At this moment I have knowledge of, in the living reality, that I am an atom in the universe that has access to infinite possibilities of development. These possibilities of development I want, gradually, to reveal.¹

The work of Swedish modernist artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) has gained increasing prominence over the last few years. A touring exhibition has taken her work to major museums in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin, Málaga, London, and elsewhere, and at the time of writing her work is being shown in a solo exhibition at New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.² Although her innovative abstract and esoteric images were not known to the wider public in her lifetime, seven decades after her death she is becoming recognised as one of the most interesting and prolific modernist artists in northern Europe.

Af Klint’s art, although deeply invested in an esoteric worldview, also offers an image of the meeting of modernist discourses. As the citation above makes clear, af Klint contemplated the magnitude of modern atomic science. In addition, Nordic mythical traditions, combined with scientific knowledge of the physical structure of space and the atom – which are transformed into spiritual questions via theosophical spiritualism – become modernist, transnational and gendered abstraction in af Klint’s painting. Criticism has recognised multiple diverse sources of inspiration in af Klint’s oeuvre;³ and the influence of scientific discoveries in her work is explored in two recent articles by Tessel M. Bauduin⁴ and Stephen Kern⁵. My paper builds on this research by analysing how the fusion of Nordic mythology and new discoveries in atomic science in af Klint’s abstract art reflect a timely demand for the material changes that women sought in the first decades of the twentieth century. Drawing from theosophical ideas of androgyny and its interpretation of atomic science, as well as Nordic mythology, af Klint innovates what I term a political “diagrammatic” abstraction centred on gender equality and androgyny.

The artistic National Romantic Movement developed in Scandinavian countries at the turn of the century partly as a reaction to new discoveries in science and contemporary societal changes. Celebration of Nordic identity was involved in this revival of past folk traditions, myths and nature. In this essay, I argue that af Klint’s subversive and androgynous use of Nordic mythology alongside advances in modernist science should be read as breaking with patriarchal hierarchies of the artistic world and with Swedish National Romanticism. In a range of groundbreaking early abstract works painted between 1914–17, af Klint develops a “diagrammatic” aesthetics, which remodels geometric abstracted forms to related utopian ends. Particularly, in two series of paintings that this paper considers: Swan (1914-15) and Atom (1917), I claim that af Klint develops a diagrammatic form whose abstracted stylistics is borrowed from scientific contexts in order both to chart and resist sexual and gender inequalities in early twentieth-century Swedish society.

The gender inequalities of early twentieth-century Swedish society, and the catastrophic personal tragedies that could result from outwardly resisting patriarchal conservatism,
are also why af Klint kept her radical feminine abstractions a secret during her lifetime. Exemplifying the fraught position of women artists in turn-of-the-century Sweden, af Klint developed two bodies of work: her professional, public and stylistically conventional representational painting, and her private abstractions, painted for the all-female spiritualist group that she regularly joined to conduct séances. In the early years of the twentieth century, female artists had only recently been admitted to Stockholm’s Royal Academy of Art, and women were still denied suffrage by Swedish society. The predominantly male critics of the day were especially prejudicial and dismissive towards women artists when they showed innovation and progressive aesthetic ideas. In this context, af Klint’s decision to keep her radical work away from the public eye seems pragmatic. The “safe space” of the feminine spiritualist group allowed her to fashion a transformed social relation-to-come, without exposing her to the misogynist attitudes of her own time.

It is my contention that af Klint’s private diagrammatic style involves a visionary futurity quite unlike other utopias of her time. Painting in an era when Nietzsche’s influential Übermensch defined an explicitly violent and masculinist goal for humanity, when Futuristic celebrations of masculine powers glorified war and machine guns while war ravaged Europe and beyond, and when the National Romantic and Symbolist idea of the male artist as a genius who would re-enthuse social life had reached its peak, af Klint’s abstraction turned towards a quite differently sexed politics. At the turn of the century, the utopian myth of androgyny was revived in spiritualist and artistic circles. I would suggest that these ideas were frequently constructed as responses to the changing socio-political position of women, and in many instances involved a sophisticated new phase of patriarchal repression. The emergence of the emancipated “New Woman” ushered in a need to redefine women’s sexuality and their role in professional life, so that the spiritualist and artistic question of androgyny at the turn of the century always broached or involved “the woman question” – even though, very frequently, the celebration of androgyny went hand-in-hand with suppression of the feminine.

In af Klint’s work, on the other hand, a diagrammatic utopianism makes visible a new phase of polymorphous androgyny. Often gender-ambivalent or gender-mixed, and consistently charting a feminine alternative to patriarchal aesthetics, af Klint’s work contained unique and idiosyncratic abstract forms (several years in advance of Wassily Kandinsky) by turning diagrammatic and utopian abstractions towards a feminine political aesthetic. During the 1980s–90s, a number of high-profile critical feminist studies of literature sought to explore and deploy utopias to feminist political ends. Mostly concentrating on feminist utopian fictions, these theorists seemed to imply that utopian thought is inherent in feminism, since it “must include an impulse to improve human community.” Utopias, imagined communities, science fiction futures, and re-charted sex relations are among the genres and modes turned towards the exploration of revolutionary change in this period. Perhaps feminisms have always been forward-looking expressions of modernity, since historically a gender-free or completely equal society has never existed. However, it is notable that late-twentieth-century criticism concentrates mostly, if not exclusively, on writing, leaving the utopian qualities of feminine art largely unexplored. This essay extends the historical reach and stylistic specificity of the utopian critical moment in late-twentieth-century literature by locating in af Klint’s diagrammatic abstraction an important yet critically unrecognised early exemplar of the feminine androgynous utopia.

Her use of diagrammatic expression is not coincidental here. A diagram has the possibility of describing both the way things are and suggesting the way they should be. If a diagram does not limit itself to a social or ontological reality, but also arranges or reconfigures data in order to chart potential futures, it can take on utopian dimensions. In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, diagrams serve as vehicles that reach into the future, and thus extend the possibilities of thought beyond conventional juridical, geopolitical, epistemological realities: “The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality.” For Deleuze and Guattari, in describing reality, the diagram is also always potentially a transformative agent.

**Aesthetics of Gendered Materiality**

Let us consider the appropriation of scientific modernity in af Klint’s work on the atom. In 1917, the year in which Ernest Rutherford successfully conducted the experiment in which he “split” the atom in his Manchester lab, disintegrating the nucleus of nitrogen, af Klint wrote in her private notebook: “The atom has at once limits and the capacity to develop. When the atom expands on the ether plane, the physical part of the earthly atom begins to glow.” She further described the exchange of power between ether and earth atom which prevents it from breaking apart. The text is a reflection on the series of paintings that she executed in January of the same year. It is immediately apparent from this work that af Klint’s enthusiasm for new scientific knowledge, which she explores exclusively in her private and abstract body of work, functions in opposition to the prevailing romantic aesthetic of the period. Likewise, by elsewhere terming herself “an atom” she employs the vocabulary of the new science to further her spiritual and aesthetic explorations of subjectivity.

The *Atom* series, as she entitles it, consist of twenty-two small watercolours on paper (27 x 25 cm), and despite the dynamic description of the exchange between atoms on the spiritual and physical realm in her writing, the images appear to be relatively static. Across the series, the
lower right-hand corner of the images contains a square divided either in four smaller squares, or with intersecting diagonal black-and-white lines with a circle at the point of the intersection. In the upper left-hand corner of these paintings there is situated a smaller black square. It is divided in a similar manner, either into smaller squares or by two diagonal lines, with a circle in the middle, mirroring the larger image in the lower portion of the picture. In each square in Atom Series no. 5 (fig. 1), the atomic form is represented, in a diagrammatic sense, on two different graphic planes. As in the rest of the series, the “earthy” atom from the lower part of the picture is bordered by a green line, which, as a combination of blue and yellow (feminine and masculine colours in af Klint’s idiosyncratic colour code), constitutes a colour symbol of androgyny. As Bender and Marrinan describe, in their history of diagrammatic form, this mode of colour coding (common to both the Atom and Swan series) is a typical feature of the diagram. Since black and white also represent masculine and feminine, according to her colour code, the dual sex of the atom is given gendered expression, its dematerialising of matter emphasised by the black-and-white nucleus, as well as the lines of the square diagonals. Black and white diagonals thus make each triangle of the divided square of the earthly atom consists of a white-female, a black-male, and a green-androgynous side.

The formal arrangement of nearly all of the pictures from the Atom series is the same, making them reminiscent of isotopes. First defined in 1913, isotopes are atoms of the same element which have similar chemical properties, but different physical properties, due to the way they combine the same number of protons with differing numbers of neutrons. Each of af Klint’s images consists of a text about the behaviour of atoms on earth and the ethereal plane, which is inscribed in the upper right-hand part of the image. These texts are further represented by two squares. As in the diagrammatic mode of representation, three different elements coexist on the same picture plane, perhaps as different points of view of the same phenomenon, and while being separated, they are also clearly put in correlation. Variations of colours and details of atoms follow the descriptions in the images. In this way, af Klint turns the disorienting changes brought by science towards a utopian vision of gender merging that is mediated by the diagrammatic transformation of form and colour. Resolutely modern, in the divisions of her atom diagrams, which are sustained by her gendered colour coding, af Klint weaves issues of gender and androgyny into her abstracted aestheticising of the atom.

As her Atom-paintings illustrate, af Klint was enthused by contemporary discoveries, such as work on radioactivity by Ernest Rutherford, and Niels Bohr. In 1909, at the University of Manchester (then called the Victoria University of Manchester), Rutherford, together with Hans Geiger and Ernest Marsden, implemented his famous gold foil experiment, which demonstrated the nuclear nature of atoms. This experiment led to the definition of the “Rutherford model” of the atom. Rutherford showed how J. J. Thomson’s model of the atom, which had described as electrons of negative charge surrounded by a “soup” of positive charge, was incorrect. Rutherford’s model stated that much of an atom’s charge (specifically its positive charge) is concentrated at the centre of the atom (today known as the nucleus), and that it is orbited by low-mass electrons. Working in Copenhagen, in 1913 Niels Bohr refined this model by describing the travel of electrons around the nucleus in circular orbits similar to the Solar system, but instead of gravity they were attracted by electrostatic forces. Widely reported across Scandinavia, and the wider western world, these revolutionary discoveries had immense implications for the understanding of the universe. As Hans Christian von Baeyer states:
Matter itself was suddenly no longer fully material, perhaps more enigmatic than emptiness.

According to Michelle Facos, Swedish National Romanticism, unlike similar movements elsewhere, embraced modernist changes and scientific developments. As Facos further argues, National Romantics in Sweden favoured development as long as it was beneficial for their society. However, the centre of interest for National Romanticism was identifying the Swedish essence with a pastoral idyll, which often involved a nostalgic and regressive attitude towards the modern world. National Romanticism has also been described as a response to the new science and nascent industrialisation by seeking to evade this disconnect of matter and human existence. As I describe elsewhere, the National Romantic strategy of traditionalism, the return to nature and to myth, and its aesthetic conservatism was bound up, in the Scandinavian context, with a number of other disturbing political issues.

Significant here is the ambivalent status of the individual in the politics of modernism following the Industrial Revolution and the division of labour. Marx explained the condition of the modern worker’s discontent with modern work: the worker “[d]oes not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.” Max Weber universalised Marx’s worker’s as a wider diagnosis of the modern condition, as “one special case of a universal trend.” For the National Romantics, alienation was a sign of modernity’s failings, and their intention was to “reintegrate the individual into society in a meaningful way,” while for later more progressively-minded leftists such as Brecht, alienation effect was an aesthetic technique for prompting an awakening of consciousness to dissatisfaction with the political status quo. In af Klint’s day, enthusiasm for modern urban living, technical and scientific advancements and industrialisation was described in Italian Futurism. The Futurists’ celebration of aggressive manliness and strength attained a good deal of prominence in Swedish modernist painting from the 1910s onwards, when it was introduced by Gösta Adrian Nilsson (aka GAN), who is often said to be a pioneer of Cubism and radical modernist expression in Sweden. As a homosexual, GAN was faced with illegality and social bigotry, and his response for a while was to paint images of very masculine bodies of sailors and sportsmen, linking his motifs with the Futurists’ credo. However, in his later work, GAN abandoned Futurism and Cubism, and returned to a romantic style of painting, citing romantic landscape painter Marcus Larson as an inspiration.

Might one speculate that GAN’s shift from apparently opposing modernist positions, Futurism and Romanticism, was aided by the masculinist gender politics espoused by each movement? Despite his homosexual identity and occluded queer aesthetics, masculinist predominance eased the passage of his own professional transition – just as the central position that gender inequalities take in the first decades of the twentieth century, such as the long resistance to female suffrage alleviated the alienating passage to modernity. Both in a social and an artistic context, women were marginalised during this period, and the view that patriarchal society had of women as incompatible with political and professional commitment also put them in a peripheral position within the avant-garde.

The anti-feminine potential of androgyny was also important to early abstraction. For Mondrian, “A Futurist manifesto proclaiming hatred of woman (the feminine) was entirely justified.” Mondrian sought to eradicate the feminine element and curved lines through rigid geometrical abstraction. Yet he too felt that he had found a solution for his gender concerns in the concept of androgyny. As Mark Cheetham argues, his androgyny is discriminating rather than inclusive. It served him as a basis for gender hierarchy and man’s superiority over woman, and it was “an integral part of his ruthless purification of self, art’s tradition, and (ideally) society, a purification that can be seen as nothing short of an aesthetic eugenics based on the discrimination of gender.”

In contrast to the range of masculine responses to scientific knowledge, af Klint’s Atom series celebrates contemporary science and aligns it with gender questions, resisting the contemporary moment, and charting a new potential for sexed relations. This inclusive, polymorphous approach that af Klint explores might be termed “feminine androgyny.” Rather than GAN’s male queer abstractions that deploy idealised maleness in order to evade modernist alienation, or Mondrian’s eradication of curved forms that are identified as feminine, af Klint’s feminine-androgyny charts a multitude of imbricated lines and colour forms by actively pursuing a hybrid aesthetics of mythology, science and sex. Explicitly gendering her diagrammatic renderings of atoms, af Klint...
In 1895, notably, the same year in which Charles Wilson built his first cloud chamber for visualising the passage of ionising radiation, and Röntgen discovered x-rays – tools that would make atoms visible to conventional science – Besant and Leadbeater started a series of psychic “experiments” on the nature of the chemical elements. They conducted a succession of clairvoyant observations, bringing to bear “a special form of will-power, so as to make its [the atom or chemical compound’s] movement slow enough to observe the details.” It was their contention that the structure of elements “could be assessed through observation with the microscopic vision of the third eye.”

They published their first findings on hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, (fig. 2) in the Theosophical magazine, Lucifer. In 1907, the experiments were resumed with fifty-nine more elements, both Besant and Leadbeater claiming that with the power of their minds, they were capable of breaking down the chemical compounds into their elements and then breaking apart the subatomic structures. These findings are published in The Theosophist, and later collected into a book called Occult Chemistry: Investigations by Clairvoyant Magnification into the Structure of the Atoms of the Periodic Table and Some Compound, which ran to several editions. With their experiment, they tried to connect science and spirituality into a new form of knowledge, which Rudolf Steiner later termed “spiritual science.” As an alternative to National Romanticism and brutalist Futurisms, theosophy sought its own utopian hybrid of spirituality and the scientific knowledge of its day. Occult chemistry, as Morrison argues, “explicitly addressed the role of the will and the mind of the spiritually purified.” It wanted to manipulate the matter of the physical world, and to gather information about an invisible subatomic world, which became available through sensuous experiments.

In many of these works, diagrammatic practice is explicitly linked to the utopian reconstruction of human relations. In Leadbeater and Besant’s diagram of hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen atoms from Occult Chemistry, the top row of their illustration shows a “common particle,” “the ultimate physical atom” that is later identified as “anu” which is used as a term for the indivisible elementary particle of matter in ancient Indian metaphysics. The form of this “anu” is taken from the drawing of the atom by Edwin D. Babbitt (fig. 3), who in 1878 believed he had discovered the secrets of bonding heat, psychic power, the harmonic law of the universe, and the “Etherio-Atomic Philosophy of force.” Besant and Leadbeater, “admitted” that Babbitt’s drawing is “fairly accurate,” however, they added another dimension to his picture by making the mirror-image of male (positive) and female (negative) “anu” thus representing subatomic particles not only as animate but also as gendered (fig. 4). For the Theosophists, both macro- and micro-cosmoses had a gendered division at their bases. As theosophist and suffragette Clara Codd claimed in 1930, “sex nature in us” puts us “in connection with the greatest spiritual verities of the universe.” Sexual difference arose from and described “that primal hour in the dawn of our universe when the one became two.” Even the question of atom was connected to the question of a gender duality that theosophy believed structured the universe.

 Appropriately, for an illustration of a scientific theme, af Klint uses the diagrammatic method in her depiction of the atom. In diagrams, the emphasis is on putting different aspects of things in correlation. It is possible to show multiplied points of view at the same time in one image. As Bender and Marrinan argue: “[d]iagrams incite a correlation of sensory data with the mental schema of lived experience that emulates the way we explore objects in the world. They are closer to being things than to being representations of things.” Following the diagrammatic mode, for af Klint the arrangements of symbols and organisation of pictorial space plays a crucial role. It is a recurring motif of her work to show the duality and the contrast of two worlds...
Feminine Androgyny and Diagrammatic Abstraction: Science, Myth and Gender in Hilma af Klint’s Paintings, Jadranka Ryle


generally supplemented with notations keyed to explanatory captions, with parts correlated by means of a geometric notational system.” In contrast, af Klint’s diagrams introduce painterly qualities, that I claim should also be read as expressions of androgynous sexuality. The gradation of colours, traces of brushstrokes, and tactile painterly qualities of the images are present, in contrast to Besant’s and Leadbeater’s more purely graphical schematic representations. In combining the standard diagrammatic representations with painterly qualities, af Klint builds a stylistic hybrid. This fusion or hybridisation of parts is also, in a different register, a stylistic recapitulation of her concerns with androgyny. In tying together scientific diagrams, theosophical esoteric teaching, and timely questions of gender, af Klint creates a hybrid aesthetic style that parallels her aesthetics of the androgynous. If the shift to abstraction in the atom series reveals a gendered atomic world beyond reality that is consistent with theosophical teaching, the behaviour of af Klint’s atoms is unlike either Besant’s and Leadbeater’s, or Bohr’s and Rutherford’s. Moving away from the reality of physical science, she also breaks from direct description of esoteric theosophical knowledge, in order to prioritise androgynous diagrammatic abstraction.

MODERNIST ANDROGYNY

To understand the political implication of her androgynous colour codes, it is instructive to look at the context of the idea of the androgyne in the artistic and spiritualist circles of af Klint’s time. The most recurrent source for the late-nineteenth-century construction of the idea of androgyny is the myth told by Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium. Further sources come mostly from the tradition of western esotericism, and teachings of influential mystics, such as Jakob Böhme in Germany, and Emanuel Swedenborg in Sweden. Picked up by Joséphin Pëladan’s Rosicrucianism and Blavatsky’s theosophy, the idea was transmitted into artistic creation, where it was ever further charged with political and social connotations. Af Klint studied the doctrines of both movements, and it is useful to look at their teachings on androgyny briefly before exploring further af Klint’s own androgynous aesthetics.

It is important to emphasise the patriarchal uses of androgyny to be found in esotericism and aesthetics of the period. French occult writer and founder of the religious movement, the Rose + Croix, Joséphin Pëladan, understood androgyny as the highest creative principle, and as an “ideal symbol of art.” His extensive writing on the subject influenced Symbolist writers and painters, most notably Théophile Gautier, Fernand Khnopff, Jean Delville and Gustave Moreau. In Pëladan’s thought the notion of androgyny is closely related to his view of the artist as a mediator between the material and ideal world, and as someone who can transmit knowledge of the ideal. On the other hand, the androgyne itself is the symbol of the ideal for Symbolists. It is essential to note here that Pëladan’s and the Symbolists’ notion of ideal androgyny, as with Mondrian’s, is rather a feminised man than a balanced combination of man and woman. In fact, the female androgyne (or gynander) was considered to be an anomaly, and for Pëladan it was a perversion of the femme fatale. The elevated state, according to Pëladan, was reserved for male artists: women could only tend towards the ideal. For Pëladan, women were incapable of the same level of men’s genius. His infamous claims that women have no intelligence and that they could never be equal to men were in practical terms manifested by the exclusion of women artists from the exhibition of the Rose + Croix Salon. Gudrun Schubert writes about this exclusion:

[…] women, particularly when their sexuality is divorced from maternity, are considered incompatible with the pursuit of the ideal, and with art. The sphere of art, from which women are effectively excluded, and consequently that of artists, occupies a brilliantly elevated place in Pëladan’s scheme.

The arrangement of the elements and her new manner of putting them into relation with and through the text inscribed on the image is something that is specific to her studies of natural and scientific phenomena. Despite the fact that af Klint’s Atom series closely follows the experiments of Besant and Leadbeater, and despite the fact that theosophy’s pedagogy of higher and better forms of existence via migrations through different stages of consciousness can likewise be understood in terms of utopianism, af Klint’s diagrammatic form perhaps reaches beyond the theosophical gendering of matter. Where Besant and Leadbeater’s representations of atoms follow existing esoteric traditions in which the tension of the gendered struggle at the heart of matter reinforces duality of male and female, in af Klint’s aesthetics of atomic materiality the dual division of black and white is complicated by a colour-coded androgyny.

This “androgenising” modification is also to be found in the difference between their diagrams and af Klint’s diagrammatic aesthetics. Besant’s and Leadbeater’s representations of atoms comply with the general formal characteristic of the diagram, which Bender and Marrinan describe as “[…] reductive renderings, usually executed as drawings, using few if any colors; they [diagrams] are generally supplemented with notations keyed to explanatory
In a similar occlusion, for Symbolists stereotypically feminine characteristics such as intuition, sensitivity, spirituality and emotionalism are commonly positioned as desirable and celebrated in artistic men, though only when they are essentially separated from femininity. Possession of those characteristics for male artists meant an escape from the increased materialism of the turn of the century.\(^\text{48}\) The idea of an artist as sensitive as well as androgynous disrupted the traditional, dual division of sexes. However, while blurring the differences, Symbolists at the same time strove to preserve the distinctions and boundaries between the genders. They distanced themselves from certain characteristics that they considered feminine, such as lack of intellect and control, weakness, and emotional excess. In addition, feminine traits were only celebrated in the male artist-genius; the same characteristics in women were considered to lead to a form of madness due to their supposed lack of intellect.\(^\text{49}\)

This celebration of a specifically male androgyny is common in early modernist aesthetic circles. A similar approach to androgyne is to be found in the artistic circle in Berlin known by the name of the tavern where they gathered and discussed artistic and political ideas, *Zum schwarzen Ferkel*. Among the most prominent members of the group were Scandinavian artists Edvard Munch and August Strindberg, who shared the idea of male/androgynous artist genius. In fact, Strindberg claimed that artistic and creative women cannot be truly feminine, and that women demanding equality were “not normal.”\(^\text{50}\) Moreover, women who deviate from conventional femininity are presented in his plays as villainesses.\(^\text{51}\)

Although in keeping with an alternative attempt to understand the emerging modernist concern with the disruption of binary (specifically male) definitions of gender, Blavatsky’s theosophy adopted a completely different approach. The concept of androgyny is central to theosophical understanding of identity and salvation, and according to Siv Ellen Kraft, it was an important factor in the feminist appeal of the movement.\(^\text{52}\) In addition, the Theosophical Society was largely led by charismatic women figures, like Blavatsky and Besant, who were critical of the inequality of gender in major world religions (especially Christianity).\(^\text{53}\) This probably inspired Blavatsky’s teaching on the androgyne beginnings of mankind, and the androgynous Masters, who, she claimed, transmitted to her all theosophical truth. However, although Blavatsky’s theosophy involves a less explicitly patriarchal androgyny, she too ultimately adopts binary gender codes – often referring to the androgyne Masters in masculine terms. As a clear example we can observe how she repeatedly refers to them as “men” in her *Key to Theosophy*.\(^\text{54}\) This was in fact a major concern for feminist theosophists, and despite Blavatsky’s attempts to reassure them, in the words of Kraft: “the issue remained unsettled, with androgynization – as it was portrayed through comments and examples – looking very much like a process of masculinization.”\(^\text{55}\)

In af Klint’s personal experience from encounters with Rudolf Steiner, this potential to achieve equality again fails to actualise, and in fact reveals the striking extent to which conventional gendered relations are encoded in theosophy. Steiner, at the time the president of the German branch of the Theosophical society and later the founder of anthroposophy, was one of few men who saw af Klint’s abstract paintings in 1908. His reaction to af Klint’s paintings was very sceptical, and he pointed out that men and women have not yet reached the same stage in their development, which appeared to be evidenced in her paintings.\(^\text{56}\) Despite this negative comment, af Klint continued to study theosophy as well as other esoteric sources. For af Klint, theosophy provided a vehicle for the development and dissemination of new and empowering ideas; but, coming at the outset of her shift to abstraction, might it be that this negative experience prompted her to depart from the conventional gender norms of theosophy? In this rejection of theosophy’s inherently masculine biases, I suggest, we might locate af Klint’s transformation of the movement’s androgyny into a radically new abstract aesthetics.

**ABSTRACTING THE SWAN**

The political and utopian aspects of af Klint’s diagrammatic hybridity are perhaps even more apparent in the geometrical abstraction of her *Swan* series, painted a few years after her negative interaction with Steiner, and a couple of years before the *Atom* series. The *Swan* series forms a much more developed vision, as well as a much more substantial body of work than the *Atom* series. In the proliferating abstracted forms and expressions of the swan that the series experiments with, af Klint binds gender duality and androgyny to her stylistic dissolution of the swan form. The series is useful for making plain how af Klint’s modernity brings the scientific into contact with the mythological. A traditional feature of Norse mythologies, swans carry a particular nationalist and patriarchal political charge. The white swan is a native bird of the European north, emotive symbol of five Scandinavian nations, and the national symbol of two Nordic countries, Denmark and Finland. Swans feature in northern European nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist art, both in the form of female deities, as in Richard Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, in August Malmström’s paintings of female spirits and deities (*Disir, fairies and Valkyries*), and in figurative representations of swans, for example, Edvard Munch’s *Vision*, numerous works by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, and Bruno Liljefors’s wild life romantic paintings of swans.

By abstracting the swan, rendering it as the subject of
a diagrammatic dissolution of form, af Klint challenges the traditional and National Romantic gender politics central to Swedish and wider, pan-Scandinavian national discourses. The late 1910s and early 1920s mark the culminating of national romanticism in Sweden. As the historian H. Arnold Barton commented (the pun was presumably unintentional), “[t]he 1910s were at once the mature culmination and the swan song of creative Swedish national romanticism.”58 In the years prior to World War I, there was an intense effort to revive Swedish folk culture, traditional handicrafts and mythology. The swan was centrally involved as a figure of the mythical revival, and the National Romantic re-enchantment of social life, in the face of alienating modernity. Malmström, who was af Klint’s professor at the art academy, was deeply engaged with the Norse Revival and from the 1850s his main preoccupation was history paintings based on Norse mythology.59 In his famous painting Dancing Fairies from 1866 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), Malmström depicts ethereal fairies in a romantic landscape dancing over the surface of a lake. With the organic movements of the dance, the fairies form a curved shape reminiscent of a swan’s neck, creating a subtle reference to the Valkyries, transforming the playful magical spirits into a force of life and death that the Valkyries represent.

As with other modes of National Romanticism, swans were often deployed to represent woman as submissive, even if she was tricked into this state. In the Poetic Edda, a collection of Old Norse anonymous poems, swans feature as swan maidens, associated with Valkyries. Dressed as fairies, form a curved shape reminiscent of a swan’s neck, creating a subtle reference to the Valkyries, transforming the playful magical spirits into a force of life and death that the Valkyries represent.

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of fairies and deities. Variants of this story appear across different times and cultures, and as Barbara Fass Leavy claims, “[t]he stories of supernatural spouses, [...] seem to be about the freedom from cultural necessity as well as about the requirement that such necessity eventually prevail.”60 As Fass Leavy further argues, the deceptively romantic swan-maiden stories are about “fierce marital struggle,” and they can be understood in terms of a power struggle. Culture’s triumph over nature and man’s control over woman are expressed in the story in the motif of the stolen plumage. “The stolen maiden’s possession is a link not only to her freedom,” claims Fass Leavy,

but also to her sisters, from whom she is separated precisely because they retain the outward signs of their precious identity while she loses hers. And thus her encounter with her mortal mate thematically links the war between the sexes with the controversial subject of female bonding.61

In some versions of the story, the swan-maiden returns home when the family is out, to cook and do domestic work, only to disappear when her husband and children are back home. During a period of turbulent political events the myth evoked the “taming” of supernatural beings; at the same time, important scientific advances which foregrounded the existence of the invisible world could be seen as an attempt to retain control of nature and the existing order of things.

As a quite different example of the use of Nordic mythological implications of the swan, Munch’s self-portrait from 1892, Vision, shows a head with a dark expression and distorted features floating above the water’s surface. Contrasting with the head, in the upper part of the picture, there is a white swan, floating on the water, whose reflection is missing the head. Munch’s image seems to be a very personal and ambiguous meditation. The lines in the image are blurred, and the atmosphere is meditative. In Marja Lahelma’s interpretation of this image, the swan represents a vision of life, death and art. “The swan can then be seen as a symbol of the ideal that the artist is forever chasing yet never able to achieve.”62 Lahelma’s interpretation of the swan is twofold: on the one hand, she connects Munch’s swan to the myth of swan as Apollo’s bird. In this case the swan – belonging to the god of music and poetry, light and knowledge – is connected with the divine, abstract ideal of art and the artist. On the other hand, as Lahelma further suggests, the swan can represent the illusion, with the real truth actually being under the water’s surface.63 In contrast to Munch’s meditative introvert, and personal search for the artistic ideal, af Klint’s Swan series is oriented towards a more universal and political gender utopianism. To move towards universalism, she had to find a radically new expression to distance herself from a symbolic orientation. This she achieved by coding in a diagrammatic way and transforming the symbolist image of the swan into abstracted political aesthetics of the diagram.

By reconfiguring her swans as balanced cuboid forms and symmetrical colour arrangements, gradually moving towards this realignment across the series, af Klint’s progressive diagrammatic abstractions of the swan figure make a radical and politically charged feminine intervention into the gender inequalities obscured and naturalised by the National Romantic Norse revivalists of her day. Moreover, in reconfiguring the mythic motif as a scientific diagram, af Klint creates a similar melding and interpenetration of opposed unities that also occurs in the recurring theme of androgyny. In an early painting from the series (fig. 5), a black and a white swan are locked in a balanced compositional embrace. In the upper part of the canvas, the white swan is surrounded by a black background, an arrangement mirrored in the lower half. Although the image is not as symmetrical as it may seem at first glance, we still get the impression of balance from the picture, which is also
related to the square shape of the canvas. This balance is in tension with the dynamic quality of the composition, but also emphasises the axial coming together of the components at the centre. The swans are in movement towards each other, and this movement is arrested at two points on the middle line of the painting. On the mythical level, this merging of swan forms might be read as rendering dynamic the metamorphic, transformative process investigated in the occult processes of alchemy, which sought to distil the spiritual from the impure. However, this dynamic balance and movement also relates to the diagrammatic gender coding of the swans, whose sexes coalesce and flow into one another. Moreover, there is also an aspect of gender reversal to the centrifugal dynamics of the composition. Af Klint’s writing clarifies that the blue feet and beak of the white swan indicate that this is the female swan. The yellow feet and beak of the black swan indicate that it is the male. The esoteric tradition of dark, lunar female swan, and the solar white of the male swan, evoked in Blavatsky’s theosophical teaching, is reversed by af Klint’s gendered system of colours.

If myth/science and male/female form the four central axes of af Klint’s composition, her abstracted symbolism works a subversive, destabilising and androgynous melding of disparate unities. This coalescing four-part structure takes a central place in subsequent paintings in the Swan series, and it is also the case that across the entire Atom series, from two years later, the motif of division into four parts forms the central conceit of her composition. In addition to dividing the whole image into four quarters, each of the corner images of each atom is further divided into four parts, either by diagonals or by vertical and horizontal lines through the middle of the squares. In the introductory image “b” (fig. 6), the four-part division is multiplied and emphasised by both diagonal and middle dividing lines of both squares. Additionally, the square in the upper left-hand corner has four smaller squares further divided into fourths,
Likewise, in the development of the earlier Swan series, af Klint offers multiple arrangements of the axial unit, and explores successive, ever-increasing abstractions of the quartered cube composition in her diagramming of the mythic swan. In the subsequent two paintings of the series, swans invade each other’s spaces, in an aggressive fight in painting no. 2 (fig. 7), and in loving embrace in painting no. 3 (fig. 8). After these dramatic events, in painting no. 4 (fig. 9) she redefines the spatial arrangement: this time it is divided into four squares in pastel pink, blue, yellow and black. The image also redefines the gender of the swans: the beak of the white swan is now half blue, and half yellow, and one of its feet is blue and the other yellow. It is situated in the upper left, pink square of the image, and from there a ray of pink light leads the eye diagonally towards the lower right square, where the black swan seems to be in a process of transformation into similarly androgynous black-and-white swan, with a yellow and a blue foot.

After this image, the series seems to be increasingly abstract, only to return to the swans in the final painting. In painting no. 7 of the series, (fig. 10) the swans are multiplied and cut into halves. Some of them are hollow, dissected, or shown almost as if under x-rays. They are connected with a heart in the middle of the painting, and a snail-shaped line that runs through their space, which is divided by two diagonal lines. These paintings also frequently deploy an apparent symmetry whose near-balance leads the eye to a small symbol or symbolic meaning as a focal point in the middle of the painting. The subsequent painting of the series (fig. 11) moves more fully towards abstraction but keeps the structure of the first painting, so we can “recognise” the swans in the shape of cubes. The same cubes we find in painting no. 9 but they are shown from a different perspective (fig. 12).

In the impressive body of work that she produced in the pivotal year of 1915, af Klint exercises an almost relentless drive to abstract from her swans. In some of the later images, black and white are not strictly separated any longer; other colours are added, and the theme is explored through varying geometric patterns and organic elements. In subsequent paintings, swans are transformed into circles, snail shells, and hexagons. Apart from the title, isolated from the series, some of the images do not carry any resemblance to the figures of the swans. For this reason, image no. 17 (fig. 13) seems to be a source of confusion in several instances, both in terms of technical knowledge and interpretation. In a book on Swedish art from the first half of the twentieth century by Elisabeth Lidén, this painting was incorrectly printed, rotated ninety degrees anticlockwise.

More recently, in 2016, the official press release from the Serpentine Art Gallery, of the London exhibition “Hilma Af Klint Painting The Unseen,” interprets this image as a human female breast, though no justification for this claim is offered, and the claim seems to bear scant relation to visual evidence. In the last painting, figurative swans reappear, positioned upon four flattened planes of colour that quarter the image space (fig 14).
Fig. 7. Hilma af Klint, HaK150, Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 2, 1914, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).

Fig. 8. Hilma af Klint, HaK151, Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 3, 1914, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).
Fig 9. Hilma af Klint, HaK155, *Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 4*, 1914, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).

Fig 10. Hilma af Klint, HaK155, *Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 7*, 1915, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).
Fig 11. Hilma af Klint, HaK156, *Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 8*, 1915, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).

Fig 12. Hilma af Klint, HaK157, *Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 9*, 1915, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).
Fig 13. Hilma af Klint, HaK165, Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 17, 1915, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).

Fig 14. Hilma af Klint, HaK172, Group IX, Series SUW, The Swan no. 24, 1915, the Hilma af Klint Foundation (Photo: Moderna Museet, Stockholm).
a closer relation in this final image, in a mutuality which perhaps represents something like a final goal. Their bodies are intertwined, and they hold an object in their beaks that resembles a key. It is half blue, half yellow—a final gesture of the gendered tension in the feminine androgyny that drives her diagrammatic abstraction. From the key hangs a cuboid form comprising three planes of the quartered square—which offers a miniature of the abstract cuboid swans from the immediately preceding image from the series. If this quartered cube held by the swans expresses both the swans in diagrammatic form, and the way their abstracted composition has caused the androgynous and imbricating melding of myth with science and male with female, it is also the case that this quartered cuboid structure forms the compositional basis of the later Atom series. In each of these images, a compositional dynamic seeks to undo the unity—exploring a polymorphous feminine androgyny of axial melding—just as af Klint’s esoteric understanding in her diary writing likewise involves the meeting of four identity positions in her own self.

CONCLUSION

We might return here to the Deleuzian conception of diagrammatic form. Af Klint’s work seems to be concerned with fully and constantly pushing for the elasticity of the swan figure, which in the context of the diagram, gets “topologically redistributed” into the forms of cubes and circles in different paintings in the series. Deleuze writes:

[…] the diagram acted by imposing a zone of objective indiscernibility of indeterminability between two forms, one of which was no longer, and the other, not yet: it destroys the figuration of the first, and neutralizes that of the second […] There is indeed a change of form, but the change of form is a deformation, that is a creation of original relations that are substituted for the form.69

The zone of indiscernibility is to be understood as an ontological sphere in which the terms which appear to be clearly separate, actually overlap. To press more closely on my claim that these paintings develop an innovative new “diagrammatic” abstraction, we can observe that throughout the series, af Klint multiplies forms and points of view, resisting the legislation of “the single view of a replete spatial environment,” which is an important characteristic of diagram, according to Bender and Marrinan.70 It is always related to the process of becoming. In af Klint’s works, we can see the zone of objective indiscernibility across different images of the series. This allows us to perceive the swans in the forms of cubes and circles, and in another sense, to understand colours and organisation of forms in terms of a gender-becoming-androgyny.

In af Klint’s Swans, diagrammatic abstraction enables a utopian transformation of form, from one stage of sexual identity to androgynous hybridity, from myth to diagram, and from figuration to abstraction. Breaking with the romantic aesthetic and resisting gender inequalities of early-twentieth century Swedish society, af Klint’s feminine-androgynous hybrid of myth, spirituality and science leads to her creation of an innovative abstract aesthetics. Her employment of the diagram, taken from the science of the day, opened new possibilities, new visions of the future, and of the utopian redistribution of form. If this leads to the complete geometrical abstraction that is unburdened with mythical traditions later in the Atom series, it is perhaps in the earlier Swan series that we more clearly perceive this process of becoming in operation. Diverting gender-divided theosophical utopias, and feminising masculinist Futurisms, af Klint diagrams a hybrid utopia: an abstraction in opposition to the conservative patriarchy of her society that charts the process of becoming feminine-androgynous.

The exhibition Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future is on the view in Guggenheim from 12 Oct 2018 to 2019.


7 Sarah Webster Goodwin, “Feminism and Utopian Discourse,” in Pride and Prejudice, and Babette’s Feast,” in Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative, ed. Libby Falk Jones and Sarah McKim Webster (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 1.


10 Hilma af Klint, HaK379, Unpublished manuscript. 13/01/1917, 119.

11 Hilma af Klint, HaK418, Unpublished manuscript.


13 Af Klint’s interest in science is also evident in her series entitled Primordial Chaos (1906–07), which often includes images of spirals and electromagnetic waves. The whole series is almost exclusively painted in yellow, blue and green.


17 Barbara Miller Lane, National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).


21 Facos, Nationalism, 121.


25 Cheetham, Rhetoric of Purity, 123.

26 Only privileged adepts were able to observe this, including Blavatsky and Olcott, as well as prominent ﬁgures in theosophy such as Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater. Mark S. Morrission, Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67.

27 Morrission, Modern Alchemy, 21.


31 Morrission, Modern Alchemy, 67.


34 Morrission, Modern Alchemy, 69.
As a contrast to these European intellectual debates on androgyny and artistic identity, one might look at the geographically more distant to af Klint, situation in New York. In 1910s aesthetic experimentation, feminism, political activism, and sexual liberation made a fertile ground for artistic expression which dealt with the question of non-binary gender identity, such as Georgia O’Keeffe and Marcel Duchamp, with his alter ego Rose Sélavy. See Susan Fillin-Yeh, “Dandies, Marginality and Modernism: Georgia O’Keeffe, Marcel Duchamp and Other Cross Dressers,” Oxford Art Journal 18, no. 2 (1995): 33–44.


Kraft, “Theosophy, Gender, and the ‘New Woman’,” 368.


Lindén and Svensson, Enheten bortom mångfalden, 33


Fass Leavy, Swan Maiden, 40.


Hilma af Klint, HaK378, Unpublished Manuscript. 28/06/1916, 16.

Hilma af Klint, HaK378, Unpublished Manuscript. 28/06/1916, 17.

For an analysis of painting no. 9 from the Swan series with regard to af Klint’s gendered colour code see Stephen Kern, “Hilma af Klint and the Fin-de-Siècle Culture,” 34–35.

Elisabeth Lidén, Sveriges Konst 1900-talet: Del 1, 1900-1947 (Stockholm: Sveriges Allmänna Konstförening, 1999), 19.


Bender and Marrinan, Culture of Diagram, 21.