



rooting for hilma:
on reading a tree
in a rhizomatic way

matilde tomat

SHORT VERSION

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Matilde Tomat is an installation conceptual performative multifaceted artist and writer whose practice focus is on the absence of and / or search for boundaries. Her interest is in the process itself and not in the final piece, where the three-dimensionality of her works take on the fourth one

of time and where space, time and their limitations disappear. Her work is mainly morphogenetic and follows intuitions, instinct, and impulses. Her choice of material stems from an almost archaeological strategy based on enquiry and investigation, ordering and archival. Inspired by M. Heidegger, M. Henry, G. Deleuze and T. Ingold, her desire is to direct her research to that elusive meeting point between art, spirituality, philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology.

Grounded in existential psychoanalysis and an eclectic philosophical approach, and supported by a strong ethical supervisory practice, she is interested in creating a phenomenological responsive safe space where artists can engage in space exploration, conceptual elaborations, material tactility, and the stopping of time; and where inner transformation happens.

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acknowledgements, uprooting and unravelling

Deleuze and Guattari inform us at the beginning of *A Thousand Plateaus* that when writing each of them were “several, there was already quite a crowd” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013a, p.1).

I am grateful for my crowd which (in a rhizomatic way) starts with

...Fiona for offering me a shed at the end of a garden and endless coffees and laughter; coffees which remind me of Helen and our walks around the university grounds, very cheeky commentary, and her endless encouragement; similar to Sam’s who has been listening, and listening, and listening to all of those words that directed me to Tilo (as in Dr T Reifenstein, Senior Lecturer in Critical Studies and Supervisor) who showed me a world of a multitude of words, thoughts and links as very fine - but still distinctive- lines and who patiently provided answers to all of my questioning, as therapeutically divergent to Darren who, instead, *simply* sat, accepted, and helped me unroot parallels and more shootings between this dissertation and my Being; that Me that when sitting in front of Fr. P. almost magically turned those lines into colourful woollen threads that can be unravelled and still keep you warm when you are sitting in front of a fire, in a shed, at the end of a garden...

And of course Tilo > Thilo > Thalia > *Tilia* > *ptel-ejā [meaning "broad"]: i.e. all that is at the root of this dissertation.

shoot

This dissertation wants to be both a methodological inquiry on a rhizomatic approach integral to a subjective way of reading an artwork and also a *revealing* of the process itself as the action of responding to the chosen work by Hilma af Klint. Inspired by the works of James Joyce, TS Eliot, Virginia Woolf, WG Sebald, Olivia Laing, and Rebecca Solnit I have tried here to replicate such a practice, where the stylistic element hopefully becomes content, allowing for a continuous connection-making that is not hierarchical but allows for fictional, historical, literal, critical and tautological stemming. Aware of the academic requirements in writing a dissertation, I have marked such literary radicles employing justified text. In-text references, citations, clarifications, and any academic requirement have been [in these instances] deliberately omitted to allow for the flow.

side shoot

I have written most of this dissertation while listening to Tchaikovsky's Concerto in D major, Op. 35, TH 59, Allegro Moderato.

P. TSCHAIKOWSKY
Concerto
(Op. 35)
Edited by LEOPOLD AUER

I

Allegro moderato (♩ = 126)

Piano

The image shows a page of musical notation for the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Concerto in D major, Op. 35. The score is for Piano and is in D major (two sharps) and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Allegro moderato' with a quarter note equal to 126 beats per minute. The dynamic marking is 'p' (piano). The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the movement with a melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The second system shows a section with a 'poco a poco' (p) dynamic marking and a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking, leading to a 'mf marcato' (mezzo-forte marcato) section.

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NODE /IMAGE	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
A NODE	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
DELEUZE / GUATTARI / RHIZOMES	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
CONNECTION	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
HETEROGENEITY.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
MULTIPLICITY.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
NON-SIGNIFYING RAPTURE.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
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*Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself;
I am large — I contain multitudes.*
[Walt Whitman]

introduction



Figure 1: Hilma af Klint, ca. 1895

I first heard of Hilma af Klint (Stockholm, 1862 - 1944) in 2018 and since then I have been particularly interested in her due to the nature of her methodology, based on intense research, spiritual exploration, fasting, journaling, and especially determination, commitment, and a fundamental Trust in being led by her spiritual beliefs.

Having barely shown her spiritual paintings during her lifetime, she asked in one of her notebooks to keep her work hidden for 20 years after her death, with the first exhibition being at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 23, 1986, to March 08, 1987, titled *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 – 1985*. At present, her work is kept together by a foundation, a decision that allows for her whole body of work to be seen, curated, studied, and interpreted in concert (Obrist, 2020, p.102). Due to my wider interests in spirituality and how consciousness and different levels of awareness could be represented in artworks and then perceived by viewers, choosing her as the focus of my dissertation came natural to me to.

During the months leading up to the writing of this piece, I explored the literature available and noticed how the mainstream narrative mainly focuses on a handful of topics that are being researched, explored, and rewritten following almost a meticulous pattern. For want of a better word, I could describe this as *official* or *conventional*. Some of these topics deal with her position within a well-established framework of artists “into the standard narratives of Western modernism” (Birnbaum, 2020, p.140); whether she was or was not the first abstract artist (Müller-Westermann, 2020, p.25); whether her mediumship and spirituality were real (Fer, 2018, p.164); how much spirituality influenced her work (Høgsberg and Rudbøgg, 2020, p.11); whether being unknown and undiscovered for such a long time is what makes her unique (Fer, 2020, p.109), and not the artworks in themselves because “art history without biography may be a fallacy” (Molensworth, 2018, p.43).

These topics follow a straightforward, well-established, prescribed approach to art understanding and interpretation. I define this as tree-like: a historical perspective formed from happenings in society that inform the culture of the time, enlightening the then-existing artistic *milieu*, further influencing single artists and their creations. Later I will question if this singular view could be considered reductive and limiting when discussing art. In this sense, I used spirituality as leverage, as one way of many to look at artworks, hence allowing me to widen the scope of my research.

After reading articles that questioned of Klint’s spirituality and suggested a need to take a step back from her mysticism and mediumship to provide a critical appraisal (Fer, 2018, p.164) I felt particularly irritated and that Hilma almost needed protecting. I hence questioned how we could look at and appreciate any spiritually informed artwork in such a detached way when spirituality is instead elusive, idiosyncratic, and subjective.

To explore a more eclectic stance on art interpretation, I used a specific drawing from the extensive body of work of the artist, and precisely the representation of the tree *Tilia vulgaris* as found at p.37 in her 1919 *Flowers, Mosses, and Lichens* notebook and looked at it through the lens of the rhizomatic approach of Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995) and Félix Guattari (1930 – 1992). Therefore, I observed a tree from a rhizomatic angle.

I aim to conclude that a rhizomatic subjective approach is as applicable as any linear objective interpretation of art. This approach is based on non-linearity, Pindaric flights (as in non-logical but still real personal associations and digressions), imagination, connections, U-turns, eclecticism, and subjectivity. Conscious that any formal interpretation is not antithetical to any subjective reading, I still hope I can convince you that a personal reading of an artwork is as authoritative as any academically informed one.

This is truer when considering spiritual art. Many critics tiptoe around the concept of spirituality and its importance. James Elkins (2004, p.3) clearly described religious art and fine art as being “equal but different”: both are dogmatic; both are dedicated, closed, exclusive. If I were to describe some of the pieces of contemporary conceptual art, I might use the same adjectives I used before to describe spirituality: subjective, incommunicable, idiosyncratic. These are “churches” in their rights, with their language, rituals, and symbols, and who both seem to fight for a certain kind of supremacy. Is the exclusion of spiritual art from the fine art world just a matter of taste? Or purpose?

If art is meant, as I believe, to open our eyes and let them see the Essence of things; if art, in the ideas of the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) in his 1950’s *The Origin of the Work of Art* can set up a space where our *Dasein* can have an experience, where what is universal and atemporal can emerge; if in the words of Barbara Bolt (2011) art is important

because allows us to be what we are in Essence, should art interpretation not be more all-encompassing?

Before I continue, I take this opportunity to clarify my differentiation between religion as a dogmatic and controlled set of beliefs and observed rituals shared by a group of people, and spirituality which I consider more individualistic, experimental, and part of an existential personal journey that includes heightened awareness and persistent seeking. (Spretnak, 2014, p.14 and Elkins, 2004, pp.105ss)

*The aim of every artist is to arrest motion,
which is life,
by artificial means and hold it fixed
so that a hundred years later,
when a stranger looks at it,
it moves again since it is life.*
[William Faulkner]

literature review

...

This is a short and redacted version.

You can find the published dissertation on Amazon : [HERE](#).

Glance is the enemy of vision.
[Ezra Pound]

tendril

The fascinating aspect of a rhizomatic approach is that each of these principles feeds and connects to the others in a self-explicatory and self-defining way. “The rhizome serves as a methodological precondition for the definition of art as a capture of forces” (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p.126).

Should we accept Nicolas Bourriaud’s claim in Sutton and Martin-Jones (2008, p.78) that “art keeps together moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences”, we can also consent to an artwork as found at the intersection of its particular time and space, intersected by specific histories of maker and context. Hence, there is a much larger context, an agglomeration of different forces (O’Sullivan, 2007, p.74) and still, when we take away history, culture, biographies we are left with affects that are found in the sharing of ideas and are what make up our identities (O’Sullivan, 2007, p.76). This is what informs our understanding of an artwork and what we can take away from it: “the connections within the work depend on an investigation of real territories” (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p.80).

I am left admiring how these connections can be created by inner stories that viewers bring to the artworks. A whole different discourse could be then argued about a validating framework regarding this subjectivity: about content, standardisation, and direct evidence collection, because there are so many different dominating factors in our subjectivity that determine who we are, factors which Guattari described as polyphonic (O’Sullivan, 2007, p.88). I leave this to further exploration.

I might not agree with Sauvagnargues (2013, p.80) when she states that not all readings are valuable, but I do agree when she confirms that each one transforms the work. What do we see in it? Being interested in what is organically happening to the whole system of reading, I had a conversation with colleagues this summer and one saw a depiction of the solar system; another, moon phases, but then she suggested that those little circles might be pearls of a necklace worn by a little girl.

If we do allow for rhizomatic thinking, I am even wondering if you, reader, had any serendipitous synchronicity and connection while looking at the image and then reading about my associations. In the *here and now* this image still holds a Truth that waits to be discovered and then transmitted, a particular truth that continues to be current (Sullivan, 2007, p.81) and, I would add, personal.

Art then evolves into a fusion of cultures, allowing for the development of new discourses: we move from objectifying and reducing, to creating and connecting. Could you envision no duality (due to this dialogue about art being based on the binary (O’Sullivan, 2007, p.14)), but a recognising (Parsons and Clarke, 2013, p.95ss)?

Works of art are new abstract machines that create connections, unite dissimilar forces which, “by passing through us, give a shock of thought and initiate material becomings” (Sholtz, 2015, p.147). They allow for connections between cognitive, affective, and social influences, by creating new perceptions via direct personal experiences. Art itself becomes an “actualising machine” (O’Sullivan, 2007, p.34), where rhizomes are weapons against dualism and free from any formalism. Finally: real multiplicities (Sauvagnargues, 2013, p.125).

*In art there is only one thing that counts:
the bit that cannot be explained.*
[Georges Braque]

rootstalk /s

[or: one conclusion].



Figure 2: Hilma af Klint Exhibition - Museum of Modern Art Stockholm, 2013

Somehow, this is an ending.

I recognise that this piece took me where it wanted to go. Consequently, I reviewed the literature about Hilma af Klint, which I discovered followed a very repetitive handful of topics. Due to my desire not to label the artist, I explored and allowed for a Deleuzian rhizomatic framework to reading one of her works, specifically a drawing from her 1919 *Flowers, Mosses, and Lichens* notebook. I then used said framework not just as a methodological enquiry, but also as a revealing of the process itself, where the form represents the content, and vice versa.

As much as the rhizomatic framework, which is ever-expanding, so was the research for this dissertation and I am now left with many questions which I would hopefully explore further in the future.

I would like to know if this rhizomatic approach has any possible limitation within itself and if there is a need to authenticate the multitude of readings. I want to know more about that intersection between art, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, theology, ethnography, and psychogeography, for example; that space in-between; my personal Venn diagram, right *there*, as a starting point of multiple nodes. In this lies the Beauty of the opening up of a world of knowledge and the vast expanse of possibilities, allowing the rhizomatic process to do its work.

I am also interested in understanding if a more open, eclectic, broader, way of reading any work of art would free viewers (and makers) of the constraints of labelling and classification. If its acknowledgement would open the doors of art galleries to anyone, providing a wider acceptance.

What happened to O'Sullivan (2007, p.10), happened to me: the discovering a different possibility, another avenue of thinking, or even better: a validation of my thinking: "an attempt to reconfigure the way we think about the world in an affirmative and creative way" [p.12]. I hope to have looked at Hilma af Klint's work and her art (and more generically the spiritual dimension) honestly and seriously.

If "art is produced by the coupling of two very specific kinds of machines" (S. O'Sullivan, 2006, p.22) we can refer always to the artwork as art-machine and the viewer as subject-machine. What is *really* happening when this artwork is paired with a very specific viewer, the one who feels this effect; that preserver who can *read* the work (Heidegger and Krell, 2011)? Maybe, the way that this opening happens, is just personal and subjective. In

Heideggerian terms, then, the world and *everything* around us contribute to the understanding of what matters to us (Thomson, 2004).

and...

and...

and...

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