On the “Spiritual in Art” in Los Angeles
by Hilton Kramer

On the exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The exhibition called “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985,” which Maurice Tuchman has organized with the assistance of Judi Freeman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the kind of event that illuminates a good deal more than its ostensible theme. The theme itself—the role played by certain occult or spiritualist doctrines in the creation of abstract painting from its origins to the present day—is an important one, and in recent years we have had ample opportunity to become better acquainted with it as more and more scholars have explored the often arcane ideas which are believed to have exerted a considerable influence on the aesthetics of abstraction. About the early history of abstract painting, anyway, these unquestionably have much to tell us. Moreover, the need for an exhibition that would attempt to bring our increased knowledge of the philosophical sources of abstract painting into alignment with our experience of the art itself has long been recognized. This, indeed, is the show which the “Spiritual in Art” was designed to give us. And while the result, I think, is a deeply flawed exhibition, its organizers are nonetheless to be commended for undertaking a difficult task and implementing it with the sort of wide-ranging research the subject requires. Certainly, as an historical inquiry into the origins of abstract art and the ideas which are now known to have governed its creation, the “Spiritual in Art” show marks a turning point.

Yet it would be idle to pretend that it is only as an historical inquiry that this exhibition makes its appeal. The issues raised by the “Spiritual in Art” address themselves directly to current debate about art and its interpretation. For while we are being invited on this occasion to make some far-reaching revisions in our understanding of abstract painting, we are also being urged to recast our conception of modern art itself—and beyond this, to ponder the crisis which has lately overtaken the very idea of abstract art for a great many people who have heretofore believed it to represent the culmination of the modernist movement in art. About this latter issue, the organizers of the exhibition are understandably discreet. The intellectual etiquette of the curatorial profession discourages open confrontation in such matters. But the issue is very much there, all the same, and its nagging presence reminds us that exhibitions like the “Spiritual in Art” tend as a rule not to be initiated when the art under review (in this case, abstract painting) is widely seen to be enjoying a
period of vitality and growth, but, on the contrary, that they can usually be expected to make their appearance when something about the art seems diminished and problematic.

If this is in fact the case—and the publication this season of Frank Stella’s *Working Space*, with its sweeping attack on contemporary abstraction, is but one of several recent developments that reinforce the sense of crisis I speak of—then an event like the “Spiritual in Art” inevitably acquires a certain polemical character. The immediate purpose of the show may be to document an important chapter in the history of abstract painting, but the show itself will also be seen to constitute a kind of inquest into the loss of something once deemed vital to the art—namely, its “meaning.” Thus, to the extent that the “Spiritual in Art” is taken to be an inquiry into what Mr. Tuchman calls the “hidden meanings” of abstract painting, it will be enthusiastically welcomed by those who have long had reason to believe that abstraction—and indeed all of modern art—is, or should be, “about” something other than itself. Which is another way of saying that the “Spiritual in Art” is yet another assault mounted against what is variously described as the “formalist” or “modernist” reading of the art of the modern era—a reading that gives to the aesthetic aspect of art a radical priority over its subject matter or content. At stake in this debate is not only the role to be ascribed to “ideas” in the creation of art, but the very status (if any) which the aesthetic factor is to be accorded in our account of what a work of art is.

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My own view of this issue is, alas, a deeply divided one. On the one hand, I am not myself satisfied that a formalist reading of a work of art can ever wholly account for either our experience of it or the complexity of the impulses that have entered into its creation. On the other hand, I know very well that the many critics and scholars who now feel at liberty to offer fanciful “interpretations” of art—modern art included—are mostly talking nonsense or something worse than nonsense, something that seriously misrepresents the nature of art itself. The only thing one can absolutely certain of in this matter is that the temptation to smuggle their own “meanings” into a work of art and then ascribe this intellectual contraband to the artist is one that writers in this field now find it all but impossible to resist. The nature and quality of contraband vary, of course. The smuggled goods may be political or sexual—the traffic in these is especially heavy just now—or they may be the result of the kind of academic research that eagerly seeks out sundry “affinities,” parallels, causes, and connections, which, when we look into them, turn out to be either entirely irrelevant to the art in question or entirely imaginary or both. Whatever the origin of this intellectual contraband, the role it plays in the interpretation of modern art is now so rampant and so promiscuous that the art itself is in danger of being rendered invisible. However limited the so-called formalist reading of modern art may be, it at least has the virtue of putting us in touch with those elements in a work of art which can actually be seen and experienced. The
same can rarely be said for the readings offered by its freewheeling opponents.

The really vexing thing about the “Spiritual in Art” exhibition is that it seizes upon a genuinely important issue in the interpretation of abstract painting and then, having duly established its direct relevance to the work of the founding fathers of abstraction, so distends and distorts its application to so many other artists of so many different persuasions that the original point of the inquiry tends to get hopelessly muddled—lost, in fact, in the mists of idle speculation, false claims, and arbitrary interpretation. This is an unhappy fate for an idea whose time (one had hoped) had come at last, and it means that one is obliged to make precisely the kinds of distinctions that the organizers of this exhibition—for reasons one can only guess at—have refused to make.

That for the founding fathers of abstract painting—Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka—the aesthetics of abstraction was inseparable from doctrines derived from theosophy and kindred notions of the spiritual and the occult is undeniable. The evidence on this issue is now so overwhelming that the burden of argument has decisively been shifted to the doubters. That this particular conflation of the aesthetic and the spiritual owed much to the theory and practice of Symbolist art and poetry is also undeniable. It therefore should come as no surprise that the soundest and most informative sections of the “Spiritual” show are those which dwell on the movement’s Symbolist origins and on its first successes in severing its ties to the representational element in Symbolism in order to establish an abstractionist alternative to it.
I say that these are the soundest and most informative sections of the “Spiritual” show, and they are. Yet this is not to say that they are wholly satisfactory, for when it comes to representing the first generation of abstractionists and to tracing the course of its transition from a more or less Symbolist aesthetic to outright abstraction, the exhibition is curiously truncated and perfunctory. The first leap into abstraction was, after all, one of the most momentous events in the history of twentieth-century art, and it should strike us as such in an exhibition of this magnitude. But the truth is, it doesn’t. Except for Mondrian, who gets better treatment than the others, this first generation of abstract painters is confined to a succession of small, cramped galleries which make these artists seem more like forerunners of a movement than—what is in fact the case—its first masters. Perhaps the organizers of the exhibition felt that Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka were already so famous that their work didn’t need to be shown at full strength. If so, they made a significant mistake, for it is precisely the obligation of an exhibition of this kind to re-establish both the power and the pre-eminence of the artists who gave this movement its start in life and set the standards for its future development. This, I regret to say, the “Spiritual” show does not do to the requisite degree. As a result, the weight of the exhibition is shifted to those many other figures who are taken to represent this future development—and this, in turn, raises a great many questions about the basic theme of the show. For the exact relation in which some of these other artists stand to the concept of “The Spiritual in Art” is itself a problem that is never adequately addressed.

Af Klint’s paintings are essentially colored diagrams.

Before turning to this problem, however, something must be said about an artist who is being acclaimed as the exhibition’s major “discovery”—the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). Except in one crucial respect, this artist might very well have been considered a prime candidate for an exhibition on this theme. She is said to have painted in an abstract style as early as 1906, and her art was apparently based on spiritualist doctrine. The trouble is, the pictures exhibited in the “Spiritual” show are not very good. As documents in the history of abstraction, they have a certain interest, to be sure, but it is not an aesthetic interest. Af Klint’s paintings are essentially colored diagrams. To accord them a place of honor alongside the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka, in the section of the exhibition devoted to the pioneers of abstraction, is absurd. Af Klint is simply not an artist in their class, and—dare one say it?—would never have been given this inflated treatment if she had not been a woman.

Both the structure of the “Spiritual” show and the elaborate installation given it in Los Angeles are extremely complicated—needlessly complicated, I think—and something needs to be said about this, too, before we turn to the question of the other artists who have been selected to represent the theme of the exhibition. As I have already indicated, the first section is devoted to Symbolism. This leads into a circular room—no doubt itself symbolic in its shape—containing
books which are known to have influenced the kind of mystical and occult thought which played a role in the genesis of abstract art. There then follows, in more or less orderly fashion, the five galleries devoted to Kandinsky, Kupka, Malevich, Mondrian, and Hilma af Klint (in that sequence). With the eighth gallery, however, the exhibition takes an abrupt turn. Thenceforth the focus is no longer on individual artists but on thematic motifs—in other words, iconography—designed to aid the viewer in the task (admittedly not an easy one) of ferreting out the “hidden meanings” to be found in the remaining works of art.

There are five thematic motifs in all—“Cosmic Imagery,” “Duality,” “Vibration,” “Synesthesia,” and “Sacred Geometry”—and the artists selected to illuminate these motifs, or to be illuminated by them (one isn’t entirely certain of the order here), are so various in style, so different in intellectual outlook, and even, alas, so disparate in their spiritual allegiances that it is extremely difficult, if not indeed impossible, to make any consistent sense of what one sees in these last five galleries. Most viewers, I suspect, simply give up on the tedious task of attempting to discern the traces of cosmic imagery in some pictures and the effects of synesthesia in others, and settle for whatever aesthetic delights and intellectual nourishment the art may afford in the traditional way. Long before we have reached the end of this exhibition, its governing theme has in any case been lost in a hodgepodge of conflicting aesthetic strategies.

Perhaps the best way of grasping the vagaries of the “Spiritual in Art” show is to see that it is finally not one exhibition but two (at least). The first is the one devoted to Symbolism and to the origins of abstraction in the work of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich, and Kupka. In their different ways, these four artists were deeply immersed in spiritualist, anti-materialist doctrines, which served to inspire and abet their hard-won efforts to eliminate from their art the kind of pictorial representation of earthly life that, in their eyes, had come to signify a materialism they feared and despised. What they yearned for was transcendence and spiritual release, and art became their principal means of achieving it. Thus, their success in supplanting representation with pictorial forms sufficiently abstract to embody what was for them the vision of a higher, metaphysical reality constituted the kind of triumph—a triumph in the realm of ideas as well as in the realm of artistic expression—that could never again be repeated in quite the same way. For what they had decisively and fatefully changed was not the ideas that had influenced them—these they had pretty much taken as they found them, and they made no serious effort to modify them—but the way their own artistic objectives were to be formulated and brought to fruition. Spiritualist ideas served these artists well, though only for a limited time in most cases, as a philosophical catalyst in creating a new art; but they could not—and did not—survive as a permanent program for art. After that first generation of pioneers, other artists might take up theosophy, the occult, and sundry other systems of spiritualist belief as an individual option, but the “spiritual” as such would never again constitute a movement in art and never again play so fundamental a role in determining the artistic vicissitudes of abstract painting.

This, essentially, is why the “Spiritual in Art” exhibition takes such an abrupt turn after those first
galleries devoted to Symbolism and the pioneers of abstraction, and in effect becomes another, different exhibition—a survey devoted to individual options in both style and belief. And once the exhibition bids its farewell to that first generation, just about anything in the realm of the irrational or the mythical or the merely subjective is allowed to pass muster as a token of “the spiritual.” Marcel Duchamp’s Dadaist ideology? Jasper Johns’s Neo-Dadaist imagery? Yves Klein’s high jinks or Jackson Pollock’s struggle with psychoanalysis? All are here in force, and so are such disparate figures as Georgia O’Keeffe and Mario Merz, Francis Picabia and Bruce Nauman, Adolph Gottlieb and Arnulf Rainer. Amongst them, to be sure, are artists of a genuinely mystical sensibility—Richard Pousette-Dart, for example, and the late Mark Tobey—but the real role played by mystical belief in their art can only be obscured by the company they are obliged to keep in this exhibition. An exhibition devoted to “The Spiritual in Art” which accords the work of Duchamp a more conspicuous role than that given to Kandinsky or Malevich is a show that has gone wildly off the rails.

If we wish to seek an explanation for this curious turn in the “Spiritual” show, it is not to be found, I think, either in the realm of ideas or in the realm of aesthetics—it is to be found, rather, in the mundane world of the contemporary art museum and the pressures which now exert so decisive an influence on the way major exhibitions are conceived and organized. The “Spiritual” show was first conceived of years ago, and had, I believe, a rather different shape in the earlier stages of its preparation. (We can probably glean something of this shape in several of the scholarly articles which are published in the mammoth book accompanying the show—especially those written by Robert P. Welsh, Sixten Ringbom, John E. Bowlt, and Rose-Carol Washton Long. What happened along the way, however, was the building of a new wing at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and it was a major misfortune, I think, that an exhibition originally conceived to be a serious and scholarly art-historical investigation into a crucial chapter of modern art had to be turned into something like a crowd-pleasing blockbuster in order to serve as an appropriately showy event for the inauguration of this new addition—the Robert O. Anderson Building. Given this atrocious circumstance, it is a mercy, I suppose, that anything of the original conception survived. Much did, of course—though at times the substance is more easily accessible in the book accompanying the show than in the art itself. And whatever one’s criticism of “The Spiritual in Art” as an exhibition, all our future explorations of its important subject will in one degree or another be obliged to take serious account of this event. But what a pity it had to succumb to so much muddle along the way!

1. “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985,” organized by Maurice Tuchman with the assistance of Judi Freeman, was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 23, 1986 to March 8, 1987. It will be on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago from April 17 to July 19, and at the Haags Gemeente-museum in The Hague from September 1 to November 22.

2. In fact, Malevich was not given an entire room in the show, but was included in an installation called “Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles.” Mikhail Matiushin was a contemporary of Malevich’s in Russia, and for a time exerted a similar influence. No doubt
the almost minor role given these figures in the "Spiritual" show can be accounted for by the fact that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art had already mounted a comprehensive exhibition of the Russian avant-garde in 1980. Still, considering the major place which these Russians occupy in the history of the subject of this exhibition, they should probably have been given a stronger representation.

3. _The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985_ was co-published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press (434 pages; hardcover price $55, paperback $24.95).

Hilton Kramer (1928–2012) was the founding editor of _The New Criterion_, which he started with the late Samuel Lipman in 1982.

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