

FAME AND PRESTIGE: NECESSARY AND DECISIVE ACCOMPLICES IN THE CASE OF HILMA AF KLINT

FAMA Y PRESTIGIO: CÓMPLICES NECESARIOS Y DECISIVOS EN EL CASO DE HILMA AF KLINT

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Abstract

This article examines Swedish artist Hilma af Klint's problematic status as a pioneer of abstract art. Her case allows us to reflect, simultaneously, upon two types of contacts crucial to the process by which artists achieved recognition in the twentieth century: on the one hand, their network of personal contacts, and, on the other, their network of institutional contacts such as museums. The basis of this study is the difference in the positions adopted by the MoMA, in the exhibition *Inventing abstraction, 1910–1925*, and Stockholm's Moderna Museet, in the display *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*. Studying the positions of her proponents and detractors leads to the conclusion that, thus far, Hilma af Klint has had the accomplices *necessary* for her work to be exhibited, to achieve recognition and even, within the art world, to enjoy a degree of fame. It remains to be seen—and sociological analysis suggests a negative outcome in the short term— whether she will, in future, have sufficiently *decisive* accomplices to earn the prestige of being widely considered as a pioneer of abstract art.

Keywords

Hilma af Klint; fame; recognition; reputation; sociology of art; museums; MoMA; Moderna Museet Stockholm

Resumen

Este artículo examina el problemático reconocimiento como pionera del arte abstracto de la artista sueca Hilma af Klint. Su caso permite reflexionar simultáneamente sobre dos tipos de contactos importantes en el proceso de reconocimiento del artista del siglo xx. Por un lado, la red de contactos personales, y, por el otro, la red de contactos institucionales como son los museos. El punto de partida son

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las diferentes posiciones mantenidas por el MoMA en la exposición *Inventing abstraction, 1910–1925*, y por el Moderna Museet de Estocolmo en la muestra *Hilma af Klint: a Pioneer of Abstraction*. El estudio de las posiciones de defensores y detractores permite concluir que, hasta ahora, Hilma af Klint ha tenido los cómplices *necesarios* para que su obra sea expuesta, conocida e incluso, dentro del mundo del arte, hasta cierto punto famosa. Está por ver, y el análisis sociológico sugiere a corto plazo resultados negativos, si en el futuro consigue los cómplices *decisivos* para obtener el prestigio de ser considerada mayoritariamente como una pionera del arte abstracto.

Palabras clave

Hilma af Klint; fama; reconocimiento; reputación; sociología del arte; museos; MoMA; Moderna Museet de Estocolmo

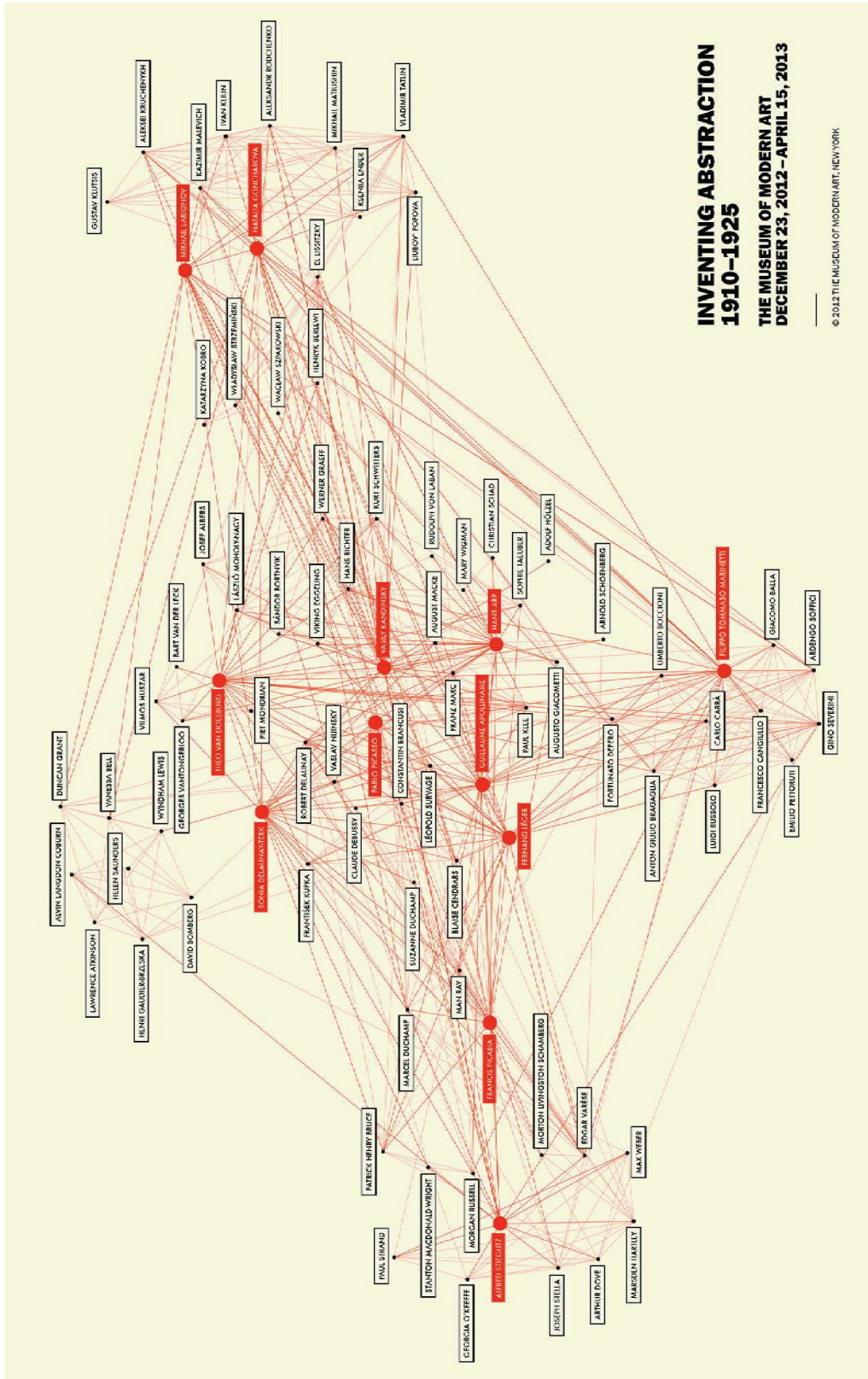


FIGURE 1. DIAGRAM IN THE EXHIBITION INVENTING ABSTRACTION, 1910-1925. HOW A RADICAL IDEA CHANGED MODERN ART, MOMA, 2012

ALTHOUGH THE PRINCIPAL CASE STUDY in this article revolves around the evaluation of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint's work, a more general objective is to draw attention to one of the elements that shape the processes of recognition in the visual arts, and whose role is rarely highlighted to a sufficient degree: the influence of personal contacts and networks of institutional contacts. 'Agents', 'processes', 'politics', 'tastes' and 'market' are some of the terms used by theories developed to explain artists' success or establishment, or indeed their descent into obscurity². These are useful terms, which point to specific realities or spheres of social action, but their use may also sidestep the identification of their protagonists.

In one of my studies into artistic recognition, I emphasised how an adequate network of contacts is, in this context, a fundamental factor, both for explaining the initial phase of an artist's recognition and for understanding those moments in which their name, and the appreciation of their work, are disseminated at a higher level:

Fledgling artists tend to seek the support of other, more renowned practitioners to obtain their approval and attempt to penetrate their circle. On arriving in Paris in 1920, Joan Miró visited Picasso. Salvador Dalí did the same on his first journey to the French capital in 1926, and three years later, through Miró, came into contact with surrealist circles. Some of the recognition achieved by various Catalan artists less famous than the aforementioned is due precisely to their relationships with them. Examples might include Apel·les Fenosa, who enjoyed the support of Picasso, or Àngel Planells, to whom Dalí lent his assistance. The increase in recognition and appreciation of the work of the ceramicist Josep Llorens Artigas, from the 1950s onwards, is not independent of his collaboration with Joan Miró.³

These processes, of course, take shape through the interrelation of many factors, but there are always some that weigh more heavily than others. We can identify these, and can demonstrate that beneath terms like 'agents', 'institutions' and 'market' hide specific people, particular gallery owners and museums, and a network of contacts deserving of more detailed illumination.

Certain important exhibitions have, in fact, paid attention to this area in recent years. In the entrance to the exhibition *Inventing abstraction, 1910–1925. How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, unveiled in New York's MoMA in late 2012⁴, a large wall displayed a diagram clearly designed to attract visitors' attention (FIGURE 1). The diagram presented more than a hundred names of artists linked to abstract art

2. Two recent Spanish studies analysing the mechanisms through which art and artists are recognised are FURIÓ, Vicenç: *Arte y reputación. Estudios sobre el reconocimiento artístico*. Barcelona, Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona (Colección Memoria Artium), 2012—which reviews diverse articles concerning artists and works ranging from classical sculpture to modern art—and PEIST, Nuria: *El éxito en el arte moderno. Trayectorias artísticas y proceso de reconocimiento*. Madrid, Abada, 2012, based on the analysis of a group of avant-garde artists who became known between 1900 and 1960.

3. FURIÓ, Vicenç: *op. cit.*, pp. 153–154.

4. *Inventing abstraction, 1910–1925. How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* was commissioned by Leah Dickerman and took place in the MoMA between December 2012 and April 2013.

between 1910 and 1925, joined by lines representing the personal contacts between them. Highlighted in red were those artists with more than twenty-four documented connections, namely Kandinsky, Apollinaire, Picasso, Arp, Léger, Sonia Delaunay, Van Doesburg, Tristan Tzara, Picabia, Marinetti, Larionov, Goncharova and Alfred Stiegliz. On one hand, the diagram recalled and made reference to the famous visual scheme with which Alfred Barr had attempted to explain the evolution of the first modern art, a scheme reproduced in the exhibition catalogue of *Cubism and Abstract Art*, held in the MoMA in 1936⁵. On the other, the diagram owes a debt to more recent theories, such as those of the networks of intellectual connections studied by the American sociologist Randall Collins in his monumental *Sociology of Philosophies*⁶. With this graphical summary, those responsible for the exhibition at the MoMA hoped to highlight the idea —undoubtedly an accurate one— that abstraction was not simply the fruit of four geniuses working in isolation, but also of the relationships, communications and exchanges of ideas established between a numerous group of artists and intellectuals who worked concurrently in diverse fields, and often in considerably distant centres and countries.

One of the best-connected artists in the scheme is Picasso, who, curiously, never made abstract art, but sits in the centre of the diagram, from which we might deduce that he represented a key figure for the majority of artists of his day: artists who, despite their varied tendencies, all hoped to obtain his approval and support. We have already seen how Miró and Dalí, on arriving in Paris, went to visit Picasso.

Monarchs and popes, nobles, influential artists and humanists, and the *staff* who oversaw the art academies were, in the past, the individuals responsible for building the reputations of artists. With the inception of modern art we must add art critics, art dealers and gallery owners, the collectors of this new art and, in a secondary phase, the directors of major museums, the authors of landmark monographs and the exhibition curators and organisers. Certain names are widely known, such as Henry Kahnweiler and Gertrude Stein, who supported Picasso; Leo Castelli, the main champion of Jaspers Johns and other practitioners of pop art; and the collector Charles Saatchi, whose name immediately evokes Damien Hirst and the Young British Artists. Nevertheless, only a minority of these have acquired any real visibility, when we consider that all of the twentieth-century artists who achieved widespread recognition had the support of agents and institutions, without whom it is doubtful they would ever have enjoyed such success.

When focusing on the art of the twentieth century, it is the art dealers and gallery owners who are the best-known agents. I have cited some of the names that flourished at the beginning of the century and during pop art's peak in the 1960s. Curiously, however, the names of the gallery owners who contributed to

5. The exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, organised by Alfred H. Barr, was held in the MoMA in the months of March and April of 1936. Barr's diagram was reproduced on the catalogue's jacket. In the catalogue *Inventing Abstraction* is a study of this diagram: Glenn D. Lowry, 'Abstraction in 1936: Barr's Diagrams', p. 359–363.

6. COLLINS, Randall: *Sociología de las filosofías. Una teoría global del cambio intelectual*. Barcelona, Editorial Hacer, 2005 (1998).

the recognition of internationally renowned artists between the two World Wars have achieved far less visibility.

Edward Hopper did not achieve his first commercial and critical success until forty-two years of age. When he did so, it was with an exhibition of watercolours held in 1924 in the Rehn Gallery. This would be the gallery that represented the artist for the rest of his life. It is difficult, therefore, not to credit the gallery owner Frank Rehn with some responsibility for Hopper's subsequent reputation. It was Rehn who sold the painting *House by the Railroad* to the collector Stephen Clark, who in 1930 donated it in turn to the Museum of Modern Art, where it became the first painting to form part of the museum's permanent collection. Hopper's acknowledgement as an important American painter took place in the early 1930s⁷.

Salvador Dalí became internationally established between the late 1930s and early 1940s, the gallery owner Julien Lévy playing a key part in this process. It was Lévy who aided Dalí's entry into the United States, and who organised his first private exhibition there in 1933, followed by five more until 1941. The mounting of the 'Sueño de Venus', for the New York World's Fair held in 1939, was also promoted by Lévy, as was the design of the showcases the following year⁸.

As for collectors, we once more find only a handful of recognisable names, like those of Gertrude Stein in the early twentieth century or Charles Saatchi at the start of the twenty-first. Marcel Duchamp never had dealers or an organised market for his works, but he did have Louis and Walter Arensberg, a pair of collectors always attentive to his output, allowing him to work in freedom without needing to concern himself with the demands and vagaries of the art market⁹. From their first meeting with the artist, the Arensbergs were devoted patrons of Duchamp, explaining his ability to remain strategically distant from the market. What was once their collection of Duchamp's works, in fact, is today found in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said institution owning the world's most comprehensive collection of Duchamp's art. One particular name stands out among the collectors who, between them, acquired a large part of Constantin Brancusi's body of work: the American lawyer, John Quinn. On Quinn's death, his collection of Brancusi's numbered twenty-nine works: a collection that, in 1926, encountered a distinct lack of buyers, eventually being acquired by none other than Marcel Duchamp, who thereby established himself as a dealer-cum-collector of his friend's work.

While from 1933 until the early 1940s Dalí's work was successfully promoted by Julien Lévy's gallery, his two key collectors were, firstly, the English patron Edward James and, from the 1940s, the married couple of Reynolds and Eleanor Morse. The Morses were assiduous buyers of Dalí's work until his death, and his greatest collectors, to the extent that in 1971 they founded Cleveland's Dalí Museum with their collection, later relocated to Saint Petersburg (Florida). Without Edward James,

7. *Edward Hopper*, Catalogue of the exhibition held in the Museo Thyssen, Madrid, 2012, p. 62. For more information see LEVIN, Gail: *Edward Hooper. An Intimate Biography*. New York, Rizzoli, 2007, pp. 185–187 and 227ff.

8. GIBSON, Ian: *La vida desafortada de Salvador Dalí*. Barcelona, Anagrama, 2004 (1997), p. 465ff.

9. For the role of the Arensbergs, collectors of Duchamp, and John Quinn, Brancusi's foremost collector, see PEIST, Nuria: *op. cit.*, pp. 111–118.

Julien Lévy and the Morses, who knows whether the work of this artist from Empordá would have achieved the fame it enjoys today¹⁰?

Any mention of Dali's success naturally implies a consideration of Gala, yet Gala is not the only romantic partner to play a prominent role in an artist's recognition. A complete study of this topic would yield a great many examples. The individual who provided Frida Kahlo with the majority of her contacts —contacts that enabled her to achieve substantial visibility in the art world of the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s— was her husband, Diego Rivera; nor is it idle speculation to ask what Jackson Pollock might have achieved without the support of his wife, Lee Strasberg, also an artist, who sacrificed her painting career for his sake while they were together. Louise Bourgeois acquired her international recognition thanks to the impulse of feminism throughout the 1970s and the retrospective dedicated to her by the MoMA in 1982. In her early career, however, it was her husband who supported her and introduced her to New York's art scene: the art historian and exhibition organiser, Robert Goldwater. Eva Hesse acknowledges that when she met her future husband, the sculptor Tom Doyle, she was seeking the influence of an individual more artistically mature than herself, and it was in fact he who put Eva in contact with the relevant network of artists of the day¹¹. Bill Viola's current recognition and renown owes much to the work of his wife, Kira Perov, also an artist, but above all a curator, cultural manager and his official representative. Kira has managed the Bill Viola Studio since 1978¹². The posthumous fame of certain artists also owes a great deal to their partner's or family's efforts towards diffusion. Following the death of Robert Smithson, his wife, the artist Nancy Holt, organised his archive and took charge of the publication of his writings¹³, which made it possible for Smithson's work to be studied by authors such as Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens, in the 1970s and 1980s, and advanced as a paragon of post-modernism.

From the 1960s, the modern curator entered the art world in force, organising countless exhibitions and fairs, Harald Szeemann being among the most famous names. Less well-known, however, is David Ross, the first major exhibitor of video art, and director of a number of American museums. He organised Bill Viola's first solo exhibition, and also his first major retrospective, in the Whitney, *Bill Viola: a 25-Year Survey*¹⁴. David Ross, along with the artist's wife, Kira Perov, have been two supporters of unquestionable importance in the career of today's most famous video artist. The key individual when considering the bibliography on Richard Estes is John Artur. In the first ten years of his career, Estes had his photorealistic work displayed in important museums and collections, and in this sense his painting enjoyed a certain international diffusion within the market circuit. However, in the

10. GIBSON, Ian: *op. cit.*, 422ff. and 532ff.

11. See PEIST, Nuria: *op. cit.*, pp. 256–257.

12. A brief biographical outline of Kira Perov can be found on Bill Viola's official website: <http://www.billviola.com/biograph.htm>. Her biography, in fact, is found in the same entry that features Viola's own biography. From time to time, she is interviewed about her husband's video artworks concerning questions of technique and arrangement. See http://www.eai.org/resourceguide/preservation/installation/interview_perov.html

13. *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt, New York University Press, 1979.

14. *Bill Viola. A 25-Year Survey*. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997.

decade of 1968 to 1978, no articles of consequence were published about his work, only sporadic reviews¹⁵. From 1978, this began to change. This date marked the start of his solo travelling exhibitions, his appearance in catalogue introductions and the monographs tackling his painting and graphical work. The principal curator and author of the bulk of these exhibitions and texts was the painter John Artur. Until the close of the 1990s, the predominance of his name in the bibliography dedicated to Richard Estes is readily apparent¹⁶, as is the scant importance assigned to Estes' work, and to photorealism in general, in some of the more recent books, written by prestigious authors, that summarise the history of twentieth century art¹⁷.

Decades before the figure of the curator or organiser of exhibitions was institutionalised, Homer Saint-Gaudens (1880–1958) already played a very similar role. The director of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute from 1922, he and Mrs. Margaret Palmer, his representative in Spain, were key figures in the recognition achieved in the United States by Hermen Anglada Camarasa, Marià Andreu and Joan Junyer, to name but a few. By 1910, Anglada Camarasa was already a renowned artist in many European countries, but it was Gaudens who encouraged her participation in a collective exhibition at the Carnegie in Pittsburgh, allowing the Catalan artist to make contact with representatives of the Van Dyck Galleries, who organised various exhibits for her in several American cities, as a result of which her fame spread also throughout the United States¹⁸. Joan Junyer met Homer Saint-Gaudens in Paris, who suggested he enter the competition for 1929's Carnegie Prize. Junyer ended up taking second place, but through the competition acquired valuable contacts allowing him to exhibit in various American cities in the 1930s. In 1945, works by Junyer related to the world of dance came to be exhibited in the MoMA itself¹⁹. From 1929 to 1939 Marià Andreu took part in the Carnegie Institute's contests, winning prizes on two occasions²⁰. At the time, meeting Homer Saint-Gaudens and Margaret Palmer, and participating in the exhibitions organised by the Carnegie

15. ARTHUR, John & ESTES, Richard: 'Una conversación', in *Richard Estes*. Exhibition catalogue, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza de Madrid, 2007, p. 44.

16. Some examples of the texts John Artur has dedicated to Estes: *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape, 1978–79* (Museum of Fine Art of Boston, Toledo, Kansas City and Washington DC); *Richard Estes: A Decade*, Adam Stone Gallery, New York, 1983; *Richard Estes 1990*, 1990 (Museum of Art of Tokyo, Osaka and Hiroshima); *Richard Estes: The Complete Prints*, American Federation of Arts of New York, 1992 (travelling exhibition through various American museums between 1992 and 1995). In the catalogue from the exhibition of the artist's work held in Madrid's Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in 2007, cited in the previous note, John Artur's presence can still be felt: two of the articles in the catalogue are his.

17. He is not cited, for example, in the 700 page volume of FOSTER, H., KRAUSS, R., BOIS, Y.A. & BUCHLOCH, B.: *Arte desde 1900*. Barcelona, Akal, 2006 (2004). It is significant, in the contrasts of recognition evident in Estes' case, that John Artur is a painter, curator and advisor for private collections, galleries and museums, rather than an academic author who counts among the illustrious names of the critics and historians of contemporary art.

18. FONTBONA, Francesc & MIRALLES, Francesc: *Anglada-Camarasa*. Barcelona, Polígrafa, 1981, pp. 172ff., and FONTBONA, Francesc: 'La fama de Anglada-Camarasa', in *Anglada Camarasa (1871–1959)*. Fundació Mapfre, 2002, pp. 13–27.

19. GARCÍA, Josep Miquel & DURÁN, Fina: *Joan Junyer*. Barcelona, Ed. Mediterrànea, 2004, pp. 32ff. and 80–86.

20. *Marià Andreu*, Exhibition catalogue, Museu Comarcal del Maresme-Mataró, Patronat Municipal de Cultura de Mataró, 1995; GARCÍA PORTUGUÉS, Esther: 'El reconeixement artístic de Mariano Andreu a Catalunya', *Butlletí de la Reial Acadèmia Catalana de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi*, XXI, (2007), pp. 101–116.

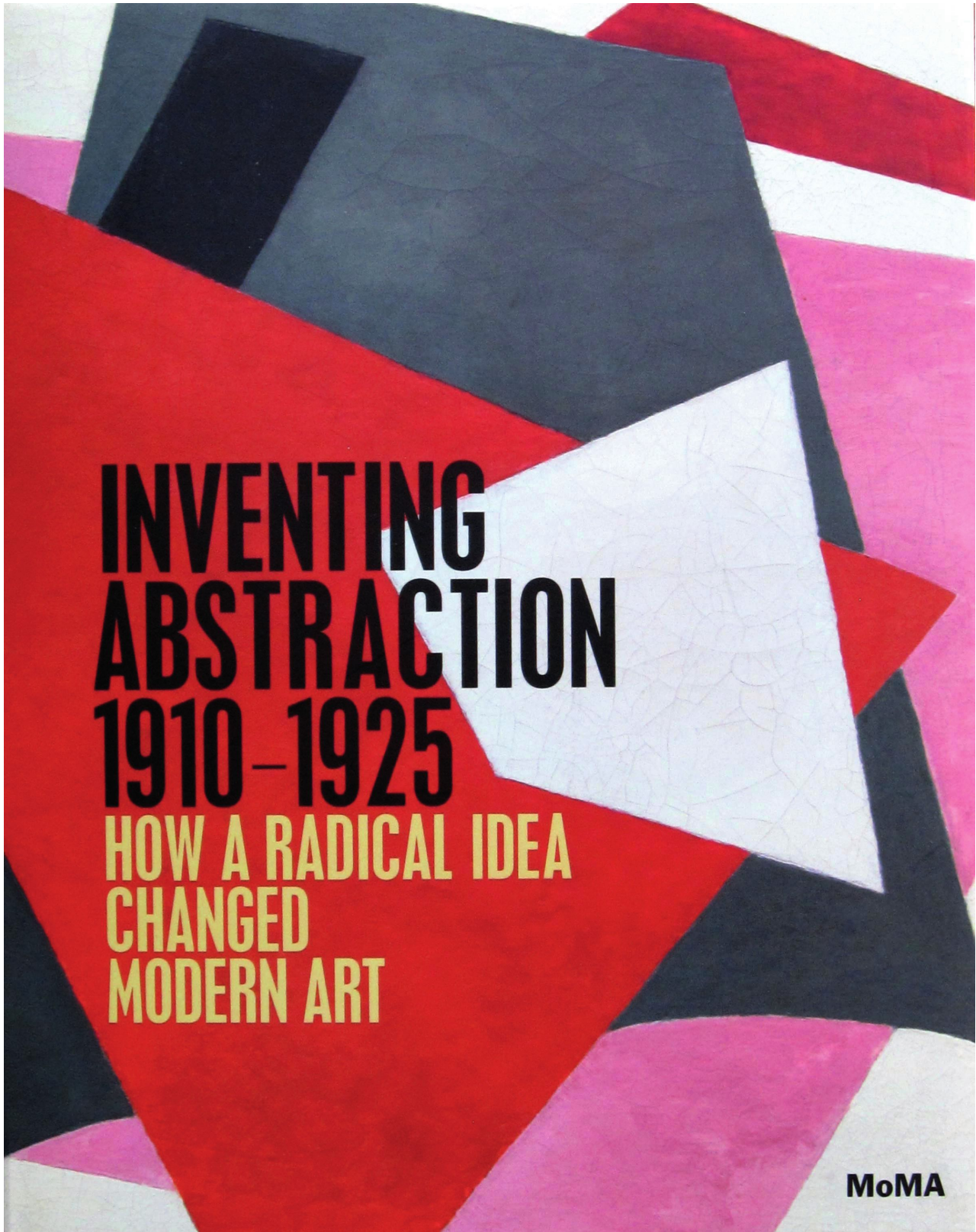


FIGURE 2. COVER OF THE CATALOGUE *INVENTING ABSTRACTION, 1910-1925* MoMA, 2012.

Institute, was one of the main channels available to Spanish artists for securing recognition in the United States²¹.

Thus far I have referred to dealers, collectors, curators, the artists themselves and, on occasion, their partners, as accomplices in the success enjoyed by many creators. I will now focus in more detail on the case of Hilma af Klint, for whom this article is named, as this will permit us to simultaneously consider two types of contacts crucial to the process of recognition of artists in the twentieth century. On one hand, these artists' networks of personal contacts, and on the other, their institutional contacts — in a word, museums. I refer the reader once more to the interesting diagram (see FIGURE 1) displayed at the entrance to the exhibition, cited earlier, *Inventing abstraction, 1910–1925. How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, held at the MoMA²². I will now refer to this important exhibition and its catalogue (FIGURE 2), and to the fact that neither the display nor the volume of studies published for the occasion cite the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint, an artist who, in contrast, is championed as a pioneer of the abstract in another exhibition, entitled *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, held at almost the same time in Stockholm's Moderna Museet (FIGURE 3)²³.

The MoMA's exhibition of the roots of abstraction highlights Picasso's role and preserves Kandinsky's well-established position, alongside other pioneers of the movement such as František Kupka, Francis Picabia and Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Another of the display's strong points is the highly relevant role it attributes to Guillaume Apollinaire, for providing the phenomenon with a new name to distinguish it from Cubism and for his defence of ground-breaking approaches. Finally, the exhibition also distances itself from the view of abstract art (and painting in particular) as a process consisting of little more than an internal purification of the medium, as if it were an isolated language, highlighting instead the mixed nature it shares with other media such as music, poetry, photography and dance. Abstraction was an innovation shared by different artists in diverse creative fields.

Yet in this magnificent exhibition, and in the catalogue that accompanied it, one name is absent: that of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. It is surprising, and even intriguing, that an exhibition which aims to pontificate on the beginnings of abstraction makes not the slightest mention of af Klint. This could reflect the impossibility of offering a complete vision, an all-encompassing account, but could also be a deliberate exclusion. Recent events surrounding Hilma af Klint's work are most interesting, especially when observed from a sociological viewpoint attentive to the mechanics of establishing artistic recognition, the precise viewpoint that justifies my analysis of this case. Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) was a painter of landscapes and portraits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (FIGURE 4). She also, however, created a separate class of paintings, decidedly different,

21. For Margaret Palmer, see PÉREZ SEGURA, Javier: *La quiebra de lo moderno. Margaret Palmer y el arte español durante la Guerra Civil*. Córdoba, Fundación Provincial de Artes Plásticas Rafael Botí, 2007.

22. Exhibition and catalogue cited in note 3.

23. MÜLLER-WESTERMANN, Iris & WIDOFF, Jo (eds.): *Hilma af Klint. A Pioneer of Abstraction*. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2013.



FIGURE 3. COVER OF THE CATALOGUE *HILMA AF KLINT: A PIONEER OF ABSTRACTION* Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2013.

composed of circles, ovals and spirals, which portrayed forces from beyond that she claimed she, as a medium, could perceive, in addition to making reference to ideas based on Theosophy and other variously esoteric tendencies. Af Klint, however, chose not to display these works to the public, and stipulated in her will that they were not to be exhibited until twenty years after her death. Yet in reality, the bulk of this secret production was only made public very recently, the paintings being exhibited for the first time in the spring of 2013, in a major exhibition dedicated to the artist by Stockholm's Moderna Museet, organised by Iris Müller-Westermann. It would seem that prior to 1915 af Klint had already painted more than two hundred of these apparently abstract compositions (*apparently* because some of the designs seem to derive from and hint at organic and botanical elements, and because there are authors who doubt that her work represents abstract art in a strict sense), some of which she had created as early as 1906: in other words, before Kandinsky. I must add, as it is an important detail, that although the full magnitude of this work was only recently revealed, a number of her pieces had already been displayed in an exhibition held in 1986 in Los Angeles²⁴, with specific works later appearing in distinguished exhibitions in Stockholm, Frankfurt, New York, London and Paris.

The two exhibitions, at the MoMA and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, practically coincided in time (December 2012 to April 2013 in the case of the MoMA, and February to May 2013 in Stockholm). The key question, naturally, is whether the MoMA —whose power and influence in shaping the canon of modern art, despite being less than it was decades ago, continues to be considerable— was unable, or unwilling, to present af Klint's work, and for what reasons. I began to take an interest in this question in early April 2013, at which point my only sources were newspapers, in one of which it was claimed that the MoMA chose not to include Hilma af Klint's works in the exhibition due to the reticence of the organisers²⁵. It is clear that, had they been included, this would have dramatically changed the story of abstract art's origins and those who were the true pioneers of this revolution.

As an art historian, it seems obvious to me that the case of Hilma af Klint must be studied to assess whether or not her work should be included in the exciting story of the invention of abstraction. If so, where, and how? If, on the other hand, the answer is negative, we must explain why. It is difficult to justify her exclusion based on her belief that she saw the spirit world, as there is ample documentation of the irrationalist roots, and the influence of spiritualism and other esoteric doctrines, in the first avant-gardes and in abstract art in particular. Alberto Luque, for example, in his book *Arte y esoterismo*, thoroughly documented the early avant-gardes' ideological links with occultism²⁶.

Fundamental to any assessment of the MoMA's exclusion of Hilma af Klint's work is an understanding of the organisers' motives, which are mentioned in neither of the two catalogues. Certain reviews and newspaper articles hint at these

24. *The spiritual in art: Abstract painting, 1890–1985*, display organised by Maurice Tuchmann and Judi Freeman, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986.

25. VICENTE, Àlex: 'La mujer que inventó la abstracción', *El País*, March 3rd, 2013.

26. LUQUE, Alberto: *Arte moderno y esoterismo*. Lleida, Milenio, 2002.



FIGURA 4 HILMA AF KLINT IN HER STUDIO, C. 1895
From Moderna Museet catalogue.

motives, but I wished to verify them through one of the agents directly involved, to which end I wrote to the one of the organisers of the exhibition in Stockholm. Jo Widoff kindly informed me that those responsible for the New York exhibition chose not to display Hilma's works as she had not formed part of the network of connections that was the exhibition's fundamental concept. Jo also indicated that, like myself, the Museet had been surprised to learn that Hilma had not even been cited in the MoMA's catalogue.

The MoMA's argument is interesting and deserving of discussion. Firstly, however, I believe it is fair to say that it would have been more honest for the MoMA to at least make some reference to Hilma, accompanied by their reasons for choosing not to include her. The result of this deliberate silence is that, today, Hilma af Klint simply goes unacknowledged by the New York museum in relation to the invention of abstraction: she does, however, enjoy this recognition on the part of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

The MoMA's explanation gives rise to a number of questions. One of these is whether the concept of an artist's voluntary avoidance of such networks, and their consequent exclusion from the dominant history of art, might be extrapolated to other artists. Here I refer not to those writers or painters who, in life, were unable to publish or to exhibit, or who attempted to do so and were denied, only achieving recognition posthumously. Of these, there exist countless examples. I speak, rather, of creators, above all in the field of visual arts, who chose to remain outside the artistic networks of their time, and who, despite their wishes and their absence from these networks, art history has incorporated *a posteriori* into those movements with which they refused to identify.

The second question to be resolved is whether Hilma af Klint was really so radically disconnected from her contemporaries who collaborated in the invention of abstraction. The catalogue of Stockholm's Moderna Museet states that af Klint twice made contact with Rudolf Steiner, in 1908 and 1920. In the first she invited him to her studio and, one assumes, showed him her work, but Steiner was critical of her activity as a medium, and it is claimed that this affected her in a deeply negative manner²⁷. In any case, while Hilma af Klint's relationship with Theosophy and its leaders is well documented, there is no trace of any connection with artists working towards or in abstraction. Hilma af Klint is absent from the diagram that headlined the exhibition in the MoMA, but it seems this absence is warranted. Curiously, on searching the MoMA's catalogue for the names Steiner and Blavatsky, in the hopes of some allusion to the artist via the channel of Theosophy, it transpires that these, too, are missing, and not one chapter of the New York catalogue deals with the spiritualism and esotericism of the pioneers of abstract art. It appears, then, that it is precisely this problem that the MoMA marginalises or excludes²⁸.

27. *Hilma af Klint. A pioneer...* pp. 41 and 50.

28. It is, in fact, a common tendency among art historians to look down on this relationship or consider it irrelevant. In a recent interview, Maurice Tuchman affirms that 'spiritual is still a very dirty word in the art world' (RACHLIN, Natalia: 'Giving a Swedish Pioneer of Abstraction Her Due', *The New York Times*, 29/04/2013). It would be interesting to identify the networks of museums and other sectors of the art world that have aligned themselves

Hilma af Klint's exclusion by both the MoMA and canonical art history is a fact that fits perfectly with one of the ideas argued by Nuria Peist in her book *El éxito en el arte moderno*²⁹. According to the author, for a modern artist to become established it is essential that said artist has formed part of what she calls the initial artistic nucleus during the first phase of recognition: in other words, that they have acquired sufficient visibility in the network of relationships formed by artists, dealers, critics, collectors and similar agents. If the MoMA did indeed dismiss Hilma af Klint for not belonging to this initial network, this reinforces the truth behind the mechanisms of recognition and establishment advanced by Nuria Peist, albeit through an example of non-recognition. It would be interesting to compile, if they exist, other cases similar to that of the Swedish artist, to be able to complete or extend this theory. Perhaps Hilma af Klint will remain in the 'realms of consolation', as Gerard Mauger puts it. If this were the case, one might attempt to identify and analyse the agents, institutions, arguments and channels of diffusion of those who have fought for Hilma af Klint's recognition, but who, perhaps, are losing, or will lose, the battle.

If the diagram of contacts reproduced here went further, and added—in addition to the lines of communication between artists— museums' alliances and positions of power, one line, possibly a broken one, would connect the MoMA to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Such a diagram should also feature another indicator to show that the position the MoMA occupies, and its degree of power, are far beyond those of Stockholm's museum, and, as a result, that the New York account of events has many more spokespeople and greater diffusion.

In the MoMA's version of the birth of abstract art, Picasso and Apollinaire ascend in importance, Kandinsky maintains his position and Hilma af Klint is ignored. The Stockholm exhibition will travel to other European cities in 2013: firstly Berlin and later Malaga. Its visitors, then, will be able to evaluate whether its title, *Hilma af Klint: A pioneer of abstraction*, seems an accurate one, and, thereby, whether or not the MoMA's exhibition has deprived us of part of the story. Yet the public who visit exhibitions through cultural interest have far less weight in the construction of an artist's recognition and establishment than those agents and institutions who

with and against the early avant-gardes' links to occultism, as here too there are sociological conclusions to be drawn. The first exhibition deserving of mention is that of 1986 in the Los Angeles County Museum, *The spiritual in art: Abstract painting 1890–1985*, organised primarily by the aforementioned Maurice Tuchmann, which, we should recall, included the exhibition of works by Hilma af Klint. Another landmark exhibition concerning abstract art was that created in 1996 in the Guggenheim Museum, organised by Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim, 1996. The exhibition and its catalogue aimed to depict the historical development of abstraction in its rich variety of forms, but Hilma af Klint is not cited in the chapter dedicated to 'the pioneers', nor indeed in any other, and references to Theosophy, Blavatsky and Steiner are minimal. In 2007, Bang Larsen considered that in recent years the theme of occultism had intensified in the world of art (BANG LARSEN, Lars: 'The other side', *Frieze*, No. 106, April 2007, pp. 114–119), a position also held by PASI, Marco: 'A gallery of changing gods: Contemporary art and the cultural fashion of the occult', CESNUR, 2010). Alberto Luque, however, doubts this supposed intensification (LUQUE, Alberto: 'Un dudoso reciente auge del esoterismo en el arte'. <http://konstelacio.blogspot.com.es/2013/06/un-dudoso-reciente-auge-del-esoterismo.html> consulted 03/06/2013). Luque also points out that between 1986 and 2013 the biography dedicated to Hilma af Klint has seen little growth, with hardly half a dozen studies not written in Swedish.

29. PEIST, Nuria: *op. cit.*

actively participate in these debates, especially when evaluations are made from dominant positions.

In my opinion, the acceptance of Hilma af Klint as a pioneer of abstract art and an artist of the first order, as well as evaluations that choose not to concede her this role, are opinions corresponding to the positions of power of museums and other implicated agents. A clear identification of the two parties —that is, which museums, exhibitions, organisers, art historians and critics are in favour and which against— would permit an advance in our comprehension of the two competing versions and in the analysis of the direction they have taken and might take in future. It is significant, for example, that the Hilma af Klint exhibition in Spain will take place in Málaga's Museo Picasso, and not the grand centre of twentieth-century art that is the Museo Reina Sofía. In all likelihood, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Museo Picasso of Málaga have formed an alliance through shared interests and compatible positions in the network of modern art museums: interests and positions quite different to those of the MoMA or the Reina Sofía³⁰.

Although this part of the article —the section dedicated to Hilma af Klint's recognition— is a *work in progress*, and although when published we will naturally have more information available than what we have thus far been able to employ, its sociological analysis allows us to make certain observations that, if correct, could become predictions. At this time, the museums scheduled to exhibit the Swedish artist's work in 2013 are not decisive institutions, not members of the upper echelons of the aforementioned museum network. We might expect, from a gender perspective, that support for Hilma af Klint and her art as pioneers of abstraction will increase³¹. As for the statement that the position of museums in the international network is a critical factor —and that this position and the struggles it implies tend to be concealed— I can provide a pair of observations to reinforce this

30. In very approximate terms, we might consider that, in the world of museums of modern and contemporary art, upon the pinnacle of power and influence sit the MoMA, London's Tate Modern and Paris' Centre Georges Pompidou. In this uppermost level, but not quite atop the peak, are the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum of New York, the MOCA in Los Angeles, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Below these would sit a whole host of others: to cite a few, this group would include the Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Oporto's Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp, Basel's Museum für Gegenwartskunst, the Hamburguer Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the Moderna Galerija of Ljubljana or Stockholm's Moderna Museet, among others. This excludes the monographic museums dedicated to artists such as Picasso, Miró, Dalí and Tàpies, which to some extent occupy a league of their own, although they occasionally organise or collaborate in exhibitions not directly related to their core collections. What I wish to highlight here is that an exhibition organised by a museum like the Moderna Museet would be unlikely to be hosted in an institution of a higher level, but rather would tend to occupy institutions of an equivalent or lower level — provided, furthermore, that the artistic ideals promoted by its directors and other interested parties are, if not convergent, at least compatible. Within this network of strengths and positions, personal contacts between museum directors can also explain a great many actions.

31. It is premature to present statistics concerning this matter, but it currently appears to be primarily female art critics and historians who, in various journals, defend Hilma af Klint as a pioneer of abstraction. See HIGGIE, Jennifer: 'Hilma af Klint', *Frieze*, 155 (2013) (<https://www.frieze.com/issue/review/hilma-af-klint/>) [consulted 06/06/2013]; IVANOV, Alida: 'Hilma. Art History Revisited', *Art Territory*, 02/04/2013 (http://www.artterritory.com/en/texts/reviews/2158-hilma_art_history_revisited/) [consulted 06/06/2013]. RACHLIN, *op. cit.*, note 26 (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/30/arts/artspecial/Giving-a-Swedish-Pioneer-of-Abstract-Art-Her-Due.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) [consulted 06/06/2013]; Voss, Julia: 'The First Abstract Artist? (And It's Not Kandinsky)', *Tate Etc.*, 20/05/2013 (<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky>) [consulted 06/06/2013].

claim. The Stockholm museum's representative who confirmed the MoMA's reasons for dismissing Hilma af Klint chose not to respond when, in my subsequent email, I asked why, from the wealth of Spanish museums, Malaga's Museo Picasso was chosen to display Hilma af Klint's work in Spain. I directed the same question to the museum in Malaga. There I did obtain a response, but hardly a specific one, namely that the selection had been due to 'common interests'. This, then, was privileged information — perhaps because to reveal it would allow the precise identification of these common interests, and might also show that personal and institutional contacts are more decisive than they appear in the artistic recognition of both artists and museums.

My hypothesis, then, is that the battle for the acknowledgement and appreciation of Hilma af Klint's work has begun, and will no doubt continue through institutions and agents who occupy non-dominant or secondary positions in the current power structure of modern art. Here I should touch upon another agency of recognition: the art market. It is no small matter, in this context, that Hilma af Klint's work has thus far remained more or less outside the market: that is, through belonging in large part to a foundation, her work has not been purchased, to the best of our knowledge, by any major collectors or museums. In this sphere, too, the Swedish artist's work has failed to circulate at the highest levels. Returning to the topic of museums, I was finishing this article when I discovered an addition to the circuit of museums that would exhibit af Klint's work, in this case in 2014: Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, situated in the north of the country, in the region of Zealand. I believe this fact is coherent with the model expounded here (observe the sequence of institutions: Stockholm's Moderna Museet, Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, Málaga's Museo Picasso and Denmark's Louisiana Museum). I also recently became aware —recall the contemporary nature of many of the topics I am tackling here— that works by Hilma af Klint would be displayed at the Biennale in Venice, from June to September of 2013. Venice's Biennale is, of course, a key event in the world of contemporary art, leading me to wonder whether my hypothesis might collapse. It appears, however, that the inclusion of five of af Klint's works in a pavilion of the Biennale was unrelated to any recognition of her role as a pioneer of abstraction. The Biennale's curator, Massimiliano Gioni, described the motives for her selection in the following manner:

This year's Biennale poses questions about how dreams and visions are represented: ultimately, it is an exhibition of the kingdom of the invisible and the territories of the imagination. In this field of work, Hilma af Klint is entirely fundamental as the starting point for an investigation into the many ways in which images have been used to organise the knowledge of our experience of the world.³²

In other words, although a top-level platform is exhibiting five works by Hilma af Klint, it is doing so for motives of lesser import: because they fit into the theme

32. <http://www.huma3.com/huma3-spa-news-id-1408.html#.UbCv2oabupo> [consulted 06/06/2013].

of 'how dreams and visions are represented', 'of the kingdom of the invisible and the territories of the imagination'. Note how the organiser Massimiliano Gioni highlights that it is *in this field of work* that the Swedish artist's output is fundamental³³. Even on the web page of Málaga's Museo Picasso, the exhibition (which will doubtless attract headlines and visitors) is announced with a prominent statement that the Swedish artist's work belongs 'to the framework of Nordic mysticism' and later adds, in a conditional manner, that the artist 'could be situated alongside fundamental creators of the modern artistic avant-garde, such as the Russian Wassily Kandinsky or the Dutchman Piet Mondrian'³⁴. I remember watching the director of Barcelona's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Bartomeu Marí, opining on television on the works of Hilma af Klint exhibited in Venice, which reminded him of the mandalas and other esoteric images that hung from his bedroom ceiling as a youth. The MACBA does not share the MoMA's lofty status, nor does it encompass the same chronology, yet the artistic and ideological tendencies upheld by its directors, and thus its evaluations, are probably similar. In an interview in *The Wall Street Journal*, we can read how Leah Dickerman, the individual who organised the MoMA's exhibition *Inventing Abstraction*, defends her decision to exclude Hilma af Klint as follows: 'I find what she did absolutely fascinating, but I am not even sure she saw her paintings as artworks'³⁵.

In summary, until today —June 2013— Hilma af Klint has had the *necessary* accomplices for her work to be exhibited, to achieve recognition and, within the art world, to enjoy a certain level of fame. It remains to be seen —and sociological analysis suggests otherwise— whether in the future she will acquire the *decisive* accomplices she needs to become widely considered a pioneer of abstract art.

POST SCRIPTUM³⁶

I finished writing this article more than six months ago. Its sociological focus did not require me to venture an opinion on the aesthetic value of Hilma af Klint's works, or on the abstract/non-abstract debate. However, I was able to visit the artist's exhibition in Málaga's Museo Picasso in early February 2014, shortly before it closed. This direct viewing of her paintings allowed me to evaluate their aesthetic effect, while also helping refine my appreciation of their artistic value and, of course, her status

33. The text that appears on the placard accompanying Hilma af Klint's work in Venice is very revealing. It begins by stating that the artist 'experienced visions as a child', later adding that from 1906 she 'began to produce an extraordinary series of esoteric paintings and drawings', and concludes, in its final lines, by relating how when these paintings were finally revealed in the 1990s, 'af Klint was at last recognized as an *independent* pioneer of abstract art' (the italics are mine). It is difficult not to think that leaving this statement until last and qualifying the artist as an 'independent' pioneer is a form of compromise, avoiding any clear inclusion or exclusion.

34. <http://museopicassomalaga.org/exposicion.cfm?id=102> [consulted 06/06/2013].

35. BOMSDORF, Clemens: 'Did a Mystic Swede Invent Abstract Painting?', *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28th, 2013.

36. Accepted by the journal's editor (13/02/2014).

(or lack of) as a pioneer of abstract art. As I have dedicated not insignificant hours and effort to studying this case, I will, here, allow myself a more personal opinion.

Did Hilma af Klint, along with the other four women who formed the group of 'Las Cinco', create abstract works before 1910–11? Yes. Did she create abstract works after 1910–11? Again, yes. In both cases she alternated these with more figurative works, most likely indicating that abstraction was not her principal objective, but rather one of the many embodiments of her spiritual beliefs and practices.

Hilma af Klint was a talented artist, who broke away from the academic painting of her time and, from a particular moment in time, displayed a surprising and audacious change of register. She explored and fervently practiced a type of painting whose arrangement and aesthetic effects are truly notable (in the Museo Picasso's exhibit in Málaga, the hall housing the great paintings of the series *Los diez mayores* produces a powerful effect, similar to what we might call a 'Rothko effect'). This is a type of painting, furthermore, that bears the hallmarks of the most appreciated concepts in modern art: experimentation and innovation. There is no doubt that her case involves problematic aspects, difficult to assess, or that we are lacking in detailed information. But even in the face of these uncertainties, I believe Hilma af Klint should be included, with all her idiosyncrasies, in the collective of artists identified as pioneers of abstract art. Quite apart from this—and I wish to emphasise this point—her painting is aesthetically and historically valuable, even if we ignore the debate about who came first and simply observe her production between 1907 and 1925. I have shown that, in the short term, it will prove difficult for the majority of modern art's centres of power to accept that the artist was a pioneer of abstraction. Thus far, she has been and continues to be promoted only in secondary networks. It is my opinion, however, that if in years to come other important museums should organise exhibitions similar to the MoMA's *Inventing Abstraction*, Hilma af Klint ought to be considered. For now, I vote in her favour. However, I am not the director of the MoMA. With this, I conclude my *post scriptum*, before straying too far from sociological analysis.