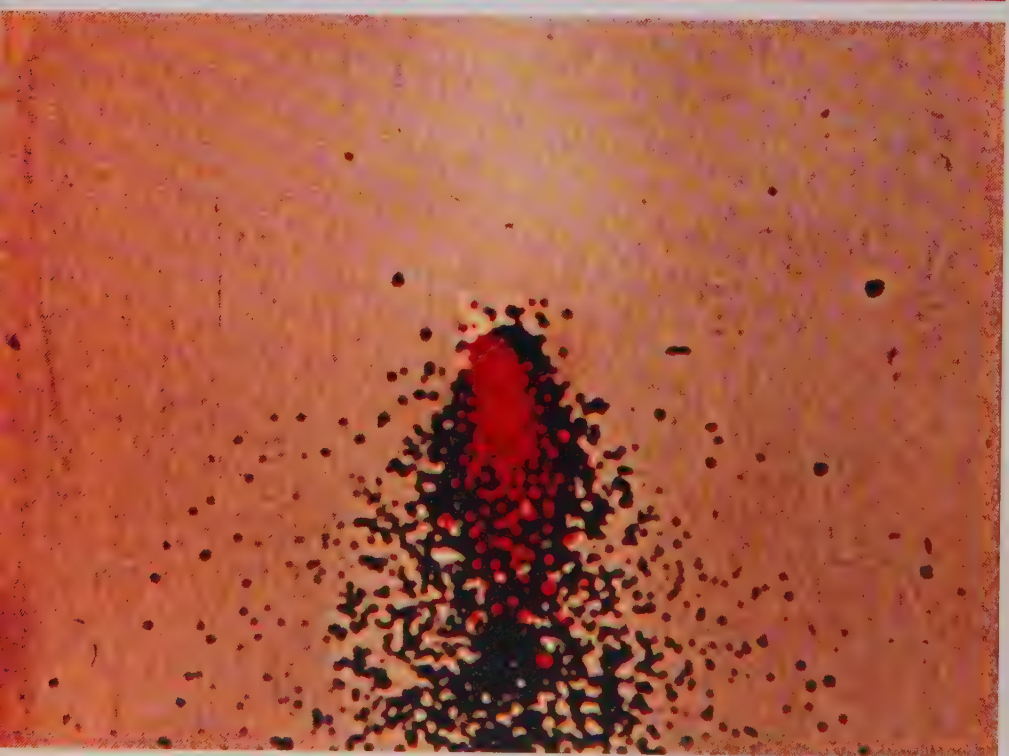
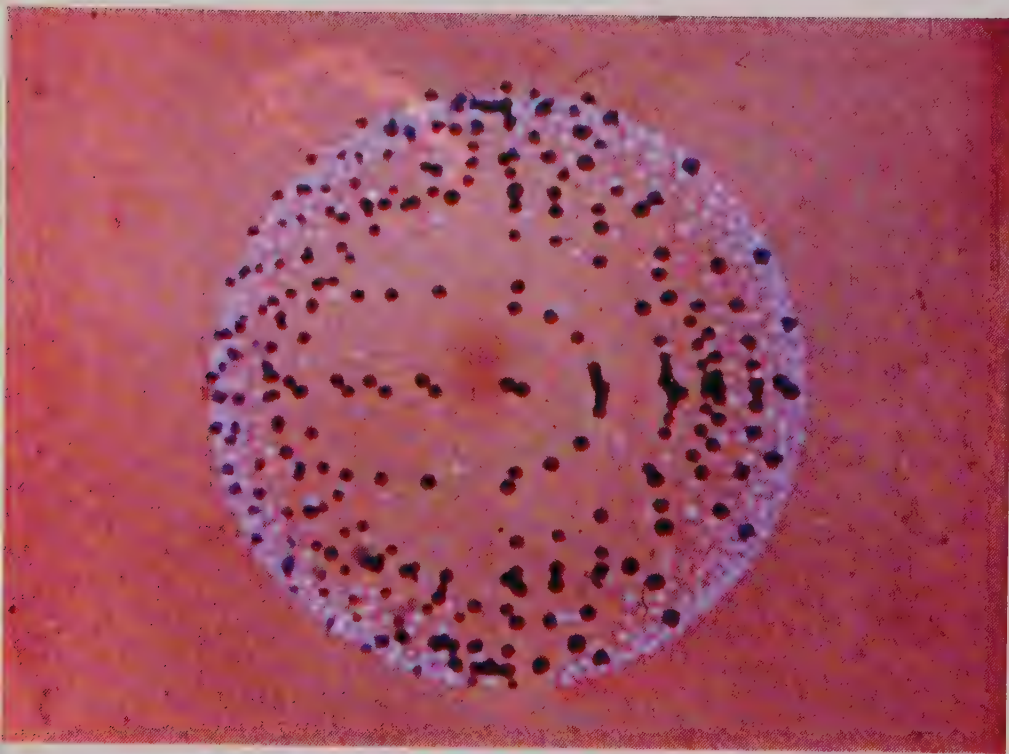
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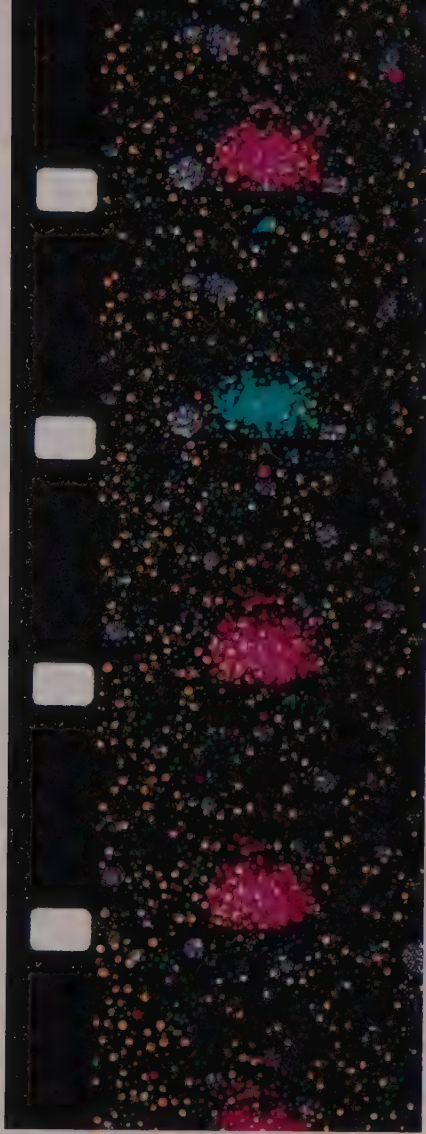
John and James Whitney  
Five Film Exercises #1–5,  
1943–1945  
16mm film (color, sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 18:29 min.  
Unpublished work, copyright  
1943–1945, John and James  
Whitney  
Unpublished digital transfer  
and restoration, copyright 2018  
► see ill. pp. 252–255

James Whitney  
Yantra, 1957  
16mm film (color, sound),  
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digital video, 7:36 min.  
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James Whitney  
Lapis, 1966  
16mm film (color, sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 9:33 min.  
Unpublished work, copyright  
1966, James Whitney  
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► see ill. pp. 256–259

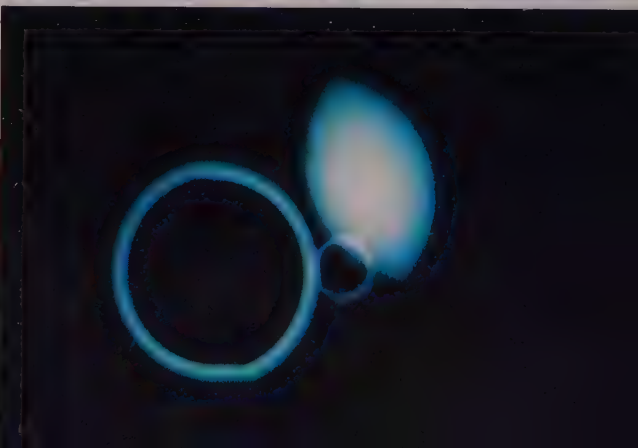


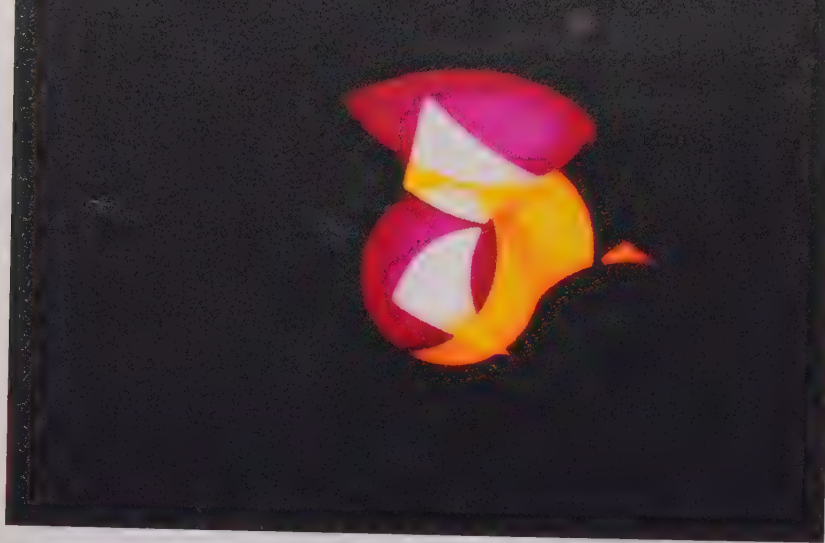






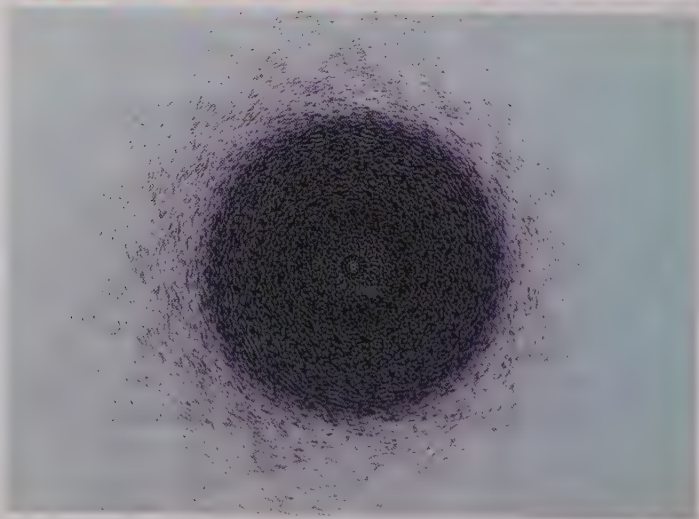
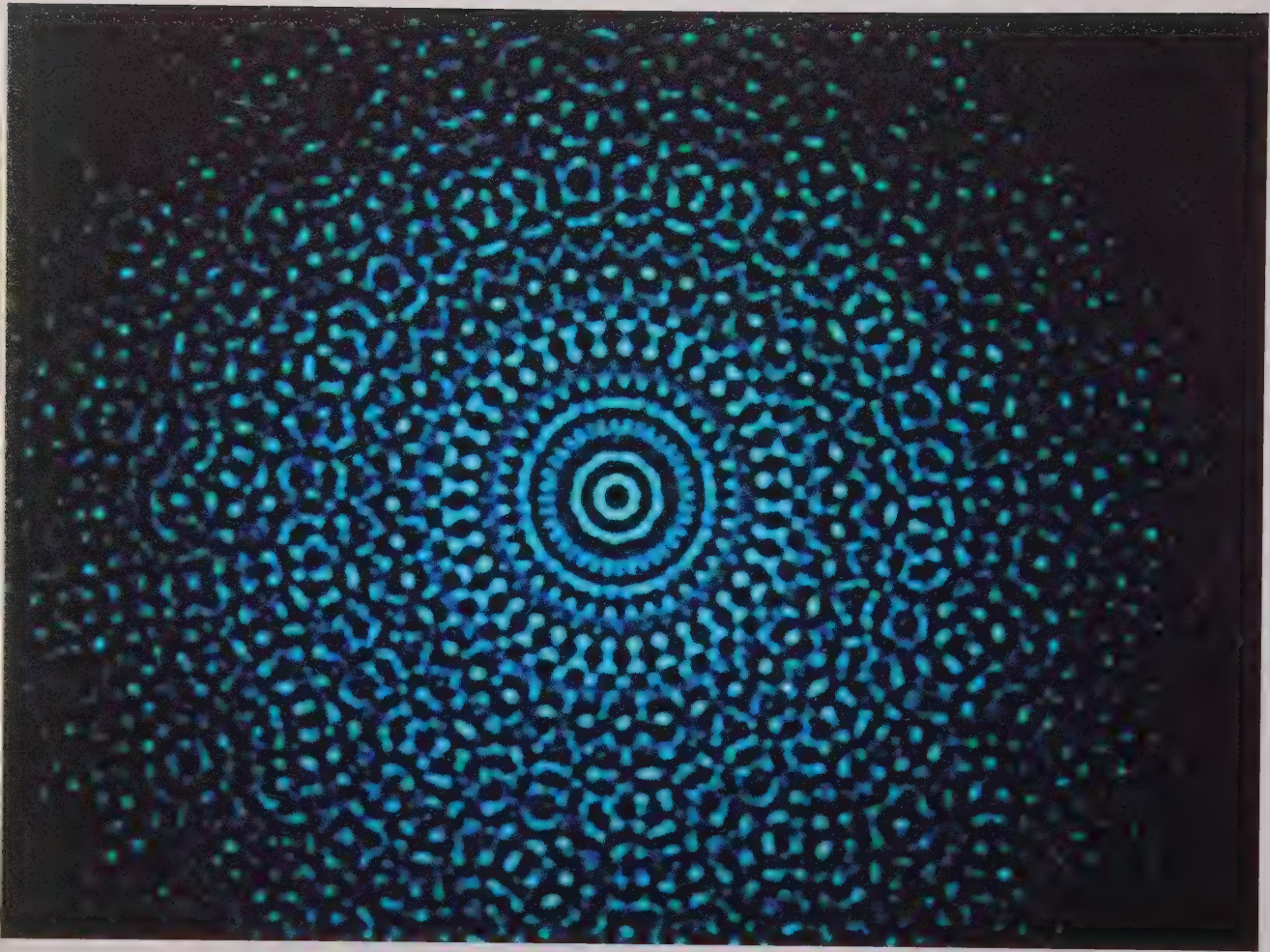




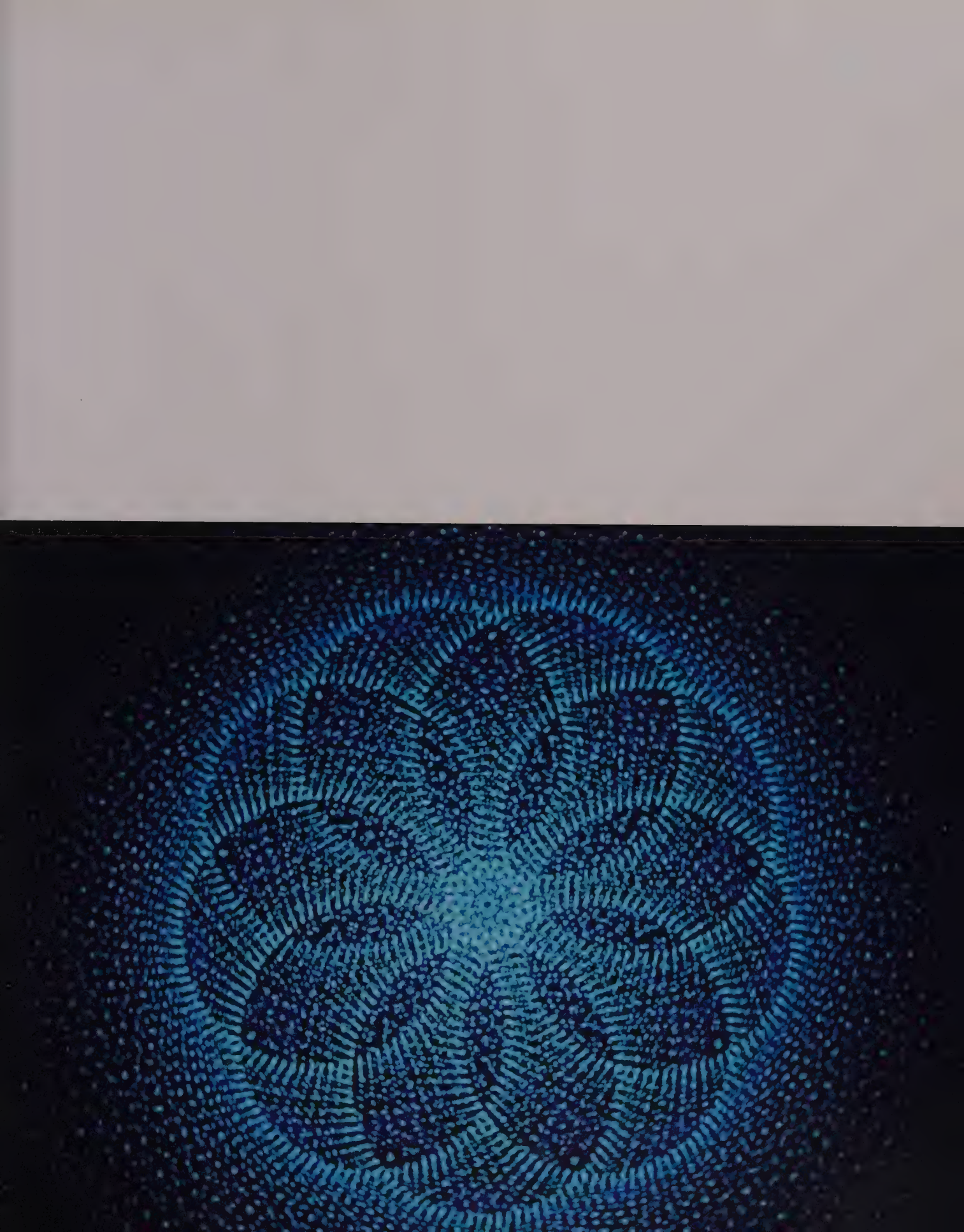




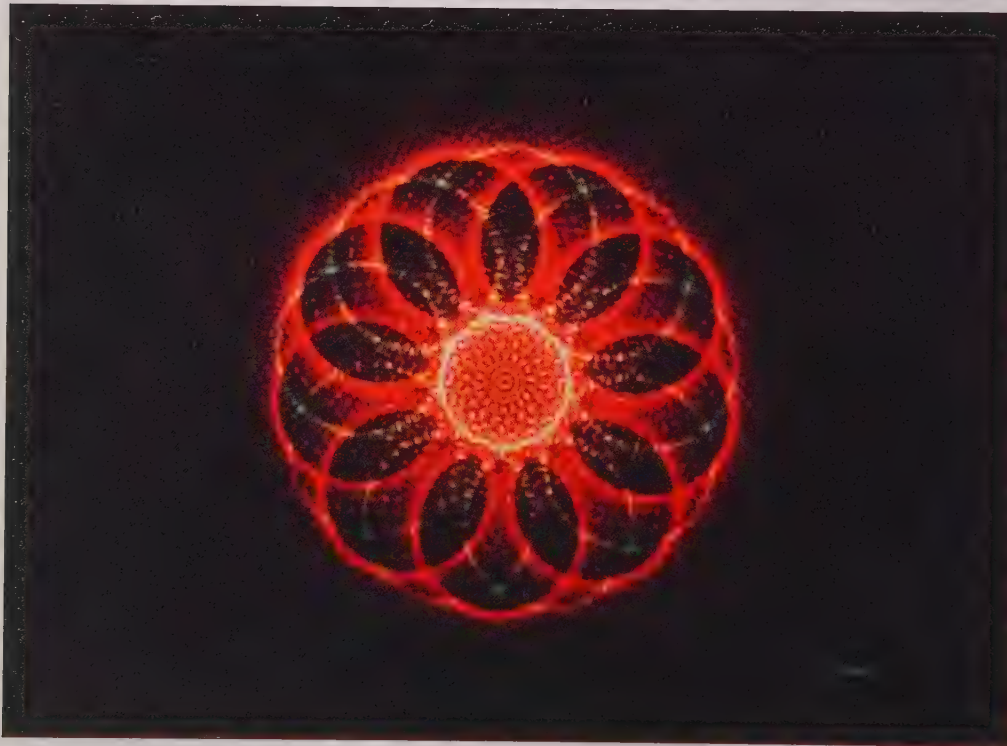


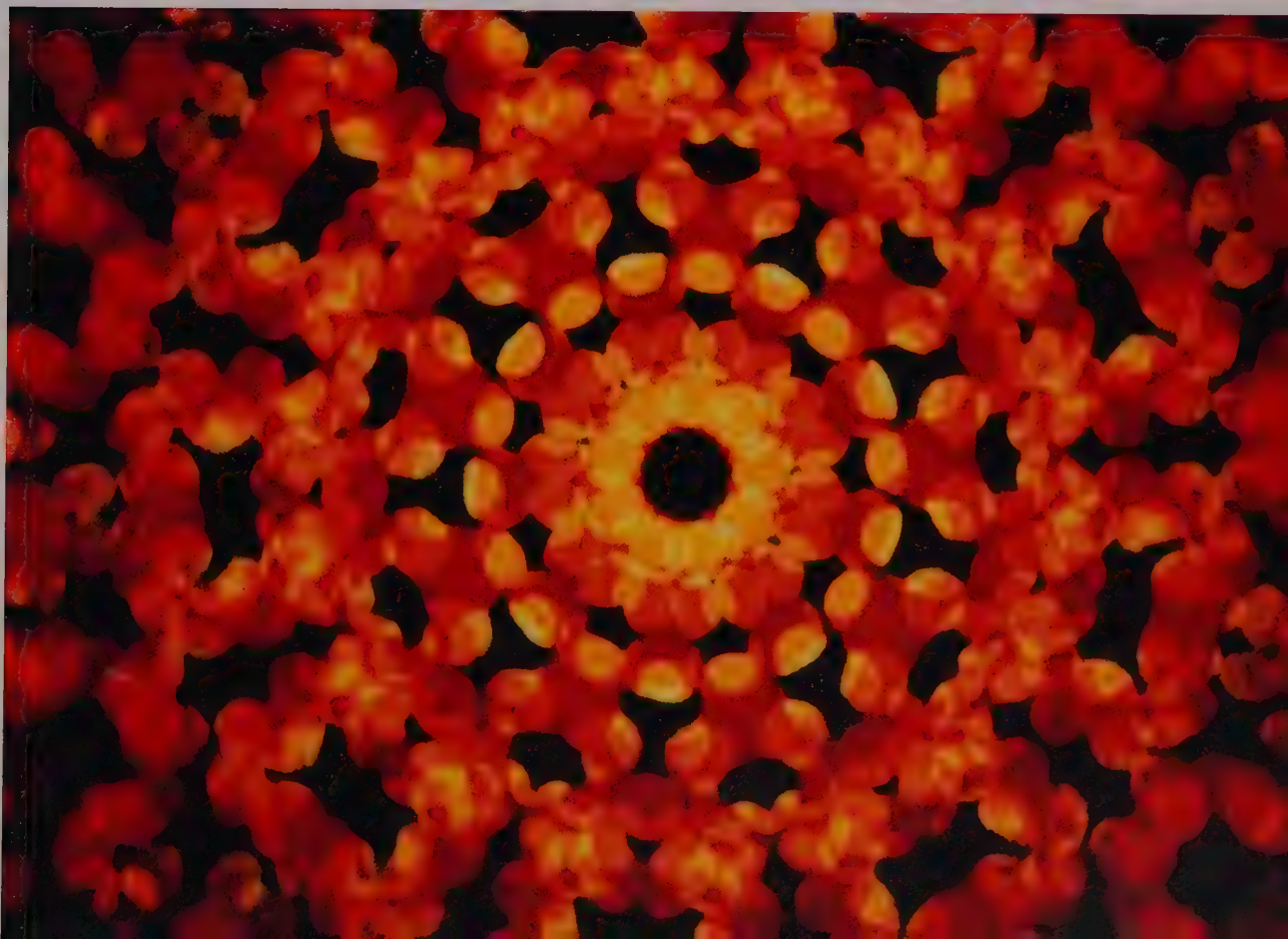
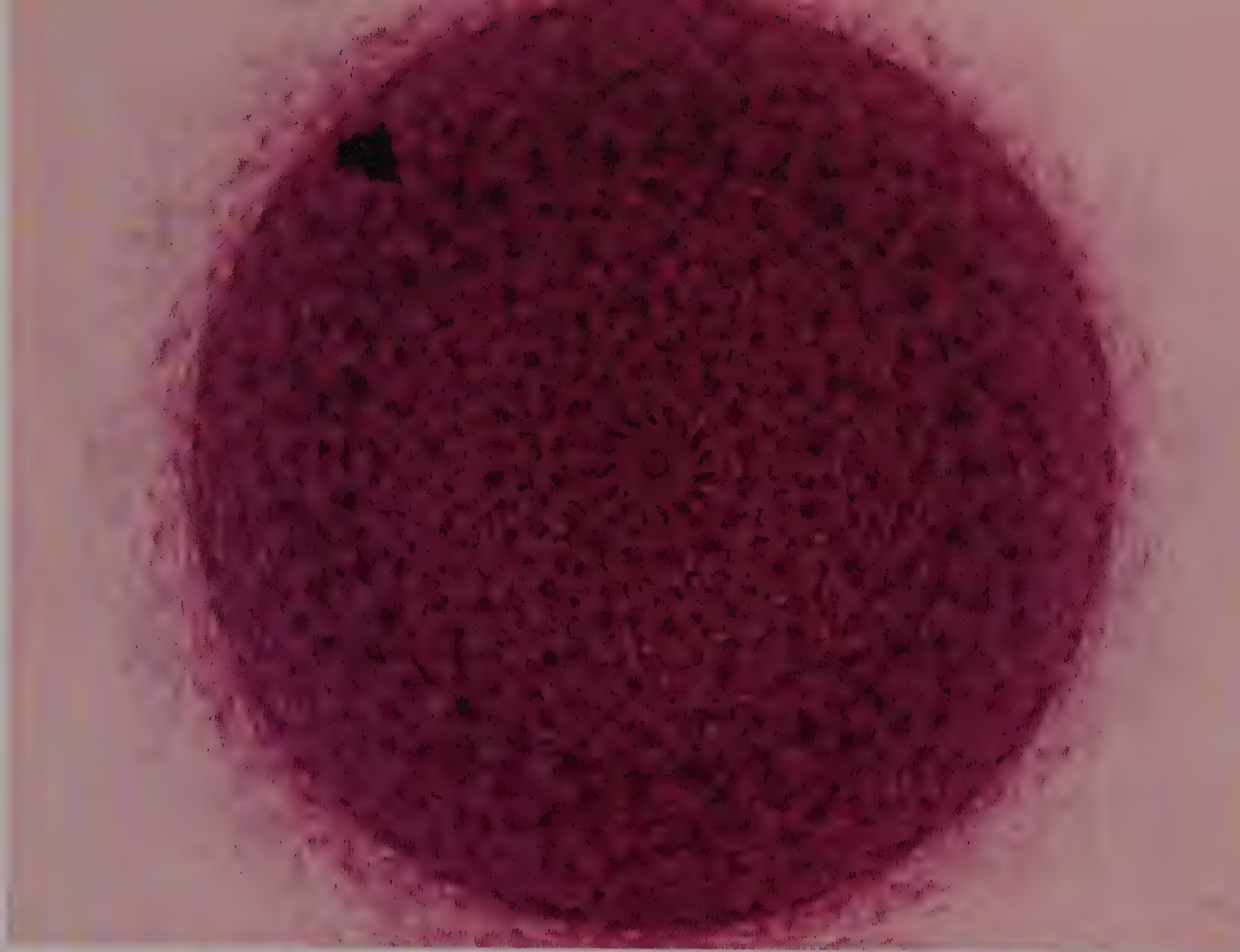




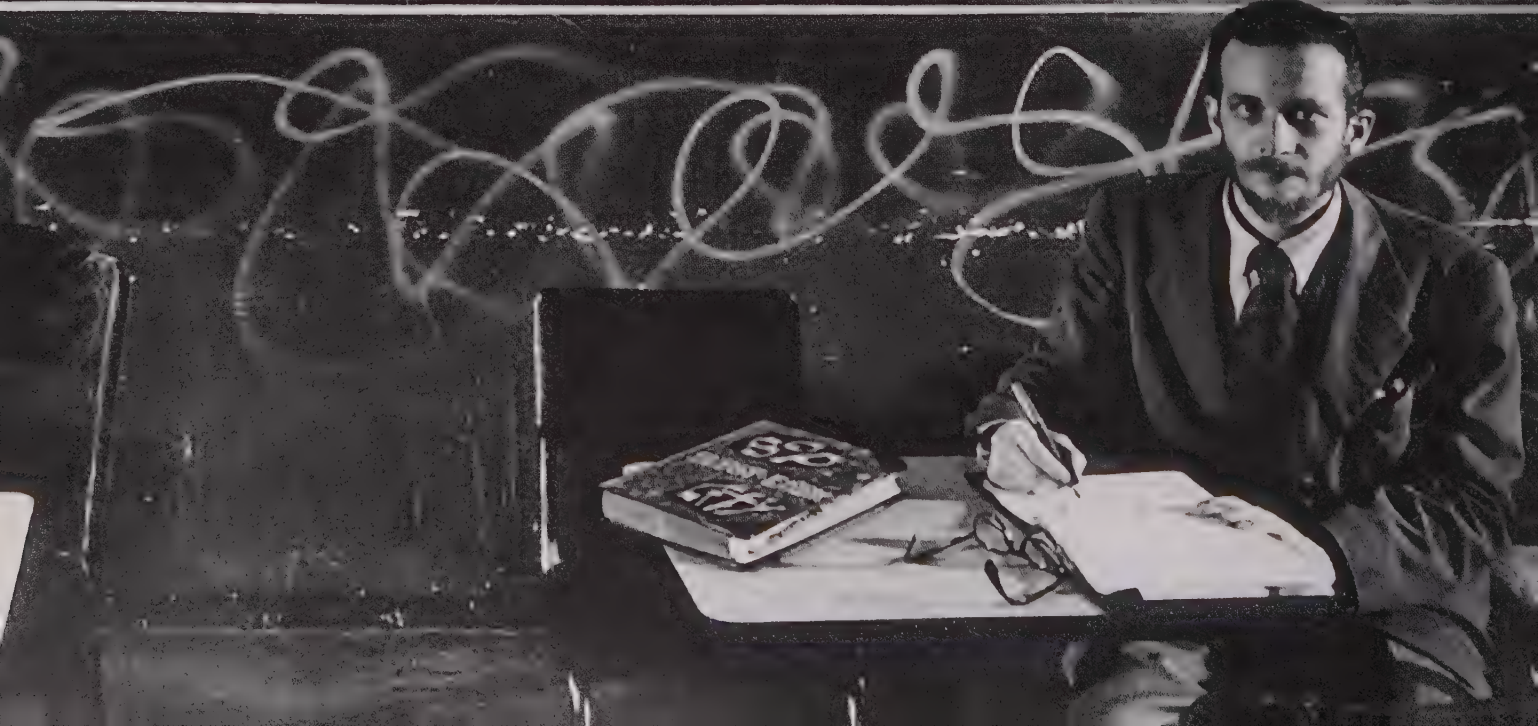
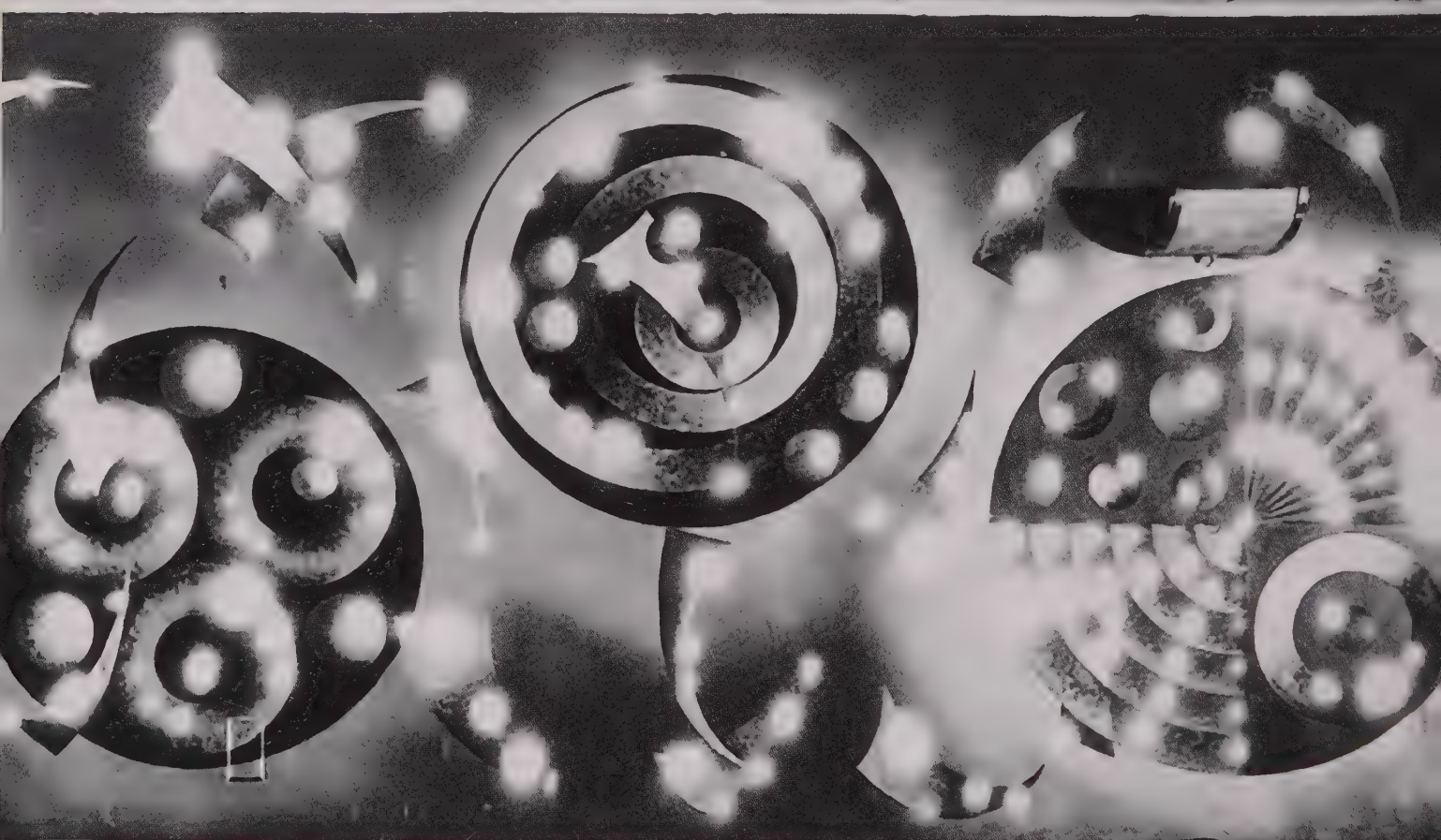














HARRY

S M I T H

# HARRY SMITH

(1923–1991)

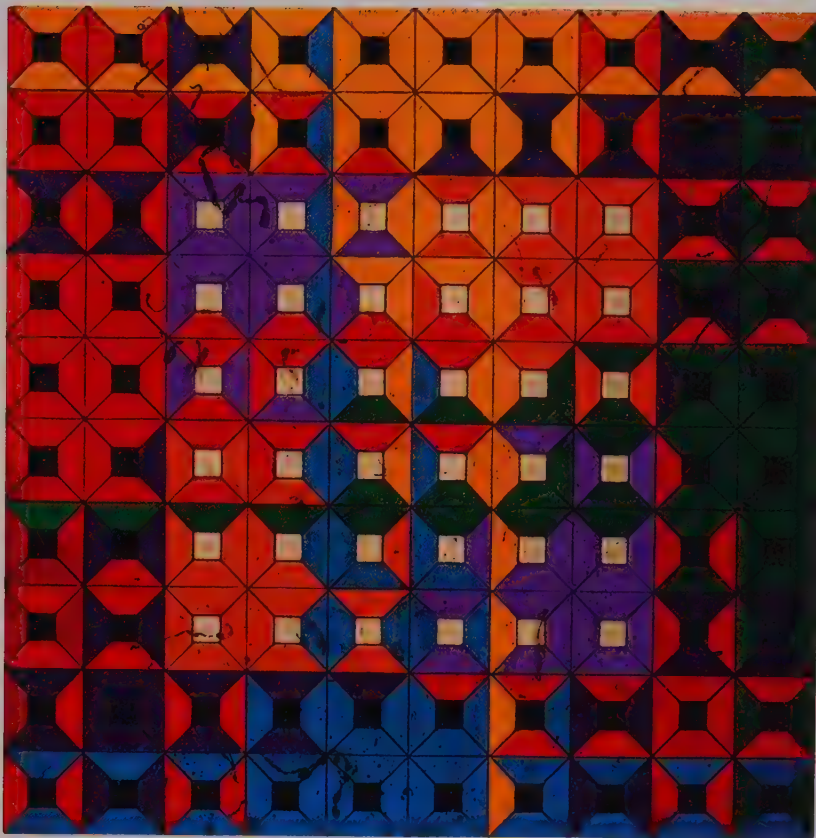
Filmmaker, music producer, shaman, painter, occultist, anthropologist. The list of professions in which Harry Smith worked could be expanded to include, for example, that of the passionate collector. In the course of his life, he thus not only compiled the world's only collection of found paper planes, he also devoted himself to unusual items such as Ukrainian Easter eggs, string figures, patchwork by indigenous groups, and things that look like other things.

In Smith's cosmological worldview, everything is linked together along cultural lines. Less interested in form than in those cultural lines through which everything is connected, he sought in seemingly disparate fields of research—from forgotten mythical worlds to contemporary, pulsating pop culture—for universal patterns in order to synthesize these within a (in his eyes) valid cultural theory. During the Beat era in San Francisco, he developed impressive experimental films, with which he continued the European-born idea of non-objective painting in new media and influenced by esoterism.

Smith led a restless life, heavily influenced by drug consumption. Many of his works are no longer preserved or only in fragmentary form. The eccentricity of his lifestyle defies any categorial interpretation but secures him the rank of one of the most influential figures of New York underground culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

■ Harry Everett Smith was born on May 29, 1923, in Portland, Oregon. He spent his childhood and youth in Anacortes and Bellingham, two small towns in the state of Washington in the northwest of the USA. His father, Robert, worked in the regional fishing industry, and his mother, Mary Luise, was a teacher on a Native American reservation. On his father's side, there was a multi-generational Masonic tradition, which Smith's parents followed through Theosophical interests. Smith enjoyed embellishing his biography with scintillating details. For example, he coquetted with being the son of the magician Aleister Crowley. It seems more believable that, through his parents, he came into contact with unorthodox spirituality, comparative theology, and metaphysics and explored these topics in greater depth throughout the course of his life.

As a youth, Smith developed a fascination for the culture of the indigenous people of North America. He



Harry Smith, *Enochian Tablet*, ca. 1979, watercolor, gouache, ink, acrylic and enamel on board, 78.7 × 78.7 cm, Harry Smith Archives

spent a great deal of time in the nearby reservations, recording songs and rituals. He also explored various dialects and collected religious objects. At this time, he began to build up a collection of folk music records, on the basis of which he compiled the much-acclaimed LP *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952).

After graduating from high school, Smith began studying anthropology at the University of Washington. Trips to San Francisco brought him into contact with northern California's bohemian culture. Its experiments with mind-altering substances, spirituality, music, and sexuality, as well as its rejection of a bourgeois lifestyle, proved to be very attractive for Smith. According to legend, he smoked marijuana for the first time in the Bay Area—an experience he declared enlightening, and which prevented him from returning to his old life. As a consequence, he subsequently dropped out of college and moved to Berkeley, California, in 1946.

In his new environment, Smith blossomed and pursued a variety of artistic directions. He nevertheless began to describe himself as a painter. Together with Jordan Belson, who was roughly the same age, he developed a passion for non-objective painting and the theoretical concepts of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Rudolf Bauer. A further source of inspiration was the film series *Art in Cinema* organized by Frank Stauffacher for the San Francisco Museum of Art. The hand-painted films by artists such as Len Lye and Norman McLaren, which Smith saw there, inspired him to conduct his own experiments in this style. During trips to Los Angeles, he made the personal acquaintance of the brothers James and John Whitney, as well as Oskar Fischinger, whom he greatly admired.

From Berkeley, Smith moved to the Fillmore District, a neighborhood of San Francisco known because of its vibrant black music culture as the “Harlem of the West.”





Harry Smith, *Tree of Life in Four Worlds*, 1954, four-color silkscreen print, 63.5 × 12.4 cm, Harry Smith Archives

He was an avid fan of musicians such as Chet Baker, Thelonious Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie, and lived in a room directly above the jazz club Jackson's Nook. During this time, synesthesia, which he also tried to evoke through excessive drug consumption, became the primary driving force behind his abstract films and paintings. This term refers to a not-uncommon peculiarity of human perception, in which one sensory stimulus triggers a variety of other sensory impressions. The visual perception of colors and shapes induced by sounds is the most common form of synesthesia. Smith's experiences while listening to jazz suggest that he, too, perceived things this way: "I had a really great illumination the first time I saw Dizzy Gillespie play. I had gone there very high, and I literally saw all kinds of colored flashes." His description brings to mind Wassily Kandinsky, who—in all likelihood sober—had experienced something similar while attending a performance of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin*. In his autobiographical text *Rückblicke* (Retrospect) published in 1913, Kandinsky wrote: "I saw all my colors in spirit, before my eyes. Wild, almost crazy lines were sketched in front of me.

For Smith, there was a close connection between the complex structures and improvisations of jazz and his experimental film practice. Searching for "genuine" artistic intuition, he declared his silent films to be visual scores, to which jazz musicians should improvise live. These performances, which took place not only in museums, but also in underground clubs in the Bay Area, marked a high point in the art of the Beat Generation, which was characterized by intermedial experiments.

During this time, Smith was in contact with Hilla von Rebay, director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York (now the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum). She supported his film productions with small sums of money and organized a studio scholarship for him. As a result, he moved to New York in 1951 and spent virtually the rest of his life there.

Even before he moved to the East Coast, Smith had begun to delve into the teachings of Aleister Crowley. In New York, he zealously continued his studies of Crowley's secret doctrines in conjunction with the occult organization Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). He was equally preoccupied with the teachings of the Kabbala. In the 1950s, he spent many hours in the New York Public Library researching metaphysical texts based on original documents. The perusal of these aroused in him a desire

to design his own Kabbalistic Tree of Life. At the time, Smith was working in the greetings card company of his friend Lionel Ziprin and was able to use the paper waste from this for his impressive print *Tree of Life in Four Worlds* (1954).

Smith became a cult figure in the New York underground scene and lived from 1968 onwards in the legendary Chelsea Hotel. In addition to countless artists and intellectuals of the downtown scene, he mingled with personalities such as Jean-Luc Codard, Janis Joplin, and Arthur Young, an inventor and philosopher who contributed significantly to the development of modern helicopters. Among his closest friends were the poet Allen Ginsberg and Ed Sanders, the lead singer of the band The Fugs. Together with them, he initiated a ceremony at the height of the Vietnam War, in which the Pentagon was to be levitated in an effort to drive the gods of war out of the government building. The action, which was registered with the authorities, is documented on the LP *Tenderness Junction* (1968) by The Fugs.

As an anthropologist and music producer, Smith made sound recordings of the liturgical chants of a rabbi, as well as of participants in a peyote ceremony. To make sound recordings of such a ritual celebration, he traveled to Oklahoma in 1964. During his absence, his New York apartment was vacated due to rent arrears and Smith lost all the works stored there. Throughout his entire life, his poverty and tendency towards self-destruction (due not least to his drug consumption) made him dependent on the support of friends and acquaintances.

Smith pursued his projects with tremendous energy and creative power, but quickly turned to new projects after their completion. From the late 1950s on, significant changes also took place in his filmic work: He no longer

used film as a synesthetic means of expression, but rather, for *Heaven and Earth Magic* (1957–1962), resorted to collage techniques to narratively illustrate his exploration of themes such as alchemy, parapsychology, and Surrealism. Later, he worked on a lavish animated version of *The Wizard of Oz*, which remained unfinished due to dwindling financial resources. From the 1960s, he ceased working with animation and instead filmed the streets of Manhattan and events at the Chelsea Hotel for *Mahagonny* (1970–1980). In his paintings, he increasingly detached himself from the close connection to music. Influenced by his esoteric interests, he worked on a symbolistic visual language, which he sought to charge with universally legible meaning. In the 1970s, he created paintings in which he interlinked his knowledge of secret languages and Scottish tartan patterns (see ill. page 263).

When he once again became homeless in 1985, his health and social situation deteriorated progressively. Ginsberg took him in for a few months and eventually found him a position as a lecturer at the University of Boulder, Colorado, where Smith lived and taught from 1988 onwards as “Shaman in Residence.” In the western USA, his health stabilized, and his interest in indigenous culture was revived in various research projects.

In 1991, Smith received a Grammy Award for his music anthology published in 1952 and related contributions to American folk music. He traveled to New York in February 1991 for the award ceremony and moved back into the Chelsea Hotel. Although his mental and physical condition deteriorated significantly over the next few months, he refused to be treated by a physician. On November 27, 1991, Smith collapsed in his hotel room and died shortly afterward at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Manhattan.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works:  
Anthology Film Archives,  
New York

Film No. 1 (A Strange Dream),  
ca. 1946  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 2:30 min.  
► see ill. p. 267

Film No. 2 (A Message from  
the Sun), ca. 1946/47  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 2 min.  
► see ills. pp. 268-269

Film No. 3 (Interwoven),  
ca. 1948  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 3:30 min.  
► see ills. pp. 270-271

Film No. 4 (Fast Track), ca. 1948  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 2 min.

Film No. 5 (Circular Tensions),  
ca. 1950  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 2:30 min.

Film No. 7 (Color Study),  
ca. 1951  
16mm film (color, no sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 5:30 min.

Film No. 11 (Mirror Animations),  
ca. 1957  
16mm film (color, sound),  
transferred to high-definition  
digital video, 3:30 min.  
► see ills. pp. 272-273  
Music: Thelonious Sphere Monk  
"Misterioso"  
Published by Thelonious Music  
Corporation, sub-publisher:  
F&M Film- und Mediascore  
Musikverlag GmbH,  
[www.fmscore.de](http://www.fmscore.de)

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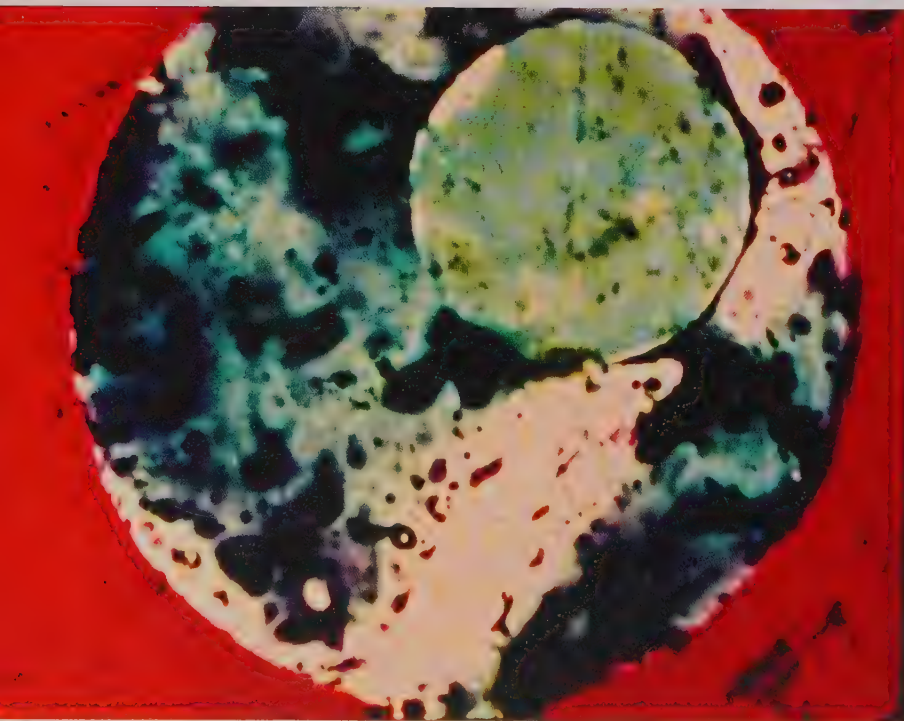
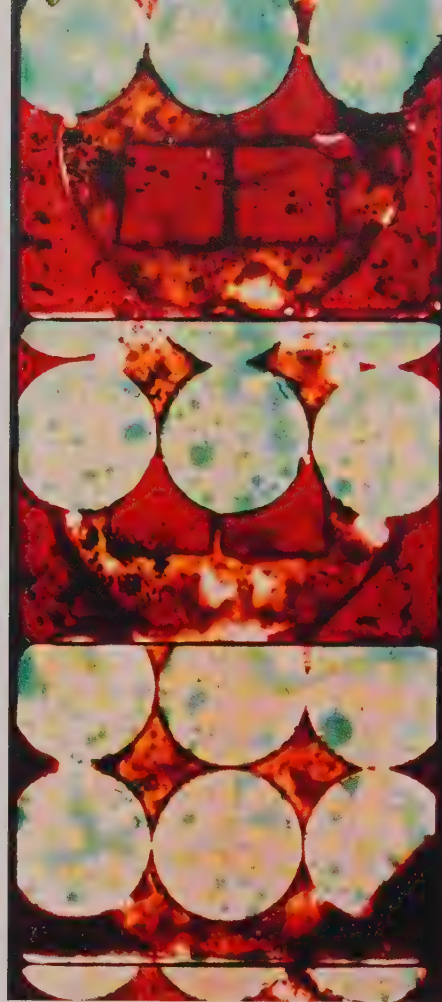
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2017.





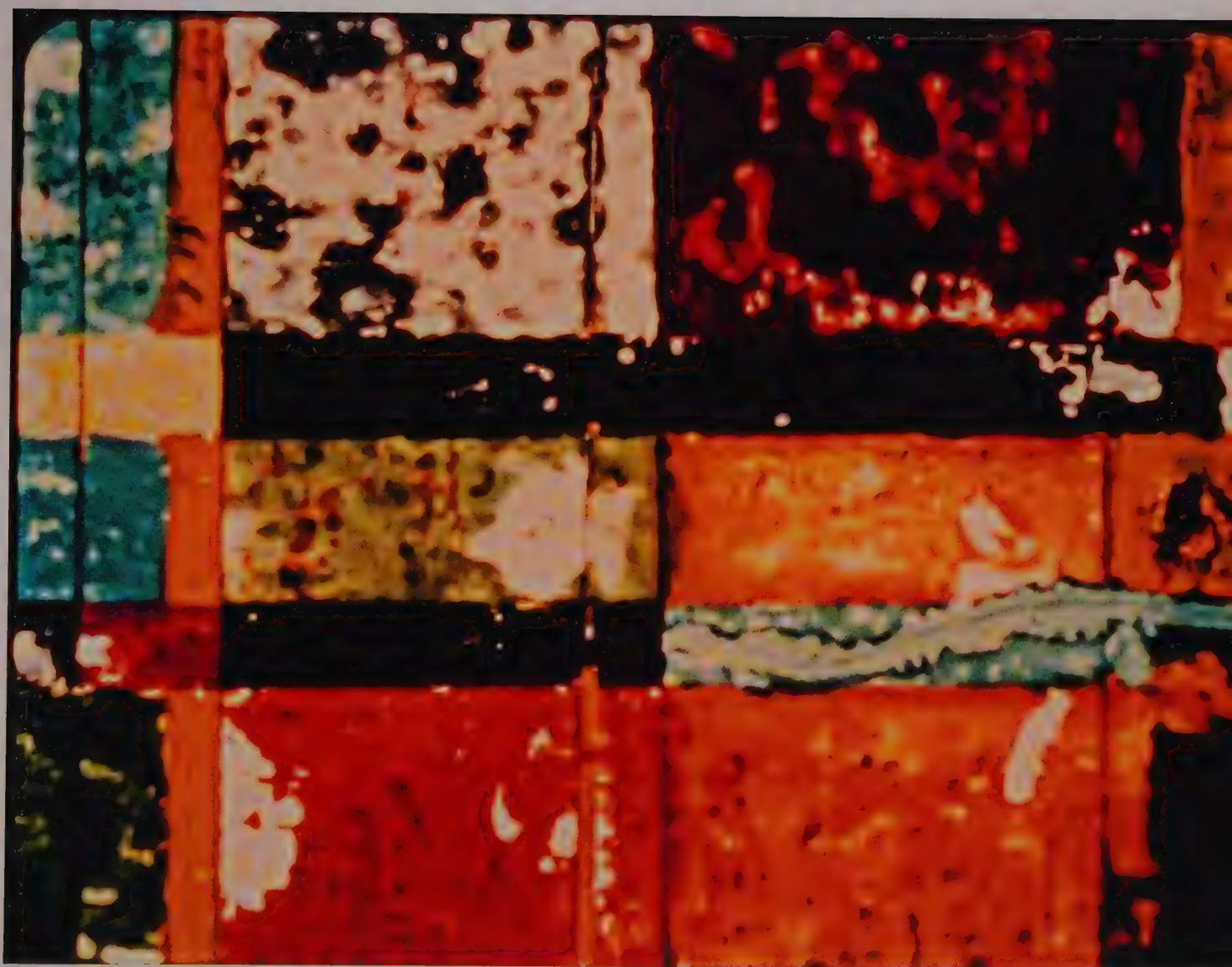






















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Collection of Vivienne Roberts

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ABCD Collection, Paris

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Harry Smith Archives

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pp. 242, 245, 247, 250–259:  
Whitney Editions, LLC,  
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pp. 267–273:  
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The Dove, No. 2,  
The Hilma af Klint Foundation,  
Stockholm (p. 125)

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Welded together by a Species  
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ca. 1945, Whitney Editions, LLC

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of his wall painting, Jimbo's Bop  
City, San Francisco, ca. 1950,  
Harry Smith Archives



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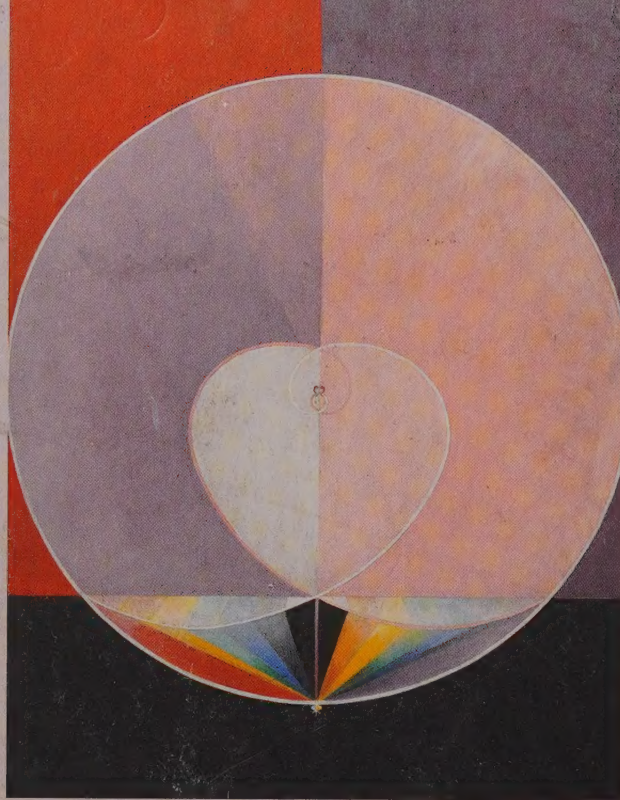


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Abstract paintings were being produced even before Kandinsky. Completely independent of one another, Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884) in England, Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) in Sweden, and Emma Kunz (1892-1963) in Switzerland each developed her own abstract visual language. What they shared was a desire to visualize laws of nature, the spiritual, and the supernatural. In addition, this volume presents works by John Whitney (1917-1995), James Whitney (1921-1982), and Harry Smith (1923-1991), who—inspired by various esoteric tendencies—made abstract experimental films from the 1940s on.

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