



## Reinventing the Yggdrasil: Hilma af Klint and Political Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** The Yggdrasil, the holy tree of Norse mythology, is central to Hilma af Klint's series of paintings from 1913/15: *Tree of Knowledge*. As with the Biblical Tree of Knowledge from Eden that is echoed in Christ's cross, the Yggdrasil allows for the salvation of humanity in Norse mythology. During the nineteenth century, the Nordic National Romantic movement turned the Norse myth towards a politics of nationalism and nationhood. Taking as her point of departure these aestheticised nationalisms, af Klint's abstraction redirects Nordic romanticism towards an alternative political aesthetic. Locating an intertwining of genders at the heart of the Yggdrasil tradition, her androgynous abstraction subverts the nationalist and patriarchal romanticism of the nineteenth century Yggdrasil.

Central to af Klint's aesthetic subversion is the troubled history of theosophy's engagement with Nordic myth. The Yggdrasil was revived in Helena Blavatsky's theosophy, and Rudolf Steiner constructed a theory of Aryanism in his readings of Nordic myth. Although af Klint was a keen student of theosophic eclecticism, using the discipline as a model for her stylistic hybrid combinations of esoteric, scientific, mythical, and modern motifs, her turn to the Yggdrasil should be read as constituting a distinct break from theosophic Nordism.

**Keywords:** Hilma af Klint, Yggdrasil, political aesthetics, androgyny, National Romanticism, feminism, abstraction

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In this paper, I explore how Swedish modernist painter Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) uses an abstracted and diagrammatic aesthetic language to challenge and redirect the rising use of the Nordic mythological tree motifs in Swedish art at the turn of the century. A Swedish tradition that used Romantic modes of representation of the mythological tree was, as I will argue, often laden with nationalist connotations. Diverting and repurposing this tradition, af Klint forged instead a political aesthetic centred on questions of androgyny and gender equality.

Central to my concerns is af Klint's engagement with the Yggdrasil myth. The Yggdrasil is the holy tree central to Norse mythology. As a powerful symbol of growth and creation, the tree dates back to ancient creation myths. Yggdrasil, an oak or fir tree, connects the nine worlds of Norse mythology. Situated at the centre of the cosmos, relating to both underworld and heaven, gods, giants and people, it is a symbol of universality and cosmos. In the nineteenth century, Nordic mythology underwent a revival, taken up by painters from the National Romantic Movement, as well as popular spiritualist movements such as Helena Blavatsky's theosophy and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. In this new situation, the mythical tree took on a wide range of connotations, ranging from national pride and patriarchy to the disturbing proto-fascist race theories of Aryanism. I explore how af Klint's derailing of these problematic late nineteenth century uses of the mythical tree is achieved both by her androgynous imagery and her concern to challenge traditional views on the separation of public and private spheres.

Despite the increasing prominence of her work,<sup>2</sup> critics have not yet sufficiently addressed the gender politics of af Klint's aesthetics. Thus far, the focus of criticism remains mostly on the spiritualist, occult, and theosophical side of af Klint's work, which is certainly important in her work. Yet, these spiritualisms should not be isolated from political questions. As was explored at *3 x Abstraction*—an exhibition featuring the work of Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin held at the Drawing Center, New York, 2005—spiritual utopianism generated spaces for the aesthetic experimentation of women artists (de Zegher & Teicher, 2005). As Briony Fer puts it, despite the fact that

many early 20th century abstract painters drew on spiritualism to fuel their artistic projects [...] this does not mean their interest in occult sources exhaust the meaning of the work. Nor should we assume that af Klint's paintings and drawings, any more than Kandinsky's, can be reduced to the esoteric theosophical meanings and functions she intended for them (2015, p. 16).

It is true that in certain recent insightful publications, efforts have been directed towards reading af Klint's work through a wider prism of contexts, including questions of botany and natural science (Lomas, 2013 & 2015), technology, androgyny and nihilism (Kern, 2015), and diagrammatic grammars (Loreck, 2015), to name a few. However, scholarship has not yet addressed the social and political motifs of her work, nor recognised the specifically feminine aesthetics of her innovations with abstraction.

I examine the possibility of reading her work as a subversive political aesthetic centred on questions of hybridity, androgyny and gender equality. Here, the term political aesthetics is understood in terms

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<sup>2</sup>Since the first public exhibition of her abstract paintings, in a 1986 exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, there has been steadily increasing international interest in her work. In addition to the publication of two critical monographs in Swedish language (Fant, 1989; Lindén & Svensson, 1999), several important English language essay collections have been published in recent years, including catalogues from the retrospectives (Müller-Westermann & Widoff, 2013; Enderby & Blanchflower, 2016), and a collection of critical essays on her work (Almqvist & Belfrage, 2015). In addition, her work is, at the time of writing this essay, on view in the Pinacoteca São Paulo in Brazil. In October 2018, the exhibition travels to the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in New York.

of Jacques Rancière's theory of politics of aesthetics. Following Rancière's position, I use the term "political" to name the struggle of a group excluded from the cultural mainstream, directed towards equal recognition in an already established order. According to Rancière, aesthetic practices are "ways of doing and making" that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility' (2011, 13). In my reading of af Klint, political aesthetics represents her struggle to overcome a misogynous political and social situation in northern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

With my multidisciplinary methodological approach, through af Klint's work, I seek, in Griselda Pollock's words, to 'retrace the steps attempting to see art as a *social practice*, as a totality of many relations and determinations, i.e. pressures and limits' (2008, p.7). Pollock's idea of a 'feminist intervention' in art's largely patriarchal histories constitutes recognition of gender power relations, making visible the mechanisms of male power and social struggles between classes, races and genders, as well as the semiotic analysis of artistic practice, its results and the implications that it produces (2008, p. 9–10). This interdisciplinary model provides a methodological framework for my paper. In analysing af Klint's artistic practice by closely examining a secretly executed series of paintings, I show how af Klint sought to understand and respond to epochal social and political situations in her art via an abstracted aesthetic of signs and forms. By considering her engagement with aesthetic, spiritual, and social ideas of the period, I explore how af Klint's work is related to her commitments to the political and spiritual struggles of her era.

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Hilma af Klint studied at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm at the time when the National Romantic movement was flourishing (1882–1887).<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1875, a generation of National Romantic painters (Georg Pauli, Carl Larsson, Nils Kreuger, Karl Nordström and Richard Bergh) moved to Paris, only to return to Sweden shortly after, determined to establish a national school of art. Af Klint's conventional landscapes, which she painted to sell and exhibit, do not differ much in terms of style from her National Romantic colleagues. For example, her painting of the Swedish forest (Figure 1) is reminiscent of Prince Eugen's forest painted a few years earlier (Figure 2).

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<sup>3</sup>According to Facos (1998), the National Romantic movement in Sweden emerged in the late nineteenth century and became a dominant ideology in the early twentieth century. Further, according to Lalander (1989), National Romanticism in Sweden dominated until the second decade of the twentieth century, when a younger, aesthetically less conservative generation of painters emerged.



Figure 1 Hilma af Klint, *Sunlit Pine Forest*, oil on canvas, 1903, 109 x 82 cm. Private collection. Image source: Bukowsiks, Sweden.

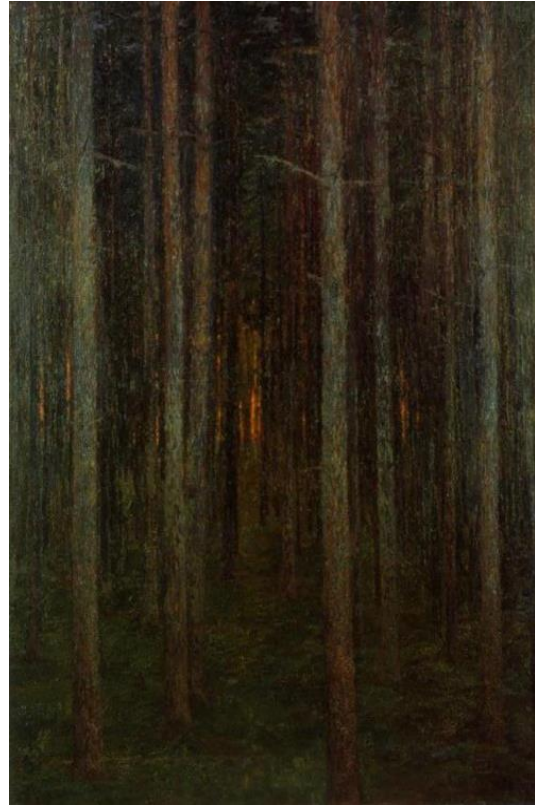


Figure 2 Prince Eugen, *The Forest*, oil on canvas, 1892, 150 x 100.5 cm. Göteborgs Konstmuseum collection. Image source: Göteborgs Konstmuseum

Perhaps, it is accurate to say that af Klint in fact painted two bodies of work, each rather different in its style and meaning: one was done in a mainstream romantic style; the other, a radically different, more abstract and explicitly spiritual body of work, remained hidden from the public – partly due to her own request—for forty-two years after her death. Connected with her less conventional, abstract painting was her spiritual practice. Af Klint was engaged in different spiritualist movements: from the 1890s onwards, she had weekly meetings with a group of five women. She held a strong interest in theosophy and anthroposophy, and she also explored alchemy and Rosicrucianism. ‘The Five’, as the group called themselves, engaged in weekly *séances* during which automatic drawings were made as early as 1896. Her work in this period offers a valuable archive of the interaction between the unconscious, as explored by female-based spiritual societies and social groupings, and artistic practice. This spiritualist and feminine group offered af Klint a ‘safe space’ for her artistic creativity and mediated the technical and compositional path to her abstract work.

During these *séances*, the group appears to have believed that they were making contact with beings from the spiritual world, the so-called ‘High Masters’. In the autumn of 1905, the High Masters demanded of af Klint that she complete the specific task of painting the series of paintings for what was to be the never-realised Temple of spiral architecture (Fant, 1989). This is when af Klint divided her work into two separate groups of work: the first was public, which was done in conservative aesthetic style and strove to avoid controversy, and included landscapes, portraits, and illustrations; the second, and her private work, was a secret group of paintings that often included completely abstract work. From 1912 to 1916, even though she did not abandon the Temple series, she came to feel that she painted with a greater autonomy and, at this time, her interest in theosophy and anthroposophy also increased.

It is significant to mention that af Klint was not the only modernist artist interested in spiritualist movements. Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian—three of the major figures of modernist abstraction—drew inspiration from theosophy's theory of a non-material reality. Helena Blavatsky's theosophy and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, seeking to bridge the gap left by the loss of faith in Christianity and the new discoveries of modern science. Discoveries such as Wilhelm Röntgen's X-rays, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, non-Euclidian geometry and the new atomic science appeared to chart the existence of a realm that could not be directly perceived by the physical senses. For theosophy, these discoveries supported a syncretistic set of beliefs in invisible realms. Af Klint used the ideas and vocabulary of theosophy as tools to respond to anxieties of the period, such as the position of women and the political situation in Europe. However, her use of theosophical ideas is by no means doctrinal, and her aesthetics comprise an eclectic combination of contemporary spiritualism, personal interpretations of ancient mythology, and modern scientific and mathematical knowledge. Theosophy's eclecticism can be considered as serving more as a kind of model for af Klint's hybrid stylistic combinations of esoteric and modern symbols, forms and colours, and figurative and abstract elements, rather than a programmatic delimitation of her own concerns.

In 1913, af Klint began working on a series of watercolours, *Tree of Knowledge*. After painting the *Introduction* and numbers 1, 2, 6, 7, she interrupted the work, only to come back to it two years later, when she painted numbers 3, 4, and 5. Her stylistic exploration of her theme in the series is continuous with her style of work. It includes developing a series of paintings that often vary only in apparently minor details. In fact, this is possibly even more true for the tree series than for the others. The images in the trees series differ radically from her Romantic tree paintings, which she showed publicly, and which conformed to academic conventions of the era. Even though the trees are not depicted in a naturalistic manner, and they occupy non-illusionistic space, the imagery in this series never becomes completely abstract. However, the images do linearly progress towards a more geometric and abstract depiction of the tree, which is not always the case in other series of work. Af Klint's concern with developing and modifying her compositions in a continuum of aesthetic development is very evident from the images of the series seen together (Figure 3). Seen like this, in the composition of the two final and more abstract paintings of the series, we are able to recognise 'the tree' in the formal arrangement of different elements. The roots are represented by the squares, with inscribed diagonal elliptical shapes, and the crown by the heart-like upper portion of the image.



Figure 3 Hilma af Klint, HaK133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 139a. *Series W, The Tree of Knowledge* no. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7a. 1913/1915.  
By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photos: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

The relatively small size of the paintings from the series, compared to her other works from this period (each measures approximately 46 x 30cm), and their unfinished appearance—fields left with no colour, inclusions of notes and comments on the sides and occasionally on verso of the image—reveal that they were probably meant as sketches. They represent a visual experimentation of representing cumulative meanings that include Christian and Nordic myth, science, and diagrammatic forms.

Her paintings from this series are reminiscent of the nineteenth century representations of Yggdrasil (Figure 4).

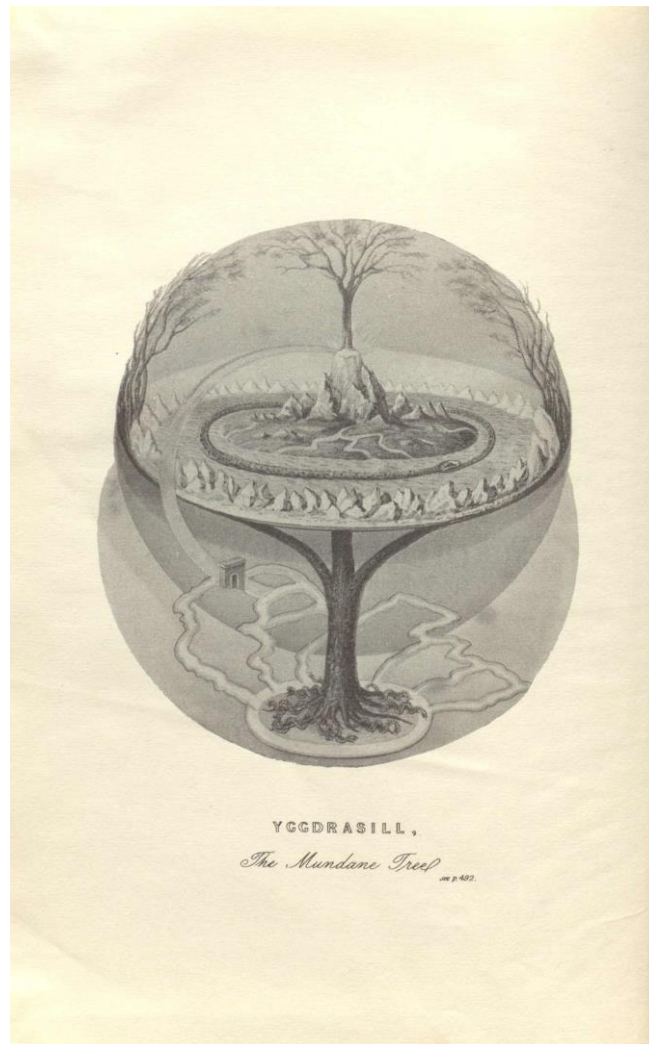


Figure 4 Yggdrasil: The Mundane Tree, reproduced in Mallet (1847, n.p.).<sup>4</sup>

Yggdrasil, an oak (or fir) tree, connects the nine worlds of Norse mythology. In *Edda*, a collection of Old Norse poems, Yggdrasil is represented as an immense tree that stands in the middle of the universe. It connected the heavens to the Earth with its roots extending deep underground. The tree as a symbol of representation of the construction of the universe is used by many ancient cultures across the world. According to anthropologist Eliade (1959), the cosmological ideas of the 'Tree of Life', 'World Tree' as the navel of the Earth, or 'axis mundi' (the point of connection between the sky and earth) reappears in a large number of cultures around the world. Yggdrasil is a combination of 'axis mundi', 'World Tree', and the 'Tree of Life'. Yggdrasil—which relates to both underworld and heaven, gods, giants, and people—is a symbol of universality and cosmos. 'It unites and separates the worlds of Asgard, high in the tree, [...] [inhabited by the gods], Middlegard where the human beings live, [...] and the damp and dark underground world of Hel, monstrous goddess of death' (Murphy, 2013, p. 5). There are different

<sup>4</sup> Mallet, M. (1847). *Northern antiquities; or, An historical account of the manners, customs, religion and laws, maritime expeditions and discoveries, language and literature of the ancient Scandinavians (Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Icelanders) with incidental notices respecting our Saxon ancestors*. B. Percy (trans). London: H. G. Bohn.

roads of communications between these worlds. As Murphy (2013) argues, it is an extremely steady yet dynamic model of the universe—as are, we might add, af Klint's paintings.

Yggdrasil also has another function: at the moment of the end of the world, Yggdrasil will open up to the last man and woman, or boy and girl, Lif and Lifthrasir to let them in and protect them from the world's destruction. The promise of a new life after the end is also something very close to Christian thought: the fall of Adam and Eve brought with it the punishment of death on the cross and accepts that punishment for mankind. The death of Christ on the cross redresses the mistake, turning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by means of the cross, into a tree of life. Af Klint is conscious of this tradition and included an androgynous Christ in the final tree of her series.

Because of af Klint's complex visual language, it is necessary to attempt to decode some of the complex inheritance of visual codes and references in her trees. In Scandinavian myth, Yggdrasil, as well as the tree of knowledge, evokes the idea of the creation and organisation of the world. Af Klint combines the Yggdrasil with stylistics of contemporary botanical and scientific diagrams. Tree diagrams were originally used to represent binary oppositions. They were widely used through history to depict the natural or divine order in the world (Gontier, 2011). With the development of biological and botanical science, tree diagrams were used for classifications which described the order of living and non-living organisms. By tying mythic and contemporary scientific styles, af Klint forges a fusion, or hybrid, of the mythical and scientific—much as theosophy drew a new theology from combining spiritual and scientific sources. However, af Klint also breaks significantly with theosophy. According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'the importance of hybridity' as historical practice and political gesture, 'is that it problematizes boundaries' (2009, 5). I claim that af Klint's art emphasises this problematising of boundaries, and that her trees use both esoteric ideas of primordial knowledge and the theosophical reading of Norse mythology to make a political break with theosophical teaching as well as with classical understanding of the binary oppositions in the natural world.

Drawing on the meaning of the title preserved in the figure of speech used in the full name of the biblical tree—tree of knowledge of good and evil—on one stylistic level, she presents the duality of nature as fundamental in the world, which can be seen in the dual spheres that are a part of each tree study in the series. The literary device 'merism' brings together opposite terms—good and evil—in order to indicate a general meaning. Thus, the phrase 'good and evil' would basically signify 'everything'. This expression is common in both Egyptian and Greek literature. Alongside the well-known biblical story of expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, af Klint's series is also connected to another biblical tree: The Tree of Life. This concept appears in a wide range of myths and religions. In Kabbalah, it is used to understand the nature of God, and the way he creates *ex nihilo*. In Norse mythology, the immense holy tree Yggdrasil is also related to cosmogony. Situated in the centre of the cosmos, this mythical tree it is inhabited by the eagles and the serpents, that appear to be a source of inspiration for af Klint's imagination.

Refiguring mythic form, af Klint expresses Yggdrasil in the register of classificatory diagram. According to Nathalie Gontier, 'Tree diagrams as we know them are first and foremost an outgrowth of philosophical attempts to find the true order and ontological structure of the world, an idea that can itself be traced back to most written cultures' (2011, 536). According to Gontier (2011), non-evolutionary tree diagrams originated in the form of another tree: *Arbor Porphyriana* (Figure 5). It was a visual depiction of relationships between substances and the hierarchy of binary oppositions.



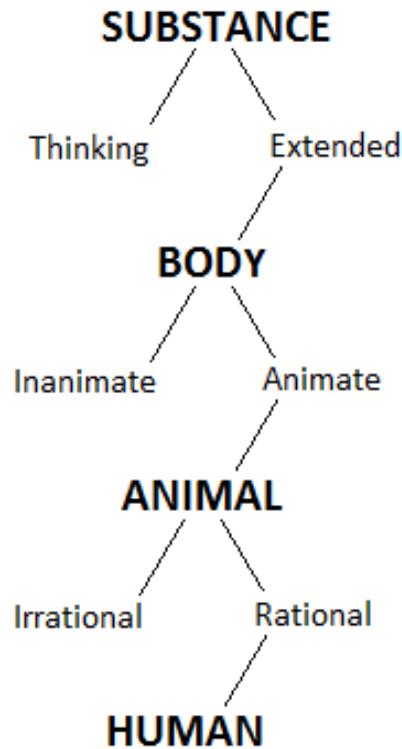


Figure 5 Simplified version of *Arbor Porphyriana*.  
Image source: Wikimedia commons.

With the increase in scientific knowledge, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, the elements were shown in tree diagrams according to affinities rather than ontological essences; for example, as done in Linnaeus's classification of the sexual system of plants in *Systema Naturae* (1735). Linnaeus classified organisms according to the shared characteristics they had in their natural attributes. According to Gontier (2011), he classifies them based on 'distinguishable, binary oppositions, in line with the tradition set out in Porphyrian trees' (p. 533). Gontier (2011) further argues that tree diagrams became the most common way to illustrate theories of evolution after the natural affinity between species was explained by the principle of natural selection. In diagrams, the emphasis is on putting different aspects of things in correlation. It is possible to show multiple viewpoints simultaneously in one image (Bender & Marrinan, 2010). 'Diagrams incite a correlation of sensory data with the mental schema of lived experience that emulates the way we explore objects in the world. They are closer to being things than to being representations of things' (Bender & Marrinan, 2010, p. 42). Following the diagrammatic mode, for af Klint, the arrangements of symbols and organisation of pictorial space plays a crucial role. In this sense, she employs a classical method of diagrammatic representation—correlating multiple viewpoints, such as political, scientific, biological, and esoteric on a single pictorial plane—and uses binary oppositions to establish a dialectical melding of these elements.

In this meeting of styles and themes, I claim af Klint's method is hybrid and androgynous: pulling together different formal registers, myths, contemporary knowledges and spiritualities, and echoing this hybridity of expression in stylistic and symbolic representations of gender fluidity and androgyny. For Nederveen Pieterse (2009), 'hybridity concerns the mixture of phenomena that are held to be different, separate; hybridization then refers to a cross-category process' (p. 78). The *Tree of Knowledge* functions as a cross-category aesthetic, combining a duality of the stories merged into a hybrid dialectic of sources and narratives, which is underscored in the duality of forms and symbolic colours that are combined into

a heterogeneous play of forms. Combining the Nordic mythical accounts of cosmogony with the Biblical story of the fall, narrated in esoteric language and symbols, af Klint creates an allegorical account of a metaphysical cosmogony, combined with a vertical hierarchy and connection between material and super-sensible plain. If we look at the series as a progression towards abstraction, as her development of the series appear to encourage, this implies that her experimentations with different meanings create ever more hybrid forms. In seeking out formal and aesthetic interconnections among these proliferating hybrids, the work is impelled towards increasingly abstract form. In this essay, I draw out the gender politics of af Klint's hybrid and androgynous abstraction. Af Klint writes, 'The first of both world trees is [...] an attempt to develop the moment when desire has succeeded to penetrate into a part of the human soul, that remains [...] liberated from material tendencies through subjected to mental meaning'. (cited in Fant, 1989, p. 52). Her art transmits hybridity, liberating human matter. As I argue, androgyny is a concept that serves both as a metaphor and physical realisation of this hybridity of forms that af Klint's aesthetic form achieves in pulling together these diverse elements.

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In order to understand how af Klint's two different aesthetic modes served in her resistance to traditional patriarchal hierarchies, it is necessary to look first at contemporary debates on public and private spheres of work and the traditional connotations of male and female roles that were ever-present in the cultural circles of the Swedish National Romantic and Symbolist painters. Secondly, it is important to study how these ideas developed in the context of National Romanticism. Ellen Key's paradigm shift in the understanding of private and public is particularly important since her ideas gave political validation to women's private activities. In my understanding, this served af Klint, either consciously or not, as a basis for the subversive political messages that she drew from the central motifs of esoteric language and the symbols by which she composed her art.

There were formidable reasons for artistic women of the period to keep a strict demarcation of public and private, particularly when one's private work was as potentially incendiary as af Klint's was. Various social and demographic changes in Sweden in the 1800s—such as the rapid rise in the population, the reorganisation of the traditional social classes, and the emergence of a middle class with strong liberal ideas—had a significant impact on women's lives (Popenoe, 1988). The need for the education of women resulted in many educational establishments opening their doors to female students, one of them being the Swedish Royal Academy of Fine Art in 1864, where af Klint subsequently studied. The conditions of studies for men and women did not, technically, differ at the Academy; however, relatively more women left the profession during or immediately after their studies (Ingelman, 1982).

Artistic men also appeared to have difficulties accepting the creativity of their women colleagues. Carl Larsson, the leading National Romantic painter, believed that manhood was needed for creativity, stating, 'In all the time since they have been the equals of the young men in the academy school, has there been a single artist among all these feeble women? [...] Manhood is what is needed, because art has to be creative; and passive, receptive women understand nothing of style when it comes to making it' (cited in Ingelman, 1982, 44). August Strindberg, who was supportive of the National Romantic movement, similarly claimed that creative independent women could not be truly feminine.

Therefore, gender politics and aesthetics intertwined and an environment was fostered in which strict resistance to female innovation or avant-gardism was ingrained in cultural mores. This is indicated by the fact that it was not until the late 1910s, when artistic women began adopting new aesthetics of

expressionism, that they experienced the fiercest criticism by newspapers and art critics. The most notable example of this new generation of expressionist artists is Sigrid Hjertén, whose art was called 'intellectually and morally crippled' (cited in Borgh Bertorp, Behr & Fritsch, 1999, p. 70).<sup>5</sup> Faced with this atmosphere, it is not surprising that af Klint decided to keep her public work in a domain where it was 'safe' for a woman artist to work in: landscapes, portraits, and illustrations, holding her more radical work away from the public eye, and using the 'safe space' of the feminine spiritual group as a basis for inspiration. In an entirely pragmatic way, the strategy of a dual working life allowed af Klint to express her resistance without being exposed to the misogynist attitudes of her time.

Af Klint's strict demarcation of public and private work can be further explained by the typical nineteenth century division of public and private sphere, which was commonly understood as a division between male and female. In *Vision and Difference*, Griselda Pollock claims that the divisions between public and private functioned on many levels. 'As a metaphorical mapping of ideology, it structured the very meaning of the terms masculine and feminine within its mythic boundaries. In practice, as the ideology of domesticity became hegemonic, it regulated women's and men's behaviour in the respective public and private spheres' (Pollock, 1988, p. 28). These divisions were challenged at the beginning of the twentieth century by feminist thinkers. In Sweden, from 1896 onwards, the questions became particularly prominent with Ellen Key's essays such as 'Misused Womanpower' and 'Natural Areas of Work for Women'. Key's focus is on the distinctive qualities of women. She criticises the patriotic or even militaristic passion to share in public life that she felt that many women in Sweden of her day were caught in, particularly after the ruptures in the union with Norway. She claims that women seeking a share in public life suppressed their life-giving tendencies, which worked to the detriment of humanity:

women have not followed their own wild path, the path of revolt against all the evil in society, which is the result of man's unilateral domination. Women have been afraid of being thought without a sense of purpose, of being derided as illogical and fanciful, as unfit co-workers, if they did not line up like zeroes behind a male cipher, did not work within the frame established by men. And thus the world has become what it is (cited in Register, 1982, pp. 601-602).

It is interesting to note that Key delivered this particular passage only to an academic audience in Göteborg. It was censored in Stockholm because the Academy of Science prohibited unpatriotic activities on its premises (Register, 1982, p. 602). Key's expressions of 'dismay over women's submission to patriarchy', as Cheri Register puts it, in their very attempts to strive for equality, had a significant effect on the development of the Swedish women's movement. Specifically, she 'recognized the tension between "the private and personally human" and "the public and universally human" and implied that the relegation of women's work to the former had curtailed the impact of female values on the latter' (Register, 1982, p. 602). As Register explores further, Key criticised the women's movement for degenerating into a dogmatism based on masculine standards. This posed the danger of limiting women's liberty and influence, and deviated from the original intent of emancipation, which was 'to liberate women as *könsvarelser* ("sex-beings"), that is, women as a group distinct from men' (Register, 1982, p. 601).

Key reworks these themes in her influential book *The Century of the Child* (1900), where she focused on the idea of 'motherhood' and 'fatherhood' with regard to a child's needs. This idea spurred many debates with regard to questions about the combination of public and private life, motherhood, and

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<sup>5</sup>Notably, criticism used vocabulary perturbably similar to the notorious Nazi degenerate art exhibition from twenty years later, in 1937. For further discussion on criticism of Hjertén's work, see also Borgh Bertorp (1995).

individual autonomy (Pironi, 2010). Through this, her work brought private issues into public consideration. Her main concern was to 'heal the public/private split by assigning public, social and economic value to work done in the private sphere' (Register, 1982, p. 602). As Register argues, Key promoted motherhood as a model for society; however, Key did not suggest that this should restrict women to domesticity—in fact she considered domestic work such as needlework a waste of time. Instead, she advocated a literature for women which would serve as a validation of women's originality and reveal their 'innermost beings' (Register, 1982, p. 602).

The alienation of the private from the social sphere that Key fought against was a conventional separation in the period. As Facos (1996) argues, it was furthered by increasing aesthetic and physiological orientations towards physical comfort, isolation, and fantasy. Facos (1996) further shows how this is evidenced by the changing design of Swedish bourgeois interiors, which were characterised by thick and heavy draperies, overstuffed furniture, and exoticism. Nacional Romantics were against these directions, and they argued that aesthetic choices were related to ethical choices (Facos 1996).

Carl and Karin Larsson decorated their home Lilla Hyttnäs in a way that addressed and contravened this bourgeois strict separation of public and domestic spheres. The simple and authentic décor for them was related to Swedish national identity. They promoted a 'holistic integration of the resident with the habitat' (Facos, 1996, p. 86), which was further emphasised by the integration of working and living spaces under one roof. Furthermore, in 1899, Carl Larsson published *A Home*, a collection of his illustrations of Lilla Hyttnäs, which allowed a large public to 'access' their private space and lifestyle. However, as Facos (1996) claims, by doing this, on one level, it could be argued that the Larssons reinforced the very division they were attempting to bridge since, as the claim goes, they actually 'further obviated the need for contact with the outside world' (p. 86). Whether or not this is the case, in presenting his private realm to the public, Larsson's goal was in a way similar to that of Key's: he wanted to present it as a universal model of social and domestic reform. Yet, it is also true that Larsson's idea differs significantly from that of Key's. Take for example Larsson's depiction of the painting of the Lilla Hyttnäs's walls—*Suzanne and Another*, from 1901 (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Carl Larsson, *Suzanne and Another*, watercolour, 1901, 94 x 62.5 cm. Private collection. Image source: The Athenaeum.

The viewpoint of this painting is from the inside the house, which furthers Larsson's idea of making his private space available to the public. However, it is the female figure (his daughter Suzanne) who is inside and works on the private, interior decoration, while two male figures paint the exterior of the house. In addition, Carl and Karin's work on the house was divided according to the traditional male/female division of work: Karin, who has given up her artistic career to become a housewife and a mother of eight, made textiles, while Carl painted murals and furniture.

In contrast to Larsson's subtle reaffirmation of traditional gender separation, the ideological shift that Key suggests is that feminism should consider both the public and private activities of women, and not to determine and separate either their public activities (as she argued the contemporary women's movement did by focusing only on political activism) or to the domestic sphere (as Larsson appears to do). This refusal to reaffirm the division upon which gender equality rested for so long is emphasised in Register's survey:

Standard Swedish history, when it acknowledges it at all, sets it [the locus of feminism] in the public sphere, usually in parliamentary activity. Feminists, then, are women who break out of private life, organize on the model of political parties, and seek specific reforms. A woman who stays independent of organizations and doctrines, extols private virtues, and sees love, an unlegislable emotion, as the crux of

liberation looks suspiciously anti-feminist, unless we broaden our view of what feminism encompasses (Register, 1982, 602).

Register helps in elucidating how Key's innovation is centrally relevant to af Klint's similar and contemporary approach to the questions of private/public and male/female roles. In effect, af Klint practices the melding of the spheres of political action encouraged by Key by bringing occluded political discourses into the private sphere of her esoteric abstractions. Her private work does not present domestic activities, as in Larsson's vision of the subtle affirmation of traditional gender codes. Instead, through her private art, she addresses important political questions of the position of women.

This reversal is borne out by af Klint's writing. Consider, for example, the inscription on the verso of the second of her paintings from the series *Tree of Knowledge*: 'Woman is in the desire of Manas, [which indicates mind, intellect, or general cognitive process] but man is desire in the physical' (cited in Fant, 1989, p. 52). Here, af Klint reverses the classical Aristotelian tradition of connecting man with intellectual capacity and woman with material/physical. Furthermore, she applies this idea in her painting, by making her public work a physical rather than intellectual expression of reality.

This feminist melding of traditional gendered capacity to mimesis bears centrally on her painting of trees. We might consider one of her traditional paintings of nature, *Oak Tree* (Figure 7). Completed in a 'male', national romantic way, this is her 'public tree', based on physical observation of its physical form. By contrast, her private feminine tree—a tree of knowledge—is diagrammatically abstracted from realism and presents a philosophical tree, a product of her private mental activity ('Manas'). Af Klint's private and partly abstracted tree exposes the roots, invisible in the oak tree, as well as the entire ecosystem that the tree represents and sustains—such as birds and snakes, whose world actuality links in a dialectical manner with their esoteric and mythic range of meanings—but which are made invisible in the romantic and 'external' painting.

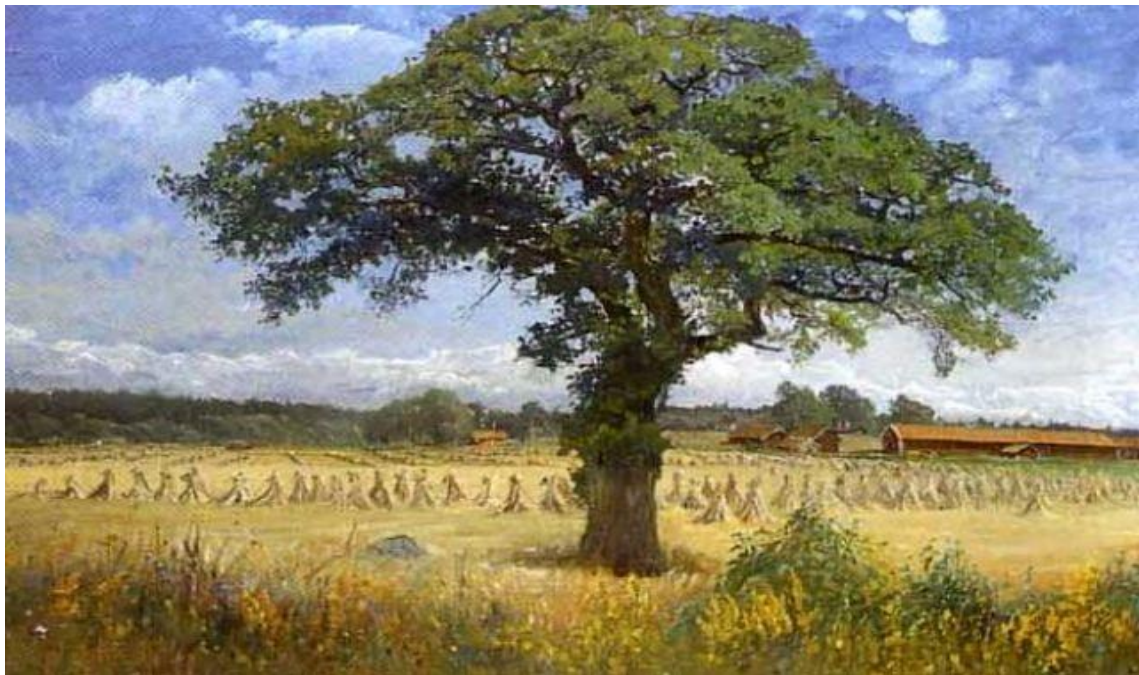


Figure 7 Hilma af Klint, *Oak Tree*, oil on canvas, 1907, 139.7 x 200.7 cm.  
Private collection. Image source: Bukowskis, Sweden.

In the first *Tree of Knowledge* painting (Figure 8), a heart composed of red and violet shell-like shapes is in the focal point of the picture. From the heart, which is connected to the four leaf-shaped aerial roots, blue and yellow strands lead the eye upwards in a dynamic movement of lines, making three distinct uterus-shaped sections of the tree crown. In the visual language of af Klint's private works, the colours blue and yellow are 'coded' as female and male colours, respectively. However, the lines lose their gendered colours when encircling two birds, one black and one white, which are themselves in turn gendered since black and white are, again, male and female colours for af Klint. Completely disconnected from each other at the first level, the birds came closer together at the second level, only to merge into one bird at the top. The fact that this image is unfinished leaves interpretation of the use of colours partly open. However, it should be noted that the merging of feminine and masculine birds into one is situated in the green area of the tree crown—the combination of blue and yellow—which in turn makes it the androgynous colour for af Klint. She re-purposes the natural colours found in *Oak Tree*—yellow ground, blue sky, with a line of greenery between them—so that her green tree crown takes on abstract colour symbolism. In this way, the visible part of the tree is recreated by the colour symbolism of her private work to denote the androgynous melding of male and female. Thus, af Klint's private politics of abstraction arguably forges a resistant, subversive gender politics from the visible external green of National Romanticism.

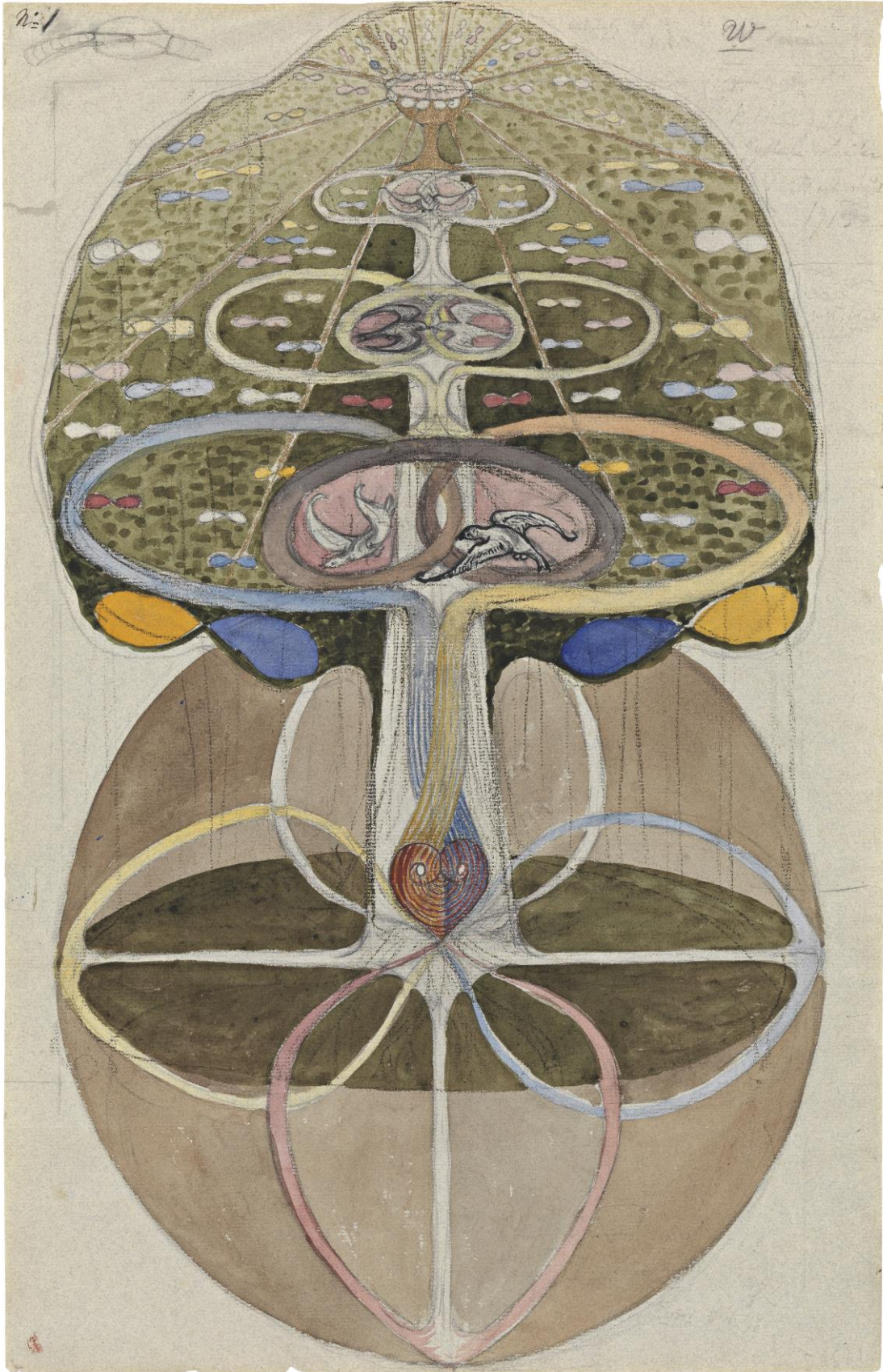


Figure 8 Hilma af Klint, HaK133, Series W *The Tree of Knowledge* no. 1, 1913.  
By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.



There is also a deep reflection on, and incorporation of, Scandinavian myth. Af Klint's dynamic play of tree elements—airial roots, life-giving heart in the tree trunk, and the crown inhabited by gendered birds, via gendered fluid lines—points towards an androgynous hybridising of genders and visions of the arboreal. Taking the painting of a 'public' tree from the Swedish countryside as a point of departure and combining it with the mythological elements of Yggdrasil, af Klint transforms the tree of knowledge into a political and private reflection on gender.

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Af Klint's concerns with gender are central to her private rejection of the dominant movement of Swedish National Romanticism. In the 1890s, Scandinavian artists returning from their studies in Paris, brought to Sweden a more subjective style of painting. They sought to emphasise individualism, romance and anti-rationalism in their landscapes. The unique qualities of Nordic nature, the deep forests, and northern lights were linked with a growing awareness and emphasis placed on nationalist expression. They are also used as symbols of Swedish national character. In this context, the tree became an important symbol of patriotism and the national consciousness and awakening (see further Nasgaard, 2016; Facos, 1998).

The generation of af Klint's professors, such as August Malmström and Georg von Rosen, favoured subjects from Nordic mythology and sagas, while the younger generation of her colleagues, the main representatives of the National Romantic movement, such as Prince Eugen and Ernst Josephson, specifically favoured Nordic landscapes and forests. Facos (1998) explains that forests for them functioned as 'repository for a national, historical consciousness' (p. 146). This was closely connected with the political thinking in the nineteenth century in northern Europe, and in particular with the ideals of national cultures and identities.

The emotion of national romanticism in Nordic countries was also developed in an international as well as national context, sometimes with extremely problematic racialist dimensions. In fin-de-siècle Europe, a fascination with the Northern European culture was widespread (Lahelma, 2014, p.16). Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, Richard Wagner's operas based on Nordic mythologies, and the novels and plays of August Strindberg were extremely popular throughout Europe, and they helped to form an admiration for the North. As Lahelma (2014) argues, exiled Nordic artists embraced the idea of the superiority of the North, and 'were even inclined to believe that it was now Scandinavia's turn to assume the leadership of humanity's intellectual advance. This belief was supported by the popular theosophical formulation of different world periods, according to which it was time for the "Northern race" to take over' (p. 16).

This movement was further developed in contact between Swedish and German artists and thinkers. In Berlin, a group of Nordic artists and writers, led by Swedish writers and lovers Ola Hansson and Laura Marholm, joined the artist colony in Friedrichshagen in 1891. Even though the life of this colony was short, it played an important role in the European avant-garde. According to Cepl-Kaufmann and Sokoll (2012), the encounter of Berlin naturalist poets, original members of Friedrichshagen, with Scandinavian thinkers was a base for a fundamental paradigm shift towards an art and literature that reflected a modern sense of alienation (p. 185). This was particularly emphasised after the arrival of Strindberg and Munch. They contributed with the new ideas of self-understanding that affected the work and life of the community in such measure that popular author Hermann Sudermann proclaimed: 'From the North comes the light to us', referring to their presence (cited in Cepl-Kaufmann & Sokoll, 2012,

p.184). The group gradually developed an aristocratic perception of themselves based on Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883), which announced the coming of the *Übermensch*, understanding that a divine art would show humanity its true path. For Hansson, the artist also possessed a higher stage of knowledge. He especially magnified these characteristics in Strindberg: 'This poet is like an old Nordic saga, something like a magnificent fairy tale. His outward appearance is already marked by the stamp of the nobility of genius' (cited in Cepl-Kaufmann & Sokoll, 2012, p.190).<sup>6</sup>

The disturbing forms that this impulse took is bound up with the use of the tree made by theosophy. In Blavatsky's thought, primordial Ur-culture is connected with her racial theories, which have troubling parallels with later fascist theories of race and racial hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> In her textbooks of theosophy, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky uses the Nordic cosmogony myth of Yggdrasil, in combination to other world mythologies, to construct her own genesis of the primordial races: 'The prototypes of our races were all enclosed in the microcosmic tree, which grew and developed within and under the great mundane macrocosmic tree' (Blavatsky, 1972, p. 297). A disturbing racism frequently emerges from these mythic returns. Blavatsky also employs the tale of lost continent, Atlantis, alongside the tree to justify her theory of Aryan race superiority. She placed Atlantis to the far north and claimed that the Atlantean's superior, sophisticated Ur-culture is transmitted to the Aryan race, which '[...] was born and developed in the far north, though after the sinking of the continent of Atlantis its tribes emigrated further south into Asia' (Blavatsky, 2011, p. 768).

This notion that the Scandinavian North could be equated with Plato's Atlantis also spread to academic circles in Germany and Austria at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rudolf Steiner further reworked racial theories. For anthroposophy, race is an essential element which 'connects the higher worlds to the physical plane' (Staudenmaier, 2014, p. 38). As Staudenmaier (2014) further explains, it teaches that racial categories are a result of the 'divine workings' and of the cosmic plan. For anthroposophy, 'race itself is not merely a biological attribute but a primary vehicle of spiritual progress' (Staudenmaier, 2014, p. 38). However, for Steiner (1985), only one race is predetermined to a spiritual progress in a certain period of time. He claims that Atlanteans possessed 'magical, psychic forces' and 'the Caucasian race'— which descends from the Atlanteans—is 'the truly civilized race' (1985, p.144, cited in Staudenmaier, 2014, p 45).

Although af Klint was a keen student of theosophical eclecticism, using the discipline as a model for her hybrid aesthetic style, I argue that her turn to the Yggdrasil should be read as constituting a distinct break from theosophical Nordism. Repurposing disturbing equations of origins, af Klint entirely shifts the theosophical effort to identify the underlying life-form, the Ur-form, or primordial form, repurposing this vocabulary as a means of expressing the creation of the new and not racialised origins. She writes on the verso surface of her second *Tree of Knowledge* painting: 'It is our intention to produce an Ur-image for every time we give you a drawing, an Ur-image of a new event' (cited in Fant, 1989,

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<sup>6</sup>In her research into the long and complicated history of the concept of genius, Christine Battersby shows the invariant exclusion of artistic women from being attributed this title. This is especially true for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when this term reaches its peak in the Romantic movement (Battersby, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Blavatsky believed in intellectual superiority of Aryan race. She writes: 'Mankind is obviously divided into god-informed men and lower human creatures. The intellectual difference between the Aryan and other civilized nations and such savages as the South Sea Islanders, is inexplicable on any other grounds. No amount of culture, nor generations of training amid civilization, could raise such human specimens as the Bushmen, the Vedddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes, to the same intellectual level as the Aryans, the Semites, and the Turanians so called. The "sacred spark" is missing in them and it is they who are the only *inferior* races on the globe [...]' (2011, footnote, p. 421).

p. 52). Turning away from nationalistic and racialist origins, for af Klint, the seeking for origins is diverted to the search for 'the new'. With her 'new' knowledge and her aesthetics, which represents private political struggle, af Klint can in this sense be read as a political aesthetics' that parallels Key's striving to validate private activities as authentic political activity. Af Klint's Ur-culture is not something 'transmitted' as in Blavatsky's thought, which points to a tradition or racial heritage of the north, as was so often celebrated in Nordic National Romanticism. Instead, af Klint insists on a 'new event', a hybrid of styles, an androgyny-to-come, that is led by her artistic intuition and expresses a clear break both with traditional aesthetics and the theosophical insistence on heritage of knowledge. With its tireless hybridity and androgyny, af Klint's work, as I see it, turns the Yggdrasil decisively away from racialist questions and towards the possibility of progressive gender relations. It is against theosophical narratives of race that present otherness as inferior that af Klint's androgyny intervenes. Rejecting disturbing fantasies of the North, af Klint presents otherness in gendered terms that refuse to ever stay tidily binary or opposed. Against theosophy's Yggdrasil, the ever-present admixture of a new female-and-male-to-come within every individual or society that is traced by af Klint's *Tree of Knowledge* rather demands equality in social relations between the two sexes.

Several decades after af Klint's painting, Hélène Cixous writes that instead of seeing the other as a threat, there needs to be an acceptance of the other that incorporates both sides of the subject/object and male/female binary oppositions. Af Klint's way of accomplishing this is through her development of subversively androgynous aesthetics, which, following Cixous's notion of an *écriture féminine*, might be described as a 'feminine abstraction'. With her 'new' knowledge and aesthetics, af Klint opens the possibility of change, which, as Cixous later sets forth, 'can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (2010, p. 44).

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Af Klint's innovation is the manner in which she draws a politicised aesthetics from esotericism. A vital component is the use of diagrammatic form that she employs in her tree series, which functions as a midway point between realism and abstract form. This involves a subtle challenge delivered on her part to both religious and political traditions in the series *Tree of Knowledge*. Androgyny as concept serves as metaphor of the complexity of forms that af Klint's aesthetic achieves by pulling together these diverse elements. Androgyny is also central to the melding of public and private, explicated by Key's feminism by which af Klint uses the diagrammatic Yggdrasil to renegotiate questions of gender.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to chart the long and complicated use of the concept of androgyny in myth, art, and feminist theory. However, it is important to briefly note different perspectives in order to understand af Klint's own use of the concept. Eliade identifies androgyny as

[m]ore than a state of sexual completeness and autarchy, androgyny symbolises the perfection of a primordial, non-conditioned state. It is for this reason that androgyny is not attributed to supreme Beings only. Cosmic Giants, or mythical Ancestors of humanity are also androgynous. [...] A mythical Ancestor symbolises the commencement of a new mode of existence; and every beginning is made in the wholeness of the being (Eliade, 1972, p.176).

Eliade shows that in various myths from oral traditions god and 'original ancestor' were considered androgynous. In various versions of Christian understanding, the 'original ancestor', Adam, known today as male as well as God, was also androgynous.

There are complex intersections of androgyny and aesthetics in the pioneers of abstraction. Without going into feminist debate concerning whether the concept of androgyny is a useful way of thinking about feminist future for woman (for details on this debate, see Cadick, 1986), it is important to note here that feminist theories supportive of the concept see it in the light of the end of patriarchal culture and the overcoming of 'mediating forms and structures' (Cadick, 1986, p. 77). However, androgyny too has a troubling history. In a very different interpretation, it has been argued that Mondrian uses androgynous forms to eradicate the feminine. According to Mark Cheetham, Mondrian's androgynous is an embodiment of his misogynistic affirmation of the superiority of male over female (Cheetham, 1991, p. 124). For Mondrian, woman is responsible for the lack of spiritual in the society and he hopes to exclude the feminine through 'purification' of forms in his art. Cheetham names this 'aesthetic eugenics' (1991, p. 123).

I would argue that af Klint purposes androgyny in a 'feminine abstraction' of hybrid interconnections that is quite different from Mondrian's 'purification'. In her tree series, af Klint's concept of androgyny is a complex and nuanced combination of affirming but, simultaneously, overcoming duality, and, in so doing, questioning of values of patriarchal National Romantic culture. As in the rest of the series, image no. 2 is divided into two distinct areas (Figure 9). The lower part is a brown circle which contains soil, roots, and the trunk of the tree. Af Klint describes this part as 'the powers developed on earth' and adds that they are not only astral but also the mental and captivating forces of nature (cited in Fant, 1989, p. 52). From the heart of this nature emerge two intertwining coiled strands, as in the first image, but this time af Klint adds an explanation in the top right corner of the image. She marks the black strand as 'truth line' and the white one as 'love line'. Both lines continue to the upper part of the picture, connecting the worlds, as in the myth of Yggdrasil. In a manner similar to the first image, two birds, divided as black and white—male and female—become one heart-shaped bird, half-black and half-white on the top of the love line, echoing with its shape the heart from the base of the tree. In this way, she transforms vertical hierarchy into an equalisation of gender, in a stylistic androgyny of formal techniques. On both sides of the tree crown base, there are blue and yellow painted horizontal eights. When explaining this symbol in her notes, Af Klint claims that it comprises male and female elements, which is also shown here by her use of colours (blue and yellow). For af Klint, this kind of dualism is a simplification of a message of alterity coming from 'outermost outline of the salvation' (1912, p.152).

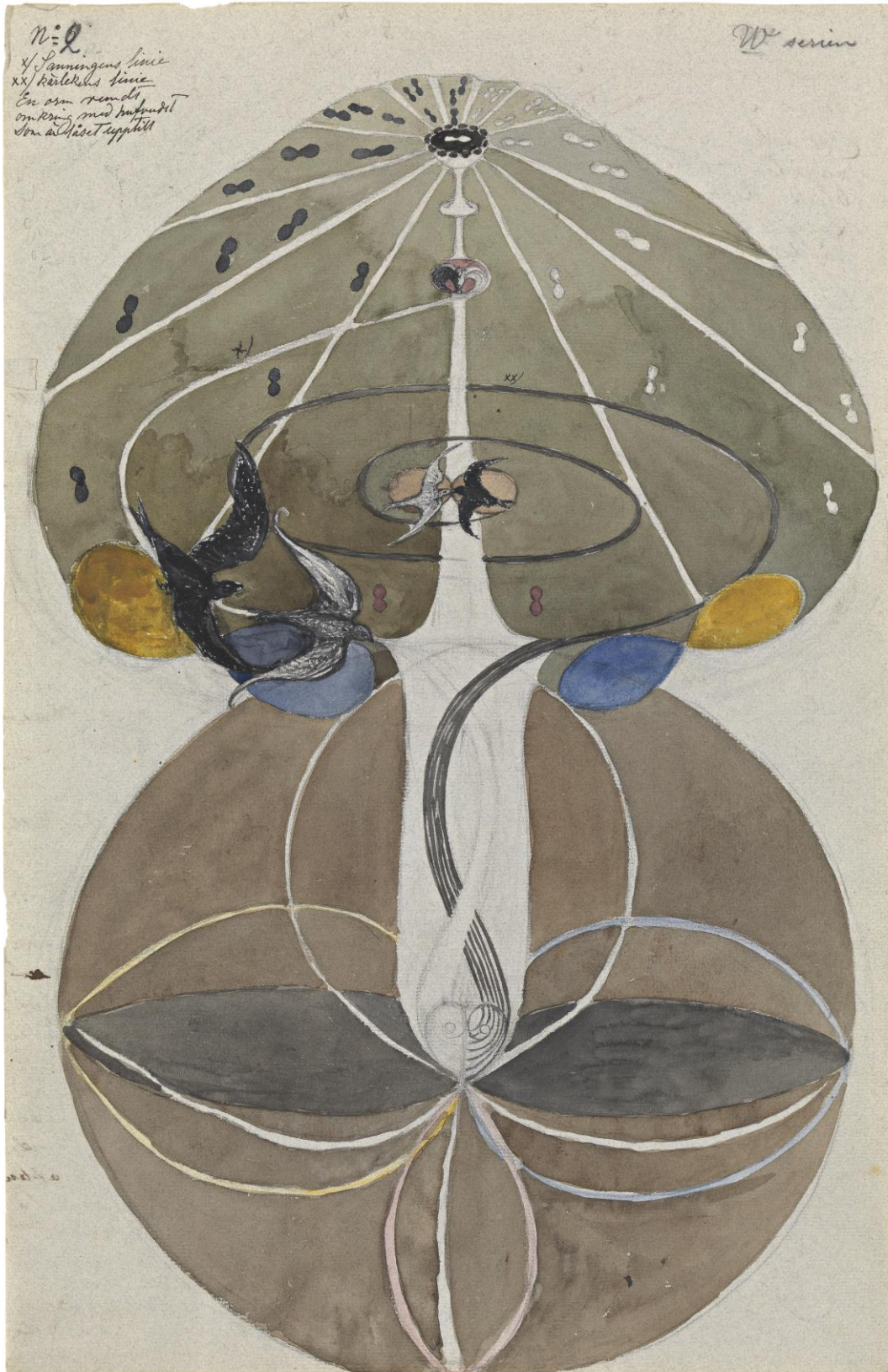


Figure 9 Hilma af Klint, HaK134, Series W *The Tree of Knowledge* no. 2, 1913.  
By courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.



Named after Charles Boyle, the Earl of Orrery, who was presented by watchmaker John Rowley with one of the first instruments in 1704, the orrery mechanically modelled the motions of the solar system. The orrery was a technological object that charted a new form of discourse. As a technically realised Yggdrasil, it mapped the nine planets, just as the Nordic sacred tree connected the nine worlds of Norse mythology. Davis Baird claims of the orrery, that these kind of early instruments were 'developed and used in a context where mathematical, scientific, and ordinary language is neither the exclusive vehicle of communication nor, in many cases, the primary vehicle of communication' (2004, p. xv). As a symbol of discursive intervention, I think the orrery helps af Klint formulate her own visual path. Visually, af Klint's tree is reminiscent in its diagrammatic form of the scientific instrument, and perhaps seeks to echo its physical body, and its representation of the solar system realised for science the diagrammatic mapping of the cosmos that the Yggdrasil performed for myth. Bender and Marrinan (2010) describe diagram as 'a hybridized form of knowledge in which a user's imagination intertwines with the world of fact to produce new understanding' (p. 91). Likewise, af Klint's singular portraits of trees, stripped of any context, perspective or surrounding landscape, function in this way as hybridising diagrams of 'the new'. As a means of 'doing and making', in Rancière's sense, af Klint sets the orrery, and its interconnection lines, so suggestive of her dynamic and abstracted vision of androgyny, to work upon and intervene in the visibility of the Nordic tree. Describing the hybridity of myth, scientific, and technological modernity in androgynous symbolic forms and colours, her feminine abstraction resists the disturbing and purifying racial overtones of theosophic trees and the patriarchal nationalism of National Romantic trees. Mimicking the dynamic arms that hold the planetary bodies of the orrery in relation, and in so doing map the current positioning of the solar system, the 'truth lines' and 'love lines' of af Klint's abstracted Yggdrasil turn the mythic tree toward an urgent task of charting the contemporary passage of gendered relations.

Her interest in the science and technology and her commitment to modernity continue to develop in her later abstract work. In later series, such as the *Atom* (1917) and *Swan* (1915) series of paintings, she likewise forges an innovative abstract form in the hybrid bringing together of the duality of contemporary science and myth. Af Klint was immersed in the social and artistic currents of her time, but she was also possessed of a deeply personal and idiosyncratic vision. While National Romantics, despite their apparently progressive political ideas remain conservative and attached to French Symbolism in their visual language,<sup>8</sup> af Klint works towards an innovative, abstract aesthetics. Her private steps toward a mode of abstraction allow af Klint to break with the public/private split played out in the representational poles of National Romanticism and Symbolism, and the resultant ideological undercurrent of gender inequality, while simultaneously pulling the political into the zone of the private, just as Key had described. In my reading, af Klint's aesthetic challenges patriarchal formulations of hierarchical and racial society, where the other is considered inferior. Taking as her point of departure the aestheticised nationalisms of her contemporary National Romantics, and proto-fascistic theosophic race theories, af Klint's feminine abstraction redirects Nordic myth towards an androgynous political aesthetics.

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<sup>8</sup>Michelle Facos describes them as part of politically progressive social democracy movement. Even though they were in the context of social classes, they were not as progressive in terms of questions of gender equality, as I explore in this paper.

## Author presentation

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