

IT'S NOT LIKELY THAT KANDINSKY MET HILMA AF KLINT

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Notes on Occult Geometry

I sit in an airport across from the tobacco, wine, and spirits counter and watch as an ad for Gauloises flickers on and off making the *Ga* and *oi* disappear so that it to me it reads *soulless*. Later, as we begin to board, I start Tao Lin's *Shoplifting from American Apparel*. And I can swear I read more than half the novel standing in the queue. Maybe the best place to read it, really. A book about the ennui of a generation incapable of knowing what to do. Where the protagonist called Sam spends his time on Gmail chat, holding an iced coffee, in an organic vegan restaurant where he works, meeting people but not saying much, removed, but very much in the moment, albeit apathetically. I wonder if in fifty years from now we will look back on Lin's protagonist, Sam, like we do André Breton's *Nadja*. *Nadja*, that begins with "André" asking, "Who am I?" and is further driven by chance, sketching a ten-day relationship between the narrator and the eponymous young woman. Both Sam and Nadja's spirits seem at a loss in a physical world, as neither is capable of fixing their own life nor the lives of people they meet.

THE TRIANGLE

The life of the spirit, Kandinsky says, can be represented in a diagram. And specifically in a diagram of a large acute-angled triangle. One divided horizontally into unequal parts with the smallest part up top and the largest on the bottom. The triangle travels through space slowly, evolving, shifting minutely, always in movement forward and upward.

The top is inhabited by one man – and only one (today that might be a woman, or two women, seeing as collectivity is considered a good thing now). That one (wo)man is deeply sad, misunderstood, made out to be crazy or a liar by those surrounding her, one tier down. She is way ahead of her time, and that is her task. Her sorrow is more or less acute depending on the time she lives in. Interestingly, artists are found in all three tiers of the triangle. Their space is not only reserved for the holy top. This allows for poorer makers to exist, middle-of-the-road artists, as well as exceptions. There are artists who can see beyond their segment, and these are the artists who pull the whole segment further, but there are those who are blind, Kandinsky says, and those who delay the movement of the triangle. These are the artists who are seen as geniuses by

their segment-companions. And the bigger the segment is, the more understanding there is within it. This is not to say that once part of a segment, always part of a segment: people can fall forward and backward, depending on the cultural food they feed on. Those who stop trying, who give in, who stop swimming against the stream, will sink.

I wonder if Kandinsky would have thought Lin had given up and that his writing was a gradual sinking.

MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Occult Geometry is a major work and exhibition; major in that it tackles many sites, on different stages, and covers a year's worth of Tee's research into abstraction, its visualization, and the possibility of its connection to the mystical. *Occult Geometry* is a work in various parts that comprises sculpture, diagrams, a book (which can act as a script), and a set of performances.

Tee's sources, ranging from Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911), specifically the chapter on the Movement of The Triangle; Shuudan Koudou (Japanese Precision Walking; literally "group movement"); Tao Magic; and the work of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) come together as visible components in an active mise-en-scène. [Aside: I mention that the sources are "visible" and would like to stress that this very visibility is perhaps a very Tee trait: the prominence of different (often disparate) components in a work, coming together to form a kind of *Tee-inian* landscape. Elements range from historic rites, entire belief systems, material products, ancient or contemporary. But none are the "frontrunner," you could say.]

Occult Geometry (2014) was shown in Copenhagen, Denmark in the galleries of the Kunsthall Charlottenburg, hosted by in Signal-Center for Contemporary Art from Malmö. In large exhibition spaces, sculptures with lights, intricate ceramics, and textiles (*Crystalline Floorpieces*) are positioned next to collages or so-called diagrams that "function" (in a way) as scores for the different sections of the performance. Tee worked together with choreographer Marjolein Vogels to create a series of four performances that would be based on several references within *Occult Geometry*. Outside, in the courtyard of the Kunsthall, twenty dancers in white T-shirts and black pants performed *The movement of the Triangle/The Life of The Spirit*, *Shuudan Koudou/Ether Plane/Material Plane*; *Tao Magic/The Patter of Change*, and *Tao Magic/Chien/In Tune with Time and Creativity*.

TAOIST MAGIC

The distance between geometrical diagrams and sculpture, dance/movement, ritual, words, and calligraphy need not be far, as Tee shows us through *Occult Geometry*. Within Taoism, Taoist magic "offer[s] man

an inner vision to help him communicate with various spirits that inhabit his body." (1) The body is itself believed to be a microcosm, the inner spirits thus reflecting the outer spirits in the wider world. Talismanic calligraphy is an actual writing of terms and notions with a belief that these "emblems" on paper hold a healing power. The motion of the brush, ascending and descending lines, the brush on the paper, the color of the ink (five colors are holy: yellow, blue, red, white, and black), the time and space where the calligraphic talismans are created determine the (medicinal) power of the mystical graphic.

This link between the material world (the actual ink, the paper, etc.) and the spiritual world is what probably fascinates Tee. "Multiperceptual communication," (2) you could call it, is key. And connects strongly to not only Kandinsky, but also the last reference in *Occult Geometry*, the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. In brief, Hilma af Klint was an artist who explored the mystic qualities of abstraction (before Kandinsky, incidentally). She worked closely with four other women who called themselves "The Five" to try and connect with the spiritual world, with the "High Masters," as they called them, often through séances. Af Klint's paintings are diagrams supporting her ideas on these spiritual searchings. The term "diagram," though, might imply a dry rendition of a process where the product itself does only service to the end goal. Af Klint's diagrams are nothing of the sort. The importance of color, line, scale, composition – in short, aesthetics – is clear in her very striking geometric visual language. Quite amazingly, Af Klint requested that her work not be shown until twenty years after her death – on the one hand, perhaps a mere detail but on the other, perhaps an essential point (here). A point which makes me wonder whether Af Klint didn't feel as though she were at the tip of Kandinsky's triangle, in a position too precarious, too solitary, and thus potentially too misunderstood in her own time to be able to converse with her peers.

GAULOISE

We find ourselves today in a time where one might say that decades of intense commercialization and ruthless mediation has opened up a contrary road or approach: the possibility for a more holistic approach to art reception where the spiritual, the unknown, the less palpable materialist reality is warmly echoed in the production and presentation of art, and the visualization of abstract knowledge. In fact, one might even say that as a means to countering Post-Fordism we've embraced the realms of the abstract unknown, the tentative, the magical to such a degree that the term *Speculative* has chiseled out a capital S for itself. An openness for possibilities of *other* approaches to the (spiritual) world, where man is no longer the center of thought and action, where the Internet of Things levels anthropomorphic hierarchy, where object are subjects. These shifts in attention make Donald Kuspit's comments in 2003 about Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* feel dated:

The relentless materialization and mediafication—if I can invent a word—of art, which are accessories to its commodification, has stripped it of the sense of subjective presence so basic to Kandinsky's belief in spiritual experience, leaving us with what from Kandinsky's point of view is the shell of art rather than its spiritual significance. The point I am trying to make is that there is no longer anything hidden or concealed or behind art, as Kandinsky expected there to be. It is all up front: what you see is what you get, as has been famously said by Frank Stella as well as Andy Warhol. (3)

And maybe just a little bit nostalgic. A touch moralistic. What makes a writer like Tao Lin so contemporary is the strong presence of the banal in the real world coupled with the bottomlessness of the online digital life his characters lead. And at the same time the equally strong presence (absence?) of the spiritual – the search for meaning, and the ennuï of the soul, the loneliness, doomed solitude. Crucial in Lin is the lack of any ethical standpoint, heightened, again, by the dominance of the immaterial, digitalized world. (An ambiguity not dissimilar to Andy Warhol by the way, but that's another discussion). That and the freedom that comes with an absence of (dogmatic) conviction. What makes Kandinsky's ideas on the spiritual in art topical now is the associative freedom they create, the combination of the very concrete and the very abstract side by side, an allowance for an intangible reality to exist within a very palpable one, in short, a sense of possibility. Of *why no?* Funnily enough, it's in this space of supple thinking, of worldly and unworldly, material and digital, that Lin could meet Breton, where Tee stands on top of the triangle commanding Japanese precision dancers to follow a Taoist choreography, and Kandinsky could easily converse with Hilma af Klint.

- (1) Laszlo Legeza, Tao Magic. *The Chinese Art of the Occult*, Random House, 1975, p.30
- (2) Legaza
- (3) Donald Kuspit, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art", from: *Blackbird*, Spring 2003, vol. 2, nr. 1