

# 'Mirages and visions in the air'

Tyra Kleen and the paradoxes of esoteric art

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Around the year 1900, European discourse on art was becoming increasingly 'esotericized'. The 1890s saw esoteric art salons create a sensation in Paris, and art critics and theorists painted a picture of the true artist and the esotericist as overlapping figures. There was also at the time a conflict regarding mediumistic art, a phenomenon initially made popular through Spiritualist mediums. This debate, as we shall see, had interesting gendered dimensions. In what follows, I will discuss how the Swedish female esotericist and artist Tyra Kleen (1874–1951) attempted to situate herself in connection to the concept of the artist as a *magus*, and the tensions between the positive view of mediumism in Spiritualism and the more negative or cautious approach to it in Theosophy, as well as in relation to the attendant gender issues.

The material used is primarily Kleen's book *Form* (1908), a sort of artistic manifesto that she produced, partially, it would seem, in response to ideas about esoteric art and women artists prominent at the time. Moreover, I provide an outline of the occultist circles in which Kleen moved, and of who some of her primary occult conversation partners were, better to understand what shaped her own ideas concerning related matters. We start, however, with a broader overview of how the period's art criticism became 'esotericized' in a manner which made it unavoidable for a person with Kleen's interests to actively engage

with some of the central notions of this discourse.

## Esoteric art and esotericized art criticism

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the reciprocal relationship between esotericism and visual art intensified. While major artists had certainly been inspired by esoteric currents and motifs connected with them earlier (e.g. depictions of alchemists by Bruegel the Elder and Younger, Rembrandt's 1652 *Faust* engraving, William Blake's many visionary works), this seemed to become increasingly prominent during the aforementioned period, especially among Symbolists.<sup>1</sup> A more or less fresh theme was the idea of (true) art itself as inherently esoteric, and (true) artists thus possessing conscious or unconscious esoteric insights.<sup>2</sup> Notions of

- 1 On Symbolism and esotericism in a Scandinavian context, see e.g. Lahelma 2014.
- 2 'True' art in these types of discourses typically designated either a type of avant-garde art perceived as transcending stale, conventional art ideals, or a form of 'eternal' spiritual art present in different eras that stood above decorative, commercial work and temporal subject matter (often instead grounded in the individual artist as a *unique figure*) (cf. Lahelma 2014: 51–2, 76, 99–100, 135–6).

the artist as a visionary or seer had roots stretching back to the Romantic period, but the explicit connection between this theme and esotericism was not so well established prior to the mid-nineteenth century. I would suggest that such ideas might have come not so much from artists themselves, as from art critics and art theoreticians (on which more presently).

Henrik Johnsson has highlighted how the Swedish author and playwright August Strindberg employed esotericism strategically, to demonstrate that he was at the forefront of literature and modernity (Johnsson 2015). This speaks to two interesting, if perhaps obvious, points: 1) that esotericism was considered a fashionable, up to date worldview in influential cultural circles, and 2) that it could therefore be used to signal that you were a relevant cultural figure. While the interest artists took in various esoteric ideas has been studied in relation to many individual persons, the discourse on this intertwining in art criticism is somewhat less well explored.

A pioneering example of the esoterization of art criticism was the English art critic and author Walter Pater's (1839–94) discussion of Leonardo da Vinci in an 1869 article for the *Fortnightly Review*, later republished in the highly influential book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873). Pater stated that Leonardo 'seemed to his contemporaries to be the possessor of some unsanctified and secret wisdom' (Pater 1998: 63). Such phrasings recur throughout the text, with Leonardo also being described as 'rather the sorcerer or the magician, possessed of curious secrets and a hidden knowledge', and claims that what his philosophy 'seems to have been most like is that of Paracelsus ... and much of the spirit of the older alchemy still hangs about it' (*ibid.* p. 68).

According to Pater, when Leonardo chose his disciples, he required of them 'enough genius to be capable of initiation into his secret' (Pater 1998: 75). The women in Leonardo's paintings are, in Pater's understanding, 'clairvoyants, through whom ... one becomes aware of the subtler forces of nature', and who 'feel powers at work in the common air unfelt by others', passing 'them on to us in a chain of secret influences' (*ibid.* p. 74). Leonardo himself was held up by Pater as a person who

... brooded over the hidden virtues of plants and crystals, the lines traced by the stars as they moved in the sky, over the correspondences which exist between the different orders of living things, through which, to eyes opened, they interpret each other; and for years he seemed to those about him as one listening to a voice, silent for other men. (Pater 1998: 66)

Pater's text was one of the most important pieces of art criticism of its time and had long-lasting effects not only for how Leonardo was viewed, but also probably played a key role in establishing notions of great art as being connected to deep, esoteric insights – and the figure of the eminent artist in general as a sort of magus. When it came to Leonardo more specifically, by the turn of century it had become a common trope among esotericists to claim Leonardo as literally one of their own. The Theosophical leader Annie Besant (1847–1933), for example, considered him a vessel of esoteric gnosis (Besant 1901/14: 123), while Édouard Schuré (1841–1929), a successful, Theosophically inclined playwright, wrote a whole drama based on the concept of Leonardo as a *magus* (*Léonard da Vinci: Drame en prose en cinq actes*, 1905). In Paris, initiates of Joséphin Péladan's

(1858–1918) esoteric group L'Ordre du Temple de la Rose+Croix swore the oath of the first degree in the name of Leonardo (Dantinne 1948: 34–45).

Péladan – both an esotericist and an art theorist – was a leading representative of the weaving together of art and esotericism and exerted a significant influence on the Symbolist movement (in which Kleen was arguably a participant). A spectacular and somewhat exhibitionistic character, from 1892 he organized yearly esoteric-Rosicrucian art exhibitions, as a sort of idealist-esoteric alternative to the regular Paris art salon. For the 1893 Rosicrucian salon, he was granted the privilege of using parts of the same building where the official, conventional salon was also held, the Palais du Champ de Mars, and he attracted a long list of important cultural personages to his events. They were also so popular with the general public that they caused traffic jams (Pincus-Witten 1976: 148, 190). Probably the most famous statement Péladan made was his declaration 'Artist you are magus' (*ibid.* p. 105), conflating the figure of the artist and the esotericist. We will return to Péladan below, in relation to Tyra Kleen.

The 1890s also saw the Polish high-profile critic and author Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927) develop an esoteric theory of art in Berlin. He wrote of Edvard Munch's work as connected to 'visions, clairvoyance, dream' viewing it as the product of a 'somnambule, transcendent consciousness' (Przybyszewski 1992: 158, 151), and elsewhere placed 'true artists' in a lineage of esoteric visionaries like John Dee and Paracelsus (*ibid.* p. 45).<sup>3</sup> A little later, August Strindberg, who knew Przybyszewski well, would write a review where he called Munch an esoteric painter,

who had come to Paris 'in order to be understood by the initiated', that is, those with the proper esoteric understanding of art (Strindberg 2011: 126).<sup>4</sup>

### Tyra Kleen: the life of an artist

Let us now turn to our case study, Tyra Kleen. This gifted and successful artist was heavily involved with esoteric systems of thought throughout most of her life, and, like so many of the women drawn to these currents in turn-of-the-century Sweden, came from a noble background.<sup>5</sup> Her father worked as a diplomat, and due to his profession the family travelled extensively during her childhood. She got to learn several foreign languages and undertook a formal education at art academies in Germany and France, thus coming to perceive herself more as broadly European than Swedish. While studying in Paris, she had her first solo exhibition in 1896. Numerous exhibitions were to follow, in for example London, Berlin, Vienna, St Petersburg, and Stockholm (Hermelin 2016: 21–2; Ström Lehander 2016: 39–40).

Though she mastered several techniques, Kleen's foremost forms of expression were drawing and printmaking (etchings and lithographs). In terms of style, the German Jugendstil and its French counterpart art nouveau influenced her strongly,

4 Regarding Munch's own esoteric interests, see Eggum 1989 and Faxneld 2011.

5 There are preserved diaries from 60 years of Kleen's life (held in the Tyra Kleen archive at Valinge gård, Sweden), an enormous body of material that scholars have not yet dipped very deeply into. Our knowledge of her interaction with esoteric currents is therefore to some degree limited, but PhD research being conducted by Karin Ström Lehander (co-supervised by the author of the present article) will hopefully rectify many of these lacunae.

3 On Przybyszewski, see Faxneld 2015.

and the flowing, organic lines so typical of these movements are prominently on display throughout much of her production. Aside from her accomplishments as a visual artist, she also wrote literary works (e.g., the illustrated prose poem ‘En psyke-saga’, ‘A Psyche Fairy Tale’, 1902). Moreover, she was a productive illustrator of other people’s texts, with an apparent proclivity for the dark and the decadent, like Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire. For the latter’s poems, Kleen created images emphasizing their grotesque and Satanic dimensions. In general, baleful skeletons, hanged men, demons, grinning skulls, and other macabre motifs abound in her works, at times with a humorous twist, but just as often with an atmosphere of pitch-black sombreness.

In 1898, Kleen relocated to Rome, where she remained for almost ten years, living a bohemian and to some degree transgressive life; for example socialising freely with artists of both sexes, and moving around without a chaperone in any context that she fancied (Ström Lehander 2016: 42; Franzén 2016: 71–2). After returning to Stockholm in 1907, Kleen was one of the founders of Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor (The League of Swedish Women Artists) in 1911, which attempted to break male dominance in the art world. Time and time over said dominance had been a hindrance for her, and during this period powerful male artists often systematically undermined and blocked their female colleagues. The reasons for this were probably tradition-based to some extent, but an additional factor could be that women were perceived as a threat, dangerous competitors for the limited number of patrons and commissions. Women artists who married a male colleague generally found themselves standing completely in the shadow of their husbands, and moreover struggling to



Tyra Kleen, 1912. Wikimedia Commons.

combine their artistic work with the tasks of a bourgeois wife (Franzén 2016: 68–9; Ström Lehander 2018: 19, 66–7).

The fiercely independent Tyra Kleen never married. Instead, she only had more or less brief relationships with men, in spite of being courted by numerous suitors (Hermelin 2016: 22; Franzén 2016: 65, 75). Such a life was made possible primarily through her rich family financing her education, and several timely inheritances meant that she did not really have to sell her art to provide for herself. Instead, she often gave away her works as gifts, though they also sold quite well when she exhibited (Ström Lehander 2018: 24).

Kleen spent the 1910s and 1920s travelling in East and South Asia, which among other things resulted in a series of books about ceremonial dances in Java and Bali. The images from the books were exhibited in the Netherlands and Germany, as well as at the prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The self-confident

cosmopolitan Tyra Kleen was a well-established artist during most of her life, but during her final years she found herself marginalized by the ascent of a male-dominated modernism, which made her decorative images appear passé (Lind 2016).<sup>6</sup>

### Kleen's esoteric circles

One of Tyra Kleen's closest friends was the prominent progressive intellectual and feminist Ellen Key (1849–1926). Kleen helped her friend distribute pamphlets and may have been inspired by her ideas regarding female independence. Both of them had a deep interest in Theosophy, and we will presently discuss Kleen's involvement with this current. Kleen's spiritual exploration had however begun long before she encountered Theosophy. During her time in Paris, she participated in Spiritualist séances (Ström Lehander 2016: 50–1). To communicate with ghosts would certainly have been titillating for a person like her, considering her taste for all things morbid. Kleen spent the winter and spring of 1897–8 in Stockholm, and at this time became acquainted with two devoted esotericists, Anna Maria Roos (1862–1938) and Princess Mary Karadja (1868–1943).

Karadja's father was the liquor manufacturer L. O. Smith (1836–1913), one of the wealthiest men in Sweden, and she had enjoyed an even more privileged upbringing than Kleen. After the 1894 death of her husband, an Ottoman diplomat and prince, Mary developed a keen interest in Spiritualism. At a séance in London in 1899, she claimed to have been contacted by the spirit of the early Swedish feminist Fredrika Bremer (1801–65), who instructed her to help the women of Sweden. Subsequently, Mary co-founded several Spiritualist groups (Nilsson 1994: 8). Kleen visited Mary Karadja several times, and was, among other things, treated to the princess reading to her from her short stories and dramas. The two stayed in touch by mail for several years and met in Stockholm on a number of occasions (Franzén 2016: 69–71). Like many Spiritualists, Karadja created art that she claimed was 'automatic' (i.e., her hand was guided by spirits), for example an impressively straight and exact drawing of a triangle or pyramid (an initiatory symbol of spiritual ascent also found in works by Hilma af Klint from around the same time) with a fire-breathing serpent (symbolising the power of darkness) below, that she underscored had been drawn in the presence of two witnesses and without the help of a ruler (Karadja 1900: 1).

Anna Maria Roos held several key positions in Swedish cultural life, among them a post on the editorial board of the influential periodical *Ord och bild* ('Word and image'). She also wrote the lyrics for well-known children's songs like 'Blåsippor' ('Pennywort'). Parallel to this, she had esoteric interests, and provided healing by the laying on of hands as well as cooperated with Mary Karadja's sister Lucie Lagerbielke (1865–1931), another important person in the local esoteric milieu (Nordlinder 2018).

6 In her will, drawn up in 1947, she stipulated that her artworks and notebooks would become the property of Riddarhuset, the Swedish House of Nobility. Moreover, none of it was to be made available until 50 years after her death. As Kleen died in 1951, the material was released in 2001 (Hermelin 2016: 37). This led to a rediscovery of her, and some key works were shown as part of a Symbolist exhibition at Waldemarsudde in Stockholm in 2015, at Östergötlands museum in 2016, at Riddarhuset in 2017, at Thielska Galleriet in 2018, and again as part of an exhibition also featuring Lucie Lagerbielke and Hilma af Klint at Millesgården in 2019–20.

Kleen's friendship with Karadja and Roos probably strengthened her already existing interest in esoteric matters (Franzén 2016: 70–1).<sup>7</sup> In 1904, she joined the Theosophical Society in Rome. However, her diaries indicate that she had been an adherent of Theosophy for a number of years by then, and she was a regular visitor at Theosophical meetings and lectures long prior to actually formally joining (Franzén 2016: 69–71, 76). In Sweden, she contributed at least twice to Theosophical art exhibitions. Over the years, her enthusiasm for esotericism remained strong, as is attested to in preserved letters between her and Hilma af Klint from the early 1940s. In them, Kleen suggests some possible solutions that would provide a permanent place of display for af Klint's radical esoteric-abstract paintings. The suggestions were not met with great enthusiasm, and af Klint mostly seems to have felt pressured by the offers of help. In one letter to Kleen from 1943, she thus explains: 'To decide in haste regarding the life's work that I have been given the opportunity to produce with the help of higher beings was impossible.'<sup>8</sup> Af Klint's art, as this quote indicates, was according to herself the product of preternatural entities guiding her hand quite directly (similar to what Mary Karadja claimed).

- 7 Roos later published a book attacking Theosophy, describing it as incompatible with the one true religion – Christianity. Her vitriolic book moreover highlights frauds and sexual misconduct by Theosophical leaders (Roos 1913).
- 8 Letter from Hilma af Klint to Tyra Kleen, 9 September 1943. Tyra Kleen-arkivet, Valinge gård. Swedish original: 'Att i hast bestämma över det livsverk, som jag varit i tillfälle att med höga väsens hjälp utföra var omöjligt' All translations of archive material are mine.

For much of her life, the cosmopolitan Tyra Kleen moved in the midst of the esoteric currents that perfumed so much of the European art world. For example, Stanislaw Przybyszewski's much-debated essay on Munch as an esoteric artist, mentioned above, was published in 1892, that is, exactly when Kleen had arrived in Germany to study at the art school in Karlsruhe. She remained in Germany for around three years, during precisely the period when Przybyszewski's theories of art's connection to the esoteric reached their pinnacle of popularity there. Considering the Polish writer's focus on, and close ties to, Scandinavian artists, it would seem very likely that Kleen was exposed, directly or indirectly, to his ideas. It is documented that she met with Munch and the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869–1943), who had both belonged to the circle around Przybyszewski in Berlin.

When Munch later exhibited in Paris, and Strindberg wrote his review of him as an 'esoteric painter', Kleen was studying in that city. She visited Munch's exhibition, and probably read or heard of Strindberg's esotericizing review. Kleen would thus have been exposed to the contemporary trends in esoteric art, and esoteric art criticism. During her Paris years, she also visited Péladan's esoteric art salons, but appears to have become frustrated with his refusal, supposedly on esoteric grounds, to invite women to exhibit (Franzén 2016: 68–9).

After returning to Sweden, Kleen had the opulent Villa Brevik (completed in 1908) built for her in Lidingö, just outside of Stockholm. In her home country she continued her Theosophical involvement by regularly attending lectures. She was well read in Theosophical literature, as well as knowledgeable regarding the Parisian occultist publications of Péladan and his compatriots Stanislas de Guaita (1861–97)

and Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916) (Franzén 2016: 85). In spite of this, and notwithstanding her own Spiritualist past, it does not appear that her work process had any ritualistic dimensions, or involved communication with spirits, as was the case with af Klint, Lagerbielke, Karadja, and other of her Swedish peers. The actual production of the art was, in other words, quite conventional (which is also clear from her stance in the book *Form*, to be discussed below). However, dream states, of a seemingly almost visionary kind, *did* play a role in her creative endeavours. For example, during a trip to Munich, Kleen had a dream that she described in a diary entry:

Tiredness: Drifting in a boat. Curious: Bandora with a big laughing figure in the background. Eroticism in a room with two kissing figures in the clouds, surrounded by youths. Dread: With a skull and a very upset background. Rumination: Shining an antique lamp upon a sphinx. (Quoted from Ström Lehander 2018: 59)<sup>9</sup>

This dream resulted in one of her most fascinating works, *Psyke och sfinxen* (*Psyche and the Sphinx*, 1901), which she worked on intensely.<sup>10</sup>

### Kleen's book *Form*

Tyra Kleen presented her own views regarding art and beauty in the small book *Form* (1908). In some respects, there she

9 Swedish original: 'Trötthet: Drivande i en båt. Nyfiken: Bandora med en stor skrattande figur i bakgrund. Erotik i ett rum med två kyssande figurer i molnen och ynglingar runt omkring. Fasa: Med en dödskalle och mycket orolig bakgrund. Grubbel: Lysande med en antik lampa å en sfinx.'

10 In spite of the title, this image is not included in Kleen's book *En psykesaga*.

rejects ideas popular with many esoteric artists of her time, while affirming certain Theosophical views on creativity and its relation to the spirit world. *Form* is a fairly short text (102 small pages with generous margins), and written in a spirited, relaxed manner but also with a considerable firmness in the views presented. As indicated by the references to various philosophical ideas and cultural history, it is clearly the work of a well-educated person, aimed at a similarly well-educated audience. Interestingly, a certain knowledge of esoteric thought in the reader is taken for granted, indicating how widespread such ideas were among the turn-of-the-century intelligentsia.

Following a section in the book about the supposed abilities of Indian fakirs, Kleen lays down the following: 'Even though Westerners have at this point not reached so far in occult ability that they are able to project their thoughts as mirages and visions in the air, they are however able to project them in clay or on canvas in more indirect and arduous ways' (Kleen 1908: 49).<sup>11</sup> For this, 'the Westerner need not have reached the miraculous fakir's level of spiritual development, but only requires the type of sensitivity that is artistic talent' (*ibid.* pp. 49–50).<sup>12</sup> In this line of reasoning, we can see that Kleen does *not* seem to adhere to ideas about true art being connected to some type of occult aptitude, as for example Przybyszewski claimed.

11 Swedish original: 'Men fastän västerländarna hittills ej nått så långt i ockult förmåga, att de kunna projektera sina tankar som hägringar och visioner i luften, så kunna de dock på ett indirektare och arbetsammare sätt projektera dem i leran eller på duken.'

12 Swedish original: 'behöver västerländingen inte ha uppnått den undergörande fakirrens andliga utvecklingsnivå, utan bara ha den slags känslighet, som är konstnärlig begåvning'.

At the same time, Kleen draws parallels to esoteric phenomena and references esoteric authors, like the Theosophist Annie Besant (whose ideas about Leonardo da Vinci as an esotericist were mentioned above). Another Theosophist she brings to the fore is Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), specifically his book *Magic White and Black* (1886). She summarizes his discussion of how too great a number of disparate impressions at once can entail such grave consequences for ‘our spiritual organism’ that it leads to drastic results like ‘madness or suicide’ (Kleen 1908: 51).<sup>13</sup> Kleen however adds that as long as one can rid oneself of the impressions through artistic figuration ‘one can expose oneself to any kind of witches’ sabbath of variegated impressions’ (*ibid.* p. 52).<sup>14</sup>

She also ponders, mostly in a dismissive manner, over artists who ‘work in an almost ecstasy-like inspiration, when ideas assault them in a manner most similar to hallucinations’ and situations when ‘the artist is an unconscious medium, who becomes the executing tool for an idea transferred to him’ (Kleen 1908: 67, 68).<sup>15</sup> This is something negative, since the resulting art will then not be one’s own ‘creation of fantasy’, which is preferable at all times according to Kleen (*ibid.* p. 68).<sup>16</sup> This passage appears to be an explicit rejection of mediumistic art of the type that her friends

Hilma af Klint and Mary Karadja were producing. We should note that Kleen here more or less adheres to the mainstream Theosophical view regarding mediumistic art, which was deemed problematic and dangerous by leading figures in this current. As Theosophy’s main ideologue H. P. Blavatsky puts it in *Isis Unveiled* (1877): ‘Mediumship is the opposite of adeptship; the medium is the passive instrument of foreign influences, the adept actively controls himself and all inferior potencies’ (Blavatsky 1877: 588). This view has its background in the old conflict between Theosophy and the movement that preceded it as the main esoteric current in the nineteenth century, that is, Spiritualism, which had a much more positive view of mediumism in general as well as in art. Theosophical attitudes towards mediumism were at times more complicated than the Blavatsky statement just quoted indicates, but the widespread scepticism about it in this group still seems a likely background for Kleen’s reasoning.<sup>17</sup>

The phenomenon of mediumistic art, which could be defined as art created under the more or less direct influence of preternatural entities, has been studied by several scholars. One of them is Marco Pasi, who has devised a two-fold model to better understand how artists (especially in an esoteric framework) experience/construct their interaction with said entities. Firstly, there is the condition of alienated agency, in which

13 Swedish original: ‘vår andliga organism’; ‘vansinne eller självmord’.

14 Swedish original: ‘så kan man utsätta sig för vad som helst för hexsabbat av olika intryck’.

15 Swedish original: ‘arbeta under ett slags rusliknande inspiration, då idéer överfalla dem på ett sätt närmast liknande hallucinationer’; ‘konstnären är ett omedvetet medium, som blir det utförande verktyget för en på honom överförd idé’.

16 Swedish original: ‘fantasiskapelse’.

17 It is notable that Rudolf Steiner, following Theosophical attitudes, was in fact so disapproving of mediumistic painting that Hilma af Klint temporarily ceased working after hearing his admonitions regarding this (Bauduin 2013: 447).

the ultimate authorship of a strongly innovative or radical artistic discourse is attributed to entities subjectively independent from the author's self. Because of this perceived independence, alienated agency allows the artist to develop a certain freedom of expression from predominant conventions and norms, precisely because the author does not believe that he bears responsibility for the particular aspects of his creation. It is not he who is challenging existing norms, but the entity he is channelling. (Pasi 2015: 113–14)

Secondly, there is creative dissociation, in which 'an experience of detachment from everyday reality may lead an artist to relativize norms and values that were perceived as cogent and absolute, and therefore to a radical change of perspective' (Pasi 2015: 114). Arguably, Kleen's friends Karadja and af Klint experienced the more radical type of these two, alienated agency, whereas Kleen's own drawing on dreams for direct inspiration might possibly fit with the notion of creative dissociation. In general, however, her artistic practice seems much more the product of a strictly regulated self, akin to the adeptship characterized by self-control that Blavatsky advocated. Creativity, for Kleen, should be firmly centred in a stable sense of individuality, and external influences from spirits should be barred from the work process.

A further interpretative framework for Kleen's line of argument is that of gender in relation to her Theosophical interests. Internationally, Theosophy was often perceived as intimately connected to feminism, even if there is certainly some ambivalence to these ties if they are scrutinized more closely.<sup>18</sup> In Sweden, it did

indeed attract many women's rights activists, such as Kleen's close friend Ellen Key and the popular writer Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940). Accordingly, anti-feminists like August Strindberg attacked Theosophy for this very reason. Strindberg is an illustrative example of the acrimonious reactions the emancipatory dimensions of Theosophy and esotericism sometimes met. In 1896, Strindberg wrote contemptuously about Ellen Key that she now apparently 'is going to become an occultist and together with Blavatzky [sic] surpass the achievements of males' (Strindberg 1969: 141).<sup>19</sup> In his article 'Sista ordet i kvinnofrågan' ('The last word in the women's issue', 1887), Strindberg called Blavatsky a 'charlatan' and described Theosophy as 'a band of deceivers and the deceived, who claimed to have gained superhuman wisdom from India, and which is led by women'. He treated it as part of a broader esoteric movement, 'now operated by women', that also included Spiritualism and which, using 'supposed higher knowledge about hidden matters', attempts to 'swing past and above' males (Strindberg 2012: 277).<sup>20</sup> When a friend attempted to recruit him to the Theosophical Society, he angrily proclaimed that this group consists of 'religious fanatics, power-mad women, Indian stranglers and other assassins, who have

Theosophy are Bednarowski 1980, Dixon 2001, Kraft 1999. See also the discussion of Blavatsky and femininity in Prothero 1993.

19 Swedish original: 'skall bli occultist [sic] och slå manfolksrekordet, med Blavatzky [sic]'.

20 Swedish original: 'charlatan'; 'en liga av bedragare och bedragne, som påstodo sig ha fått en övermänsklig visdom från Indien, och vilken ledes av kvinnor'; 'som nu bedrives av fruntimmer'; 'föregiven högre kunskap om förborgade ting'; 'i ett tag svinga sig om och över'. For more on Strindberg and Theosophy, see Johnsson 2015: esp. chs 5 and 6.

18 Some important studies on feminism and

decided to take over the Earth' (Strindberg 1969: 386–7).<sup>21</sup>

In light of such attacks, we could read Kleen's *Form* as a strategic underscoring that her art did not come from any esoteric source (a type of 'cheating' or false claims of legitimacy to triumph over men, according to Strindberg), but from her as an individual. Thus, she herself as an artist was rendered impervious to the frequent gendered attacks on female esotericists. Moreover, she thus underscores that she herself, a formally trained artist, is the creator of her art, and that she is not a passive female medium for spirits often coded more or less explicitly as male (as was the case with, for example, most of the spirits af Klint claimed guided her hand). We have already seen that Kleen was very concerned with the position of women artists, and co-founded Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor three years after the publication of *Form*. It therefore makes sense that she would want to assert the strength of female creativity, as opposed to passive female mediumship.

Kleen's contrasting of her own method with that of the Indian fakirs could, in turn, be understood as a distancing from the type of esoteric Indian wisdom Strindberg connects with Theosophy. Thus, Kleen sets *her art* free from potentially troublesome connections to esotericism, even if in the same book she affirms the value of esoteric thought in general.

It has been suggested that Hilma af Klint's marginalization from art history (until recently) was partly due to her mediumistic claims, and that the supposed outside guidance from spirits set her apart from the male pioneers (even though they

too were heavily influenced by esotericism) who became inscribed in art history as the creators of abstract art (Bauduin 2013: 441; Rousseau 2008: 13–14). To some degree, we could therefore speculate that Kleen understood the career-strategic importance, especially for a woman artist, of underscoring that the art came from the artist herself, not from any external source.

### Esoteric themes in Kleen's art

In a way, then, Kleen seemingly distanced herself from esoteric *modes of producing art*. This does not mean her art is lacking in esoteric references or explicit inspiration from specific figures in the occult milieu, even if her works were produced in a more conventional or non-esoteric manner. As Tessel M. Bauduin has pointed out, Theosophy influenced a multitude of artists, working in different stylistic traditions, such as Symbolism, Expressionism, or abstract art, thus making it impossible to speak of a specific Theosophical style (Bauduin 2013: 430).<sup>22</sup> We can therefore not really designate specific works by Kleen 'Theosophical' on stylistic grounds. Interestingly, official Theosophical tastes seem to have remained traditional, favouring conventional representational images,

22 It is today fully established that pioneers of abstraction like Frantisek Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky, and, in particular, Piet Mondrian (who was a card-carrying member of the Theosophical Society) were heavily influenced by Theosophical ideas when they developed their different modes of non-representational abstract art. Interestingly, however, contemporary Theosophical responses to their innovations were often lukewarm or even negative. For example, Mondrian submitted an article on the so-called Neoplasticism he was developing based on Theosophical principles to the journal *Theosophia*, but did not get it accepted (Bauduin 2013: 434).

21 Swedish original: 'religiösa fanatici, hersklystna qvinnor, Indiska strypare och andra lönnmördare, hvilka beslutat intaga jorden'.

even after abstraction started to achieve its breakthrough in the art world (*ibid.* pp. 441–2). Tyra Kleen – whose decorative Jugendstil was perhaps moderately forward-looking, but still remained firmly within a traditional figurative idiom – fits well with these preferences, and she was welcomed to exhibit in Theosophical contexts. On the other hand, so was Hilma af Klint (Anonymous 1913), so perhaps the conservative preferences of Theosophical groups when it came to art have been somewhat overstated.<sup>23</sup>

Bauduin highlights the use of geometric forms to express esoteric concepts in art, proceeding from notions of said forms ‘as carriers of the Absolute in a spiritual sense, as spiritual or sacred geometry’ in the work of for example occultists like Éliphas Lévi, Papus and Blavatsky. This would include, but not be limited to, ‘a dualistic principle of male–female and/or heaven–earth, resulting in two-fold contrasts; symbolism of numbers, in particular divisions or unities of three; and forms such as the cross, the circle, the square, and the triangle as carriers of essential meaning’ (Bauduin 2013: 435). There is fairly little imagery of this type in the works by Kleen shown to the public this far, including the work by her that we know appeared at Theosophical exhibitions. Certain of her images can conceivably all the same be related to motifs in Theosophical writings, like Blavatsky’s

radical reinterpretation of the myth of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Faxneld 2013). That counter-reading might be what Kleen is referencing in for example *Förbjuden frukt* (*Forbidden Fruit*, 1915).

It has been suggested that the surging waves surrounding the figures in many of Edvard Munch’s pictures are energy fields or auras, inspired by esoteric teachings (Eggum 1989: 60–2), and a similar argument has been made regarding certain works of Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Kokkinen 2019). Ideas about the emission of waves, vibrations, and so on, were prominent in turn-of-the-century occultism, and thus frequently seen in art produced in such contexts (Bauduin 2013: 437). Regarding Kleen’s work, the flowing, wavy shapes around the figures (e.g. in *Orkidéer*, *Orchids*, 1907), partially similar to those pioneered by Munch, are usually interpreted as indicative of her indebtedness to Jugendstil. However, it does not appear far-fetched to suggest an esoteric connection here as well, just as with Munch. A quite clear example of this theme in Kleen’s oeuvre is *Hjärnans spektrum* (*The Spectrum of the Brain*, 1915), which she exhibited in the premises of Teosofiska samfundet in Stockholm. Here, a human head with a transparent top section, making the brain visible, is shown to emit two rays: a jagged blue and white one to the left, and one with the colours of the rainbow to the right.

Kleen at times also explicitly referenced esoteric sources of inspiration when creating her art. An example of this is her 1907 illustrations for a passage from the Parisian occultist Stanislas de Guita’s (1861–97) poetical work *Rosa mystica* (1885). A prominent occult name from the period, de Guita started out as one of Péladan’s Rosicrucian brothers, but subsequently had a violent falling out with him. Kleen’s

23 In Sweden, many of the most famous, and most conventional, names in art had ties of some sort to Theosophy. For example, when Katherine Tingley’s branch of the Theosophical Society organized a ‘peace conference’ on Visingsö in 1913, artists like Carl Larsson (1853–1919), Anders Zorn (1860–1920), and Julius Kronberg (1850–1921) provided works for the exhibition hall (Selander 2018: 40–3; Barton 1988: 457–8).

illustration has the title *Les fantômes du passé* (*The Ghosts of the Past*) and is a nightmarish vision of how different painful impressions we have been subjected to through our lives tend to linger, illustrated with a multitude of grasping hands reaching for a female figure at the bottom of the image (Franzén 2016: 85). At the top of the depiction, the hands dissolve into non-figurative flowing, wavy lines, that may again be inspired by esoteric notions of vibrations, energy fields, and so on.

### Concluding comments

As detailed above, Kleen's book *Form* represents a 'de-esotericization' of the artistic process, possibly for strategic reasons. In the same text, however, she simultaneously affirms esotericism as a relevant worldview that is important for a proper broader understanding of man and the cosmos. She also embraced esoteric *themes* in some of her work, but was, compared to someone like Lucie Lagerbielke or Hilma af Klint, not as adamant in displaying it prominently there. Ultimately, she is clear regarding esotericism not necessarily being intrinsic to great artistic work, as male critics such as Pater, Péladan, and Przybyszewski had implied. Following Blavatsky's notion of the esoteric adept as a person in active control of their self, Tyra Kleen's vision of the ideal artist was a creative figure that should certainly be employing esoteric wisdom, yet leaving it out of artistic methods. ■

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