

***Art, Occultism, and Science in the Time of Hilma af Klint***  
**CAA 113<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, New York, Thursday, 13 February 2025**  
**On location at the New York Hilton Midtown, in room: Morgan Suite**

**Convenors**

**Professor Emeritus Linda Dalrymple Henderson**

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**Conference Session**

The Swedish mystic painter Hilma af Klint's record-breaking exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 2018 testifies to substantial changes in the reception of art, science and occultisms, particularly a noticeable new openness toward occult and spiritual subjects by artists. More than had been realized previously, scientific developments in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (X-rays, radioactivity, the electron, and the still-reigning ether of space) played a key role in creating a new cultural focus on invisible realities beyond the human eye. In the last two decades, excellent scholarship on this and the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century prevalence of occultism has emerged in the histories of art, science, religion, and literature. Occultism became international, with spiritualist journals, translated books, and a network of Theosophical publications making such ideas readily available, including to af Klint in Stockholm. Access to these scientific discoveries and occultism not only provided vital support for spiritualists, Theosophists, and alchemists but also motivated many artists, particularly modernists, to explore these new sciences in their interrelationship with the occult. Now that it is clear that these concepts were not on the margins but were central for many artists and, hence, for modernism itself, this session is intended to showcase recent scholarship in this field.

**Conference Session Speakers**

**Vivienne Roberts**

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***Re-evaluating Madge Gill: Mediumship, Music, Marconi and Mars***

The recent interest in spirit-inspired artists like Hilma af Klint, Agnes Pelton, and Georgiana Houghton has paved the way for re-examination of such historically overlooked visionary

women as Madge Gill, particularly her significant contributions to mediumistic and visionary art. Recontextualizing Gill within the framework of Spiritualism and Theosophy places her at the intersection of esoteric, scientific, and artistic discourse in the early twentieth century, a time of innovation and exploration beyond normal perception. Her clairvoyant visualisations and automatic techniques, characterised by geometric and organic abstractions, astrological motifs and spiritual references, often feature terms like ‘wireless,’ ‘etheric waves,’ ‘music’ and ‘mars’. These elements of her art signify Gill’s engagement with invisible emanations such as auric flows, magnetic forces, sonorous waves, ectoplasmic presences and etheric energies. This engagement aligns Gill with key scientific discourses of her era, including Lodge’s studies of electromagnetic radiation, Marconi’s wireless telegraphy, Flammarion’s planetary communication and Besant’s ideas on sound and thought forms.

Beyond her scientific and esoteric relevance, Gill’s art created from 1920, an era marked by pandemic, war and uncertainty, seems to resonate with contemporary audiences as evidenced by her recent inclusion in the Venice Biennale. Here the recurring depiction of myriad female faces in her art invited feminist readings, signalling that spirit inspired art was predominantly the realm of women who challenged patriarchal artistic structures. This solidifies Gill’s place within art, science, occultism and feminism during and after Hilma af Klint.

### **Susan Aberth**

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### ***Invisible in Plain Sight: The Esoteric Content in Leonora Carrington’s Oeuvre***

Long relegated to the periphery of the Surrealist movement, Leonora Carrington’s work has finally reached a greater global appreciation. Part of the delayed appreciation of her work was no doubt related to her gender, but other important factors were at play as well, particularly her long residence in Mexico. These factors aside, her complex visual and literary work is steeped in the occult traditions of many cultures, often with a focus on feminine deities and women’s ritual practices. These references were misunderstood, ignored, or dismissed as the fairytale fantasies of a superficial woman artist. This presentation will trace how the various esoteric aspects of her work have come to be better understood—as well as the continued resistance to their serious consideration.

### **Serena Keshavjee**

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### ***Juliette Bisson and the Art of Ectoplasm***

Within the new visual cultures of psychical science in the 1910s to 1930s, practitioners theorized ectoplasm as a materialization of psychic energy that could be captured on

photographic plates. Building on research for my 2023 exhibition and related anthology, *The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs*, this paper focuses on the photographic production of Paris-based sculptor, Juliette Bisson (1861-1956) and her séances with the medium Eva Carrière (Marthe Béraud, 1886-1943), who was able to produce ectoplasm from every orifice of her body. While Spiritualist Arthur Conan Doyle credited Bisson with conquering the flash apparatus and capturing the first ectoplasmic materializations on plates, her high-contrast images revolutionized the look of spirit photography. One of few women accepted into psychical research circles in Paris and Munich, Bisson worked from 1909 to 1922 alongside the most respected researchers of the period: Charles Richet, Gustav Geley, and Albert von Schrenck Notzing. Even though Schrenck Notzing's *Phenomena of Materialisation: A Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumistic Teleplastics* (1923) became much better known than Bisson's *Les phénomènes dits de matérialisation; étude expérimentale* (1914), Bisson had collaborated with Schrenck Notzing on many of the scientific illustrations published in his book. Despite questions of fraud dogging Carrière and Bisson, this paper will look at how they utilized sculptural carving techniques, biological theories, and staging practices to craft their dramatic ectoplasmic imagery.

### **Sébastien Mantegari-Bertorelli**

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### ***Images of the Spirit: Art, Science, and Occultism in the Visual Works of Carl Gustave Jung***

In addition to Carl Gustav Jung's *Red Book*, his visual works included several dozen paintings, as well as many sculptures and numerous drawings arising from his experimentation with the visualization and externalization of the contents of his self-induced visions entailing his "confrontation with the unconscious." These works feature figures that assume the appearance of characters from mythology or the *Bible*, divinities or mysterious ritual scenes that take on multiple and hybrid meanings. All these images were used by the psychiatrist to establish his own personal mythology, and his own relationship with the modern world. While the creation of this mythology through images is rooted in Jung's vast cultural background in myths, comparative religions and art history, it also seems to rely heavily on his knowledge of the occult and esotericism, and in particular Theosophy, through his personal readings and social connections. Through his visual works, Jung thus seems to be part of the vast field that Tessel Bauduin calls "occult modernism", defined as "the interaction between occultism and modern artistic expression." Yet how does occult spirituality and psychological science interact and enrich each other in Jung's works? How also might these images, in dialogue with other artists interested in the occult, provide a more complex and less teleological approach to modern art? Using the tools proposed by art history, visual cultures and the anthropology of images, these are the questions this paper aims to answer.