

The Medium's Medium

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spiritualist art practices from the turn of the century and beyond

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The advent of spiritualist art-making in the 19th and early 20th century is emerging as an important addition to the art historical canon. For many years, the strange scribbles, obscure symmetries, figurative imaginings and floral bouquets transmitted from so-called other worlds, were overlooked - even ignored - by the cultural mainstream.

In recent years there has been a significant shift. Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz at the Serpentine Galleries, and Georgiana Houghton at the Courtauld Institute of Art, have revealed the impact of a spiritualist visual far beyond Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. Like-minded investigative exhibitions in Europe have included *World Receivers* at Lenbachhaus (Munich), *Drifting through the Endless Garden* at Wilhelm-Hack-Museum (Ludwigshafen) and *As Above, So Below* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin).

In New York, The Guggenheim drew record audiences for its Hilma af Klint installation. Likewise, in Paris, with the Grand

Palais retrospective of Czech radical, František Kupka.

Yet these high-profile narratives remain silent on the spiritual essentiality of the material, focussing instead on feminism and abstraction. This critical omission denies art history one of its most radical and forgotten steps. For it was the visuals of Spiritualism which switched artists across turn-of-the-century Europe and America onto a new improvised methodology.

Rather than impose a fixed narrative, *The Medium's Medium* encourages viewers to experience the material on its own terms, allowing the work to define its own meaning (as it did to its makers). *The Medium's Medium* also aims to contextualise Spiritualism's influence on other artists, through Surrealism and Art Brut, and to emphasise its connection to other movements, from Occultism to Art Deco.

Considered in this light, spiritualist art-making is revealed as a new pathway into our understanding of 20th century Modernism, and a lateral entry-point for contemporary artists today.

*I never said it was possible,
I only said it was true.*



The Castle Spectre (1797)
by Matthew Lewis

larger question.

Part of this is about the nature of the person. Whose existence is *persons multiple*? Is a single person a subject of experience and agent of action? If you believe that persons are multiple (and many cultures do operate to some extent on this notion), that souls can be multiple and independent of the body, there are lots of sources of interpretation. It leads to extenuations of agency and can reinforce them and shape them.

There are many questions here. It's partly about what underpins creativity - and I haven't been talking about that. I've been talking about agency.

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who is broadcasting?

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who is receiving?
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There is another question: about how human behaviour is framed and interpreted, and how that influences the formation of behaviour, experience and cultural reception. That has as much to do with institutions and beliefs as it has to do with individual consciousness.

MS: The cultural operating system affects so much, because of the prevailing narratives. Outside agencies come to us in many ways. The Surrealists' credo was to affect reality from our dreams.

You used the word *experiment*. I'm interested in experiments; and Gavin's contribution is fascinating in this way. Artists like to make trouble and challenge things.

Recently I went to an interview with Werner Herzog about his directorial skill. All of a sudden he said: *I don't direct my films!* The interviewer was incredulous:

You manifestly do direct your films, your name is on the credits. Werner Herzog said: *No, it's my brother, he does everything!* Everybody started laughing, except Herzog. He looked at the audience scathingly and said: *I'm not joking!*

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I understand what Herzog is doing, and again, it's about points of origin. Rupert Sheldrake has this wonderful idea, about the artist and the scientist as *outsiders*, which is morphic resonance. Who is zooming who? Who is broadcasting? Who is receiving?

It is a very interesting area. It's complex - and I didn't mean to criticise, because it's fantastic research.

Jonathan Allen: I'm Jonathan Allen. I'm an artist, a writer, I'm also a curator at the Magic Circle Museum - which is a museum of *secular magic*.

This is an interesting term to throw into the mix at this point. It's magic which makes no real claim to draw agency from any supernatural or paranormal source - in the sense of magic pitched and realised in a theatrical, material context.

I wanted to pick up on the conversation on the importance of and misuse of language. It seems to me that we've been talking about the words *spiritual* and *spirituality* with incredible flexibility.

I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the word *magic* in the same way. One important change is by adding *s* onto the end of *magic* and thinking culturally about *magics*, not about *magic*.

We're talking about different kinds of *spiritualities* here. Definitions are dangerous things, but I want to refer back to one useful description of *spirituality*. It includes the plurality which I'm suggesting. It comes from Susan Sontag's *Styles of Radical Will* and the opening lines of her essay, *The Aesthetics of Silence*. She says:

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Every era has to reinvent the project of spirituality for itself (spirituality equals plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence).

This covers a lot of the things we've been talking about, but keeps them in play together. I'm particularly interested in this term, it's quite ambiguous really: *ideas of deportment, aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions in the human situation*.

Ideas of deportment seems to describe multiple kinds of behaviours and attitudes to psychological bearings on reality: interactions and relations between human beings which might involve authenticity, and might also involve temporary deception.

This is where theatrical magic is very interesting. It plays a huge part in the history of Spiritualism, as demonstrated in the fin de siècle and blurs the line between Spiritualism as a religious experience and as a stage act (which are two sides of the same coin).

You talked about your disappointment with ectoplasm in the history of supernormal photography. That is another threshold where there's a contest between the material and the supernatural. You

can't just reduce it down to *spirituality*. You have to talk about deportment and approaches to spirituality - and then you're into the realm of human imagination and the province of artistic production.

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This is one of the fabulous things about the show at the Serpentine. Because of how material those paintings are, no matter how ethereal or supernaturalist or mediumistic her sources may have been, we are looking at pigment on paper, and it's sitting on a wall, and we encounter it in a material context. The divinations may have other origins, but they are manually and materially hewn into the world.

Susan Sontag picks up on that quite nicely; and our approach to that is how we deport ourselves in the presence of the materials by which we find ourselves challenged.

JB: I started The Museum of Everything because I was fascinated by the materiality of the objects I was looking at. Their form fundamentally moved me and gave me a wide range of people, behaviours, cultures and times. Opening The Museum of Everything proved that this material was profoundly moving to a wider audience. That nobody was showing it within the formal art world was the thing that drove me forward - and still drives me forward. I love the challenge of others saying: *No, this is not!* - and then us saying: *Oh yes this is!*

It is the materiality which allows us to have a conversation like this. The materiality communicates so that everyone has something on which to hinge their

ideas and belief systems.

Susan Hiller: There are two problems: *one is ideology*, the other is *detrimental scepticism*. In a sense, you have to walk between those two. Much what has been expressed is a sign of our discontent with how conventional cultural upbringing defines us. We're not going to be able to reform our society and our world until we reform that.

There isn't much point looking backwards. The thing to do is to take ideas, investigate them, and move forward - to cultivate a way of being. Maybe this is what Sontag means by *deportment*: something which allows for surprising experiences. That element of surprise is surely what one gets from a really good artwork. Suddenly you are surprised. That can be generated in normal life (and it often is).

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be careful!

A lot of the discussion has been muddled by vocabulary that slips around. After all, Spiritualism in the classic sense is a belief in the dead communicating with the living. A lot of people speaking today are using the word Spiritualism in a very different sense.

So that's all I have to say. Be careful! You need to be careful!

Avril Price: My name is Avril. I'm based here at the college and my field of interest is tarot studies. I'm passionate about tarot as an art-form, and also as a modality for self-discovery and a divination system.

For those of you who are not familiar with tarot, there are 78 cards and each are

archetypal symbols. One of the magical things about tarot is that it mirrors your inner life back to you.

Man's quest for his own psychic life has existed for millennia. I use the term *psychic* not necessarily as a clairvoyant would. The word *psyche* is about man getting in touch with his *psychic*, which is the great balancer between strength and nature.

*the unconscious longs to
merge with the physical world*

Tarot connects us to every known living human experience. Every one of us, on one level or another, has a memory or awareness of what that human experience is, and how it operates for us. Whether that information resides in the collective consciousness is worthy of debate. The point is the connectivity tarot has to the unconscious.

The unconscious longs to merge with the physical world. The unconscious does not have a language. It speaks to us through dreamscapes and art forms. It requires form. Through a modality like tarot we can give unconsciousness a language which connects us to the multi-dimensional, multi-faceted beings we are. It challenges us to see beyond the two-dimensional beings we are represented as in society.

Imagination is the playground of the divine. It connects us to our duality at birth. On one hand, we are divine will; we're also carnal and animalistic. This creates confusion, as we're birthed here in the physical plane. Our quest is - as part of this discovery of a psychic life - to make sense of the chaos into which we are born.

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