

Dominique De Groen meets Hilma af Klint

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Dominique De Groen is an author and visual artist. She has published the poetry collections *Shop Girl* (2017), *Sticky Drama* (2019) and *Slangen* (2022) through Het Balanseer, and she has been honoured with the 2019 Frans Vogel Poetry Prize and the 2022 Jan Campert Prize.

Script for *Spiral Seance*

[set-up: chairs in a circle]

[start with everybody standing in the circle]

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We manifest a protective circle: a barrier between us and our immediate surroundings, both physical and temporal. A zone disconnected from material space, in which the vital energies we generate are preserved.

Close your eyes.

Visualise a cone, a rounded pyramid of energy. Its base is the circle formed by our bodies, its apex is a point above our heads at the exact centre of the circle.

The energy may manifest before your mind's eye as bright white light, as flames, or as a soft colourful glow. Let the image present itself naturally. Try to focus all your mental energy on it and channel into it.

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I summon the Energy from the North, the Powers of Earth, and ask them to watch over this ritual.

You see the dark, chilly ground, damp and shimmering under a solid layer of ice crystals.

You see the bowels of subterranean rocks, permanent twilight twisted into labyrinthine mineral coils.

She rises from the ground like mist, a semi-translucent Medusa, her hair a writhing tangle of glossy black snakes.

Medusa, we hail and welcome you.

I summon the Energy from the East, the Powers of Air, and ask them to watch over this ritual. As far as the eye can see: an expanse of scorching sand, white hot under the intense blue sky.

Inanna comes vibrating and oscillating to life in the shimmering sky, her golden wings and armour blinding in the glaring sun.

Behind her shine an eight-pointed star and the narrow silver crescent of a waxing moon.

Languid from the heat, a formation of gigantic lions slumber around her.

Inanna, we hail and welcome you.

I summon the Energy from the South, the Powers of Fire, and ask them to watch over this ritual.

A place where paths and timelines cross reveals itself in a coal-black flame, a hidden fold in the fabric of the night.

A forest of burning torches casts grotesque patterns of light and shade on Hekate's face.

Around her, healing herbs and poisonous plants shoot from the ground, their vapours burning holes in the cool night air, in the veils of mist that glisten in the glow of the full moon

that packs of wild dogs howl at, and through these openings, the vectors of occult forces slip into the nether realms.

Hekate, we hail and welcome you.

I summon the Energy from the West, the Powers of Water, and ask them to watch over this ritual.

You see Neith floating, swirling, and seeping through the unfathomable, inky black mass of the night: a porous, changeable body with no solid form and no clear contours.

Slimy primordial water gushes from all her openings and pores in an endless stream, the liquid matrix of terrestrial life.

Neith, weaver of cosmos and fate, we hail and welcome you.

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Sit down and close your eyes.

Relax the muscles in your face, your jaw, your forehead

Relax your arms and shoulders.

Relax your legs and your feet.

Take a deep breath.

Breathe out. Feel all of the air leaving your lungs until you are empty.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Feel the tension leave your body. Feel yourself become soft. Melt like a wax candle in the heat of the flame.

You see the cone of energy, glowing, burning, and twinkling in the darkness. The cone becomes a three-dimensional spiral, the circles narrow as they move higher.

You stand at the lowest level of the vortex, the largest, outermost circle, and you feel your body becoming light.

Earth's heavy matter loses its grip on you, you are smooth and shimmering and surrender to the flow, you let yourself be carried away, you drift upwards in the flowing vortex.

Energy penetrates you, it seeps in through every pore, filling the cavities between your organs, it dances in every cell. Your body becomes part of the circuit. Your boundaries blur. You feel yourself disintegrating, liquefying.

You are nothing but light and movement. Effortlessly you glide through the thin shell of visible reality.

You seep into the astral zone.

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The lower regions of the astral plane: a collection of broken, twisted fragments from our world, like shards of a black glass carnival mirror. The darkness is heavy and as sticky as tar, the air almost solid.

You wander around aimlessly, struggling wearily through the sticky mass of darkness, the viscous zone of semi-visible organic forms. Every movement you make makes a soggy, slimy sound, like a foot pulling out of a treacherous swamp with all its might.

The sky fades to a sallow dark brown. A subterranean fossil body curls around you. It slumbers, dreams, generating impossible folds everywhere, magical portals, fleeting dimensions in the subterranean world.

A shiver slips through things, a shift deep into the chemical bones of the day. From the pulsing eye of the spiral leaks something soft and squishy; it expands, eating away at and loosening everything around it. The shimmering coal body loses its hard consistency. It begins to melt, dissolving into sticky brown peat; it disintegrates further into wet rotten leaves, wood pulp, fragments of plants that have been compressed and fossilised over millions of years by unimaginable pressure and heat.

It unfolds, vibrating as it swells back to life. You flow through organic structures, leaves and roots. Veins guide you like groundwater. Ancient forces free themselves from their fossil dungeon. Solar energy accumulated by long-forgotten photosynthesis is unleashed.

You feel the warm glow of sunlight, green spots and speckles filtered through the foliage of giant ferns and scaly palms as tall as houses. You are in an ancient mangrove forest, sprouting all over the place, green buds shooting out of the mud. The air is heavy, sticky, intoxicating. It smells of leaves and flowers and oily, fertile soil. An overwhelming explosion of life. Billions of towering trees rise from the silent mire, the dark, bubbling, fermenting water. Particles hum in the air. You can almost hear the plants breathing, the rush of sap through their stems, the murmuring processes of photosynthesis.

The first stars appear in the sky, you see them through the dark glossy leaves, twinkling in the mist: the solitary, pale ghosts of species that have slid from the slippery branches of the tree of life and slipped through the mesh of time. Undead afterimages, echoes, the shimmering dust of progress. The dodo, the thylacine, the passenger pigeon, the Pyrenean ibex, the Polynesian tree snail, the giant eel, the baiji, the Kaua'i 'o 'o... The extinct animals flicker in the night sky, haunting the ether, they whimper because they are lost, in the wrong place and in the wrong shape, far from home... And you feel them tugging at you; a lonely, savage sensation engulfs you in waves, phantom pain from sharp claws desperately kneading your fluid tissue into a new, alternative family tree, that melts over and over and disintegrates before it can bear fruit, before the first patches of lichen have taken shape on its bark...

You whisper to the frightened animals, you comfort them.

The tangle of limbs is warm but shivering, violent and uncontrollable like a body convulsing to the rhythm of a fever dream.

Something tugs at them, pulling the defenceless, shimmering shapes upwards. They are sucked into the swirling spiral, an upward vortex of spectral forms.

You slip in between them, feeling the vague touch of soft down, steaming flanks, wet noses, powerful but fragile wings, skin and scales, feathers and membranes and teeth and warm throbbing blood seared by the accursed burn of planetary violence, spread across the centuries. You lose yourself, dissolve into a spiralling dance of swirling forgotten bodies.

You allow yourself to be carried upwards along the rings of the vortex. Celestial bodies spin around you, unknown planets in every possible shape, spheres, hexagonal pyramids, cubes, icosahedrons, antiprisms, some sombre, dull and opaque, others shimmering like crystals or luminescent and translucent like deep sea jellyfish.

You feel something tear.

The sickening sound of organic tissue ripping apart, the ether being scratched open. You break through an invisible membrane and are engulfed by light.

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Now the rarefied heights of the astral plane sparkle around you, iridescent in the light of the celestial bodies.

The temple spirals skywards from the turbulent surface, spongy ocean rock mutating incessantly, twisting, changing shape, changing state: writhing green vine that snakes around the seasons, wringing out and absorbing the sticky sap from it until it swells, petrifying into a patterned snail's shell, colours sliding over each other like wafer-thin layers of conchiolin and calcium carbonate, the organic matrix wound in a spiral staircase to nowhere, pulled tighter and tighter, a narrowing maelstrom of elements and minerals, the double helix of genetic material, the onyx snake wrapping around the world's egg, tightening harder and harder until the shell bursts and the primordial slime slowly leaks into the cosmos...

The helix temple becomes ever flimsier: with each new guise, with each turn, it sheds layers of matter, breaking free of shells of substance, wrestling its way out of the earthly force field, an inexorable demolition of the walls around the spiritual zone of which the material cosmos is but a fractured echo, a fragmented emanation, something once whole and now cracked, crumbled, and split...

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You approach the top of the spiral, so immaterial now that it is almost completely transparent.

From the highest, narrowest rings you look out over the astral field, its flowing colours, the radiant light-beings gliding across its planes.

Only now do you see and understand that the centre of every body, every molecule, every atom, is also the centre of the cosmos, the junction where physical and spiritual vectors meet and intertwine for good... Every entity is traversed by invisible forces, pierced by intense beams of astral light, the strata of unwieldy matter interspersed with a bright white

glow. The worlds flow into each other like blood and gunge, ceaselessly emptying into one another. Through chains of magical symbols, cosmic energies flow from the smallest to the largest scale, from the invisible to the visible.

Occult links between dimensions, between micro and macrocosm.
Secret fold lines where the universe turns inside out.

Astral light permeates the cosmos, stitching together the material and spiritual worlds.
It seeps into our bodies like rain into the earth and makes them fertile.

On the astral plane, you see objects from all perspectives at the same time, revealing their sides and hollows at a glance, the inside of a solid body as visible as its surface. Every aspect of every particle is equally clear.

The jagged rocks protruding from the landscape are not inert masses of stone, you look through their outer shell into their deep mineral being, you see the vibrating and pulsating of the smallest particles, the astral matter clinging to them like a soft sticky glow, swirling around them, interpenetrating every grain of stone.

Through the ether float millions of particles, microorganisms, emanations that are invisible to the naked eye in the physical dimension, but reveal themselves here as gossamer veils of shimmering dust in impossible hues.

You float over the diaphanous geometric planes. Astral matter forms restless clouds around you. The ground over which you glide is a confusion of constantly mutating shapes, ephemeral like the bubbles in boiling water. Human and animal forms tear themselves away from the swirling mass but never become separate entities; they instantly dissolve back into the whole, like waves on the surface of a lake over which a winter storm rages. The thoughts and feelings of humanity knead matter into an endless procession of forms: a ceaseless global stream of consciousness, reflected in grotesque, turbulent distortions.

As well as this collective, indiscriminate stream of affects that shape the scenery, you also see individual thoughts traversing the ether above the astral plane: objects of specific shape and colour, pink clouds of affection, yellow snakes of ambition, red lightning bolts of anger, green cylinders of jealousy, turquoise flakes of sympathy, and endlessly complex variations and combinations to embody every emotional nuance.

The thoughts float, merge, disintegrate, shrink, swell. They swarm around you like mosquitos, attaching themselves to you, cladding you with a fluid, holographic cloak, a play of swirling, shimmering colours, like in the mist above a waterfall when the morning sun shines on it.

Around each astral body hangs an oval mass of luminous mist, spirals and fractals going down and down, a bark of affects like the shell around an egg....

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You approach the top of the vortex, the vacuum at the eye of the spiral.

But what you had mistaken for empty space now turns out to be a solid mass of unimaginable density: a clump of congealed, compressed spirals, a darkness so intense it absorbs all light. Visible reality is draped loosely over it, insubstantial in comparison, as fine and weightless as gossamer.

A giant oval hangs at the centre of the massive void, spinning and shining snow-white in the darkness.

It is a solar system, a bacterium, a plant and animal cell, a seed that bursts open before your eyes and germinates, casting out shiny thin roots and tendrils to every part of the plane.

It is the world egg, the matrix of the universe. In the primordial matter inside the egg, billions of potential forces and forms swirl, latent and dormant until the astral light strikes like a lightning bolt and brings them to life, fracturing the egg. Strands of slimy yolk pour from the cracks in its shell and from them new branches of the tree of life grow; the spiral bursts and gushes everywhere, washing over the solid blocks of emptiness, it swells into viscous rivers where the shimmering dead animals come to drink, and slowly, slowly it will solidify and thicken, into a new, transformed world, a rich soil in which everything can grow...

You feel yourself becoming heavy, sinking away into the warm, oily, fertile mud.

You slowly let yourself glide downwards, past the germinating seeds, roots, past the debris of the broken spiral around which plant tendrils are already snaking, past the broken animals buried in the earth and resting at last.

You sink and sink until you can go no further, until you feel your feet on the ground, the chair beneath you.

You glide into your own body.

In your mind's eye, you see the cone of energy slowly disintegrating. The energy we have summoned, the transformations we have manifested, float out into the world, spreading across the four corners of the globe.

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Energy from the North, Earth's Powers, Medusa, we thank you for your presence. We hail you and bid you farewell.

Energy from the East, the Air's Powers, Inanna, we thank you for your presence. We hail you and bid you farewell.

Energy from the South, Fire's Powers, Hekate, we thank you for your presence. We hail you and bid you farewell.

Energy from the West, Water's Powers, Neith, we thank you for your presence. We hail you and bid you farewell.

The circle is open.

Translated by Michele Hutchison

Epilogue

My text is the script for a ritual performance, a poetic guided meditation inspired by the works of Hilma af Klint. While writing it, I had several paintings from her *Urchaos* series in mind. The series is part of *The Paintings for the Temple*, which af Klint was commissioned to paint between 1906 and 1915 by the supernatural being Amaliel. During seances, af Klint came into contact with High Masters, messengers from the astral realm with names like Ananda and Teohatius. It was these entities that produced *The Paintings for the Temple* through her, by means of dictation. In af Klint's own words, they used her as a medium, as a conductor for their vision. The complete series comprises 193 works and, according to the emissaries from the spirit world, it was intended for a yet-to-be-built spiral-shaped temple, which would be filled with paintings that evoked the astral realm and humanity's spiritual evolution.

Urchaos, one of the many sub-series within *The Paintings for the Temple*, is made up of 26 paintings. The spiral is a recurring motif in these works, repeatedly winding its way to the surface. Af Klint employed a complex system of symbols and signs in her work, for which she developed a lexicon in her notebooks: a vocabulary of layered, constantly shifting meanings. A network of secret symbols and codes was created in which everything is connected by an intricate web of correspondences. I see in this a method, a determined and systematic manner of reintroducing mystery and hidden meanings into a disenchanted world: the symbols as magical signs, portals to occult dimensions, and af Klint's paintings as messages from a reality that has yet to be mapped. Af Klint evokes this other realm, the astral plane, which the average mortal has at most caught a glimpse of in dreams or hallucinations, in an abstract way in her work.

In af Klint's semiotics, spirals – often biomorphic ones like snail shells, seashells, and the tendrils of plants – symbolise evolution, growth, progress and transformation. But rather than biological evolution – the origin and development of species – they are about *spiritual* progress. Af Klint was strongly influenced by Theosophy, the spiritual philosophy popularised by H el ene Blavatsky in the late 19th century. According to this esoteric teaching, such spiritual evolution involves, above all, a return to a lost, broken unity, through the reuniting of apparent dichotomies (spirit and matter, micro and macro, light and dark, inner and outer, male and female), forces that were once one but were torn apart shortly after the creation of the cosmos. Theosophical evolution is a progression towards the supernatural. According to this worldview, the terrestrial is merely a material echo of the spiritual dimension. Everything in the visible, physical universe is just an emanation from the spiritual order.

In the seance, I evoke the spiral-shaped temple, which ultimately never materialised, but which would have embodied this spiritual evolution. I have based my work partly on books that also informed af Klint's practice: Theosophical classics like Charles Leadbeater's *The Astral Plane* (1895), which contains descriptions of the spirit world that often seem very psychedelic, and *Thought-Forms* (1901) by Leadbeater and Annie Besant, about the material forms that thoughts and emotions take, and how affects (in the psychological sense) manifest as embodied entities. I have also woven into it an earthly, ecological dimension, a thin dark-green thread of plants – coal, which contains the spirits of extinct species. What happens to spiritual evolution on a planet where life is increasingly precarious, and the gulf between opposites becomes more and more pronounced? Is there a ritual that can heal the wounds and manifest an alternative planet earth, an alternative future?

Dominique De Groen

Colofon

Dominique De Groen meets Hilma af Klint was published in February 2023 as a literary intervention in the exhibition *Swedish Ecstasy. Hilma af Klint, August Strindberg and other visionaries*.

Accompanying this publication are an audio recording and a poetry performance taking place amid Hilma af Klint's works. The text *Spiral séance* is the script for this performance.

The following persons collaborated on this project: Silvia Bassetti, Olga Briard, Judith Hoorens, Selma Burzic, Daniel Cunin, Leen Daems, Kurt De Boodt, Amber Demuynck, Johan De Smet, Ann Flas, Michele Hutchison, Evelyne Hynque, Koenraad Impens, Géraldine Lenceclaes, Lotte Poté, Karl Van den Broeck en Tom Van de Voorde.