

What constitutes a subject? Should spirituality be understood as a kind of rest that affirms one's identity? Or should it be a means of questioning this identity, particularly in the context of anthropocentrism? Is it a connection between the individual and the collective? Not only with the big Other of a transcendental dimension, but also with the small other of the more-than-human? The following text explores how individuals disseminated—and thus shared—spiritual or supernatural information at two different times: in the beginning of the 20th century and around 1950. My focus will be on the Swedish visual theosophist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944). The artistic approach offered by Harry Smith (1923–1991), a US-American *modern alchemist*, will complement and extend my understanding of diagrammatical and alphanumeric practices within the spiritual realm. Hence it will not judge whether the mediums' messages convey universal truth or rather maniacal fiction: the 'messages' are in the world inasmuch as they have been passed on materially and are part of the Western cultural legacy. Spiritual practitioners, I shall argue, do not only reproduce voices and visions according to the common scholarly and artistic modes of epistemic representations of their times, instead it is mediality itself which shapes the experience of the invisible and the unheard: discourse, non-objective images, annotated illustrations, drawings, diagrams, photography, among others, inform the search and bring forth a genre we might call visual science fiction.

Let me start with the following assertion: A mediumistic art practice is by no means a weak one. On the contrary, it critically reflects the hegemonic effectivity of an operating system, its hierarchical orders and its prejudices through the use of the canonical 'languages.' In this sense, Hilma af Klint invented her strange, but at the same time aesthetically alluring, indeed convincing visual language or imagery through the preexisting epistemological methodologies. In a formal perspective, her early cosmic search manifests itself in graphic lines and scriptural marks like single letters, certain ornamentally decorated symbols resembling spirals but also coils, shapes reminiscent of snails and eggs, and human figures. Whereas in her later work, three-dimensional, often geometric configurations, partly known from sacred geometry, proliferate: color planes, optically transparent cubes, coordinate axes—mostly in the form of a quartered square, sometimes cross-shaped—or the kabbalistic Star of David return over and over again. Concerning semiotics, the mixture of non-objective or figurative elements and inscriptions of words and captions suggest an iconography or, more generally, a coded, possibly decipherable message.¹

The challenge now is to amplify the diagrammatic methods already ascertained in her spiritual-as-artistic research. Commonly, a diagram is defined as a graphic, mostly two-dimensional, non-figurative design (in fact this exactly is what makes af Klint's art so prone to the notorious debate about who really was the first abstract artist...). The diagram's performance is one of indication rather than of representation, and diagramming can be understood as processing and unfolding vital relations. However, methodologically this is not enough. Hilma af Klint's diagrammatic practice is more comprehensive. It cannot only be found visually in the single art works but consists of a whole range of tools, methods, and scientific paradigms. The artist was well informed about the life-sciences and especially about botany and biology's academic systems of visual knowledge production of her time. Most likely she was in touch with her naval family's interest in mathematics and fairly acquainted with chemistry—not to forget about her professional art education at the Academy of Fine Arts of Stockholm. Drawing on this background, she even contributed anatomical figures to a veterinary textbook.² Around that time, the beginning of the wireless age had supplied first the navy with telegraphy and telephony. These communication techniques transmitted messages invisibly and inaudibly providing reproduction at a distance of either written, printed, or pictorial matter or of sounds respectively.³ For transmission the information had to be cut up in letters and numerals, a system we also know from the coding of occult texts.

All sorts of signals were in the air anyway, so why not receive 'calls' and 'telegrams' in times where spiritualism and séances gained popularity among the bourgeoisie? At the same time, af Klint's diagrammatic practices opposed the prevalent confining Protestantism in search for an intercultural theosophic climate. Both religion and science are organized in disciplines and one of their tasks is to discipline the subject and society in turn. It is exactly this ambivalence towards the disciplinary organization which seems to be at stake when talking about Hilma af Klint's diagrammatic methods: On the one hand, all disciplines ask for defiance and for their unruly other,

1) I have elaborated on this in my earlier work on Hilma af Klint and especially in the three essays: Hanne Loreck, "Hilma af Klint. Spiritual Alphabetisation*" in Kurt Almquist, Louise Belfrage (eds.), *Hilma af Klint. The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Stockholm 2015, pp. 211–226; Hanne Loreck, "Anlässlich von Hilma af Klints Notizbuch #588: Blumen, Moose, Flechten" [translates as *On the Occasion of Hilma af Klint's Notebook #588: Flowers, Mosses, Lichens*] in Hanne Loreck et al (eds.), *(Mit) Pflanzen kartografieren / Mapping (with) Plants*, Material Verlag, Hamburg 2017, pp. 22–33; Hanne Loreck, "Critical Knowledge Practices from the Margins: Plants and the Like," in Sabine Flach, Suzanne Anker (eds.), *The Cultures of Entanglement. On Nonhuman Life Forms in Contemporary Art*, transcript, Bielefeld 2024, pp. 231–245. The present text was completed in 2021 but was not published until 2024.

2) See John Georg Heribert Vennerholm, *Grunddragen af hästens operativa speciella kirurgi*, Norstedt, Stockholm 1901; see also Julia Voss, "The Traveling Hilma af Klint," in Tracey Bashkoff (ed.), *Hilma af Klint. Paintings for the Future*, exhib. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 2018, pp. 49–63, p. 55.

3) See Samuel Shelburne Robinson, *Robinson's Manual of Radio Telegraphy and Telephony. For the Use of Naval Electricians*, four revised editions between 1907 and 1918, reprint Forgotten Books, London 2018. Its illustrations show graphic features resembling af Klint's choice of visual expression.

on the other hand the painter was searching for skilled forms of communicating the overlooked and the unheard. They too are related to the diagram as an operational principle and most important function for recognition and education according to the alphanumeric regime of para-religious wisdom. In thinking about af Klint's scriptings, as my title suggests, I want to capture the double sense of writing or lettering—both visually and in the more abstract notion of recording—as deployed by the sacred scriptures. To impart her esoteric and theosophical reality to others, af Klint's struggle consisted of finding suitable methods for sharing and participation, and this is because occult wisdom is experience-based and works empirically. Furthermore, it is time-based in the sense of being rooted in growth, training, and transmutation. Occultism's foundation in alchemy and chemistry fits in well here too. Therefore, we actually shouldn't talk about her knowledge time and again: af Klint's painterly and graphic proceedings and in general her diagrammatic practice is much more about realization and search itself than about stable doctrines.

The Diagrammatics Between Science and Spiritualism in a Graphic-as-Symbolic Perspective

In his rather unknown *Die graphische Darstellung* of 1914,⁴ the German-Jewish physicist and mathematician Felix Auerbach (1883–1933) lauded the diagram's beneficial properties; he believed in its accessibility independent from genre, class, and language faculty since it would showcase facts, truths, and laws intuitively. The effect of immediacy resides in the combination of image features with numbers and alphabetical elements in a transparent and rather economic way. Though from a scientific angle and not an esoteric one, Auerbach had been looking for a method to visually represent passages of time and otherwise invisible forces. How can we, he asked, bridge the gap between the visual world and invisible entities and demonstrate qualities instead of quantities? Many phenomena which had previously been invisible had been brought to light only shortly before Auerbach started his specific research on scientific demonstrations: most importantly X-rays, radiation, radioactivity, ether, electrons, and so forth. In addition, the then recent discovery of the disintegration of the atom had been a provocation for both scientific thinking and its representations.

The symbolic, spiritual core of Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments, is often visualized as inscriptions in a tablet organized in two columns. In comparative religious studies, their visualization is frequently compared to the periodic table of the elements whose substances make up the universe. Of a different graphic order, numbers and letters are recalcitrant and rebellious because they don't belong genuinely to the narration told with colors and shapes. Functioning as pictograms, these non-representational elements add something to the picture plane: They mark a knowledge of their own by somehow undulating above the picture ground, thus demonstrating the mutual conditionality of the unseen or the spiritual 'data' and the code. As we know from the Jewish religious education, learning the alphabet and the specific meaning of each letter (and number) was at its core as were combinatorial techniques like pairing letters to create meaningful units. One of the most meaningful letter combinations is the Tetragrammaton JHWH, Jahveh, the God of the Old Testament. This transliteration can also be figured in the paradoxical equation 10 plus 5 equals God.⁵ The alphanumeric learning methods perform a certain politics of language with the signs acting in two reverse directions: As pure abstractions they separate signification from the everyday. At the same time the graphemes and figures also grasp things in as far as they signal reliable orders, common measures, countable quantities or certain rhythms. Why Judaism here? We shall refer to the Kabbalah—esoteric method, discipline, and school of thought that originated in Judaism—as an important pillar of theosophy's mixture of religious cultures.

The 1890s – The Formative Years

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As we know, af Klint became interested in theosophist Annie Besant's thinking in the 1890s. This involvement coincided with the founding of *The Five*,⁶ a female spiritualist group to which af Klint became a member, and the beginning of their collective mediumistic sessions. Later they started to carefully report the 'dictates' in both the mediums text and image. If we look at the visual notations of those years today, the time-based or processual character of the messages' reception becomes perceptible. Particularly supported by the delicate, yet unsteady pencil lines, the figures originate from a searching mode which lets the forms emerge from the ground gradually and without making use of defining contours. Thus, even the recurring visual elements like the snail, the spiral, the rose, petals, and other botanical imagery look as if they are being re-searched.



fig. 1) Hilma af Klint, "The Atom Series," No. 9–12, watercolor, graphite, and metallic paint on paper, twenty-two drawings, 10 5/8 × 9 3/4 inches (17.8 × 14 cm) in Christine Burgin (ed.), *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*; publication in collaboration with the Hilma af Klint Foundation, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, pp. 149–158, pp. 154–155.

4) Felix Auerbach, *Die graphische Darstellung. Eine allgemeinverständliche, durch zahlreiche Beispiele aus allen Gebieten der Wissenschaft und Praxis erläuterte Einführung in den Sinn und den Gebrauch der Methode*, Druck und Verlag von B. G. Teubner, Leipzig and Berlin 1914; <https://archive.org/details/AuerbachDieGraphischeDarstellung/page/n19/mode/2up>, last accessed April 27, 2025.

5) $10 + 5 = Gott$ was the, at first puzzling, title of a great exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Berlin in 2004.

6) *De Fem / The Five* included the two professional artists Hilma af Klint and Anna Cassel and the non-artist spiritists Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman and Mathilda Nilsson. Seances took place since 1896 with several longer interruptions. The Five is an offspring of Edelweissförbundet (Edelweiss Society).

Fifteen years af Klint's senior, Besant was born in London in 1847 and died near Chennai, former Madras, in India in 1933. She was a controversial and uncomfortable British socialist, theosophist and, since 1893, leader of the International Theosophical Society; she was also—and more importantly—a women's rights activist fighting for the right to birth control, along with being a writer, orator, and supporter of both Irish and Indian self-rule. Besant was one of the first women to study

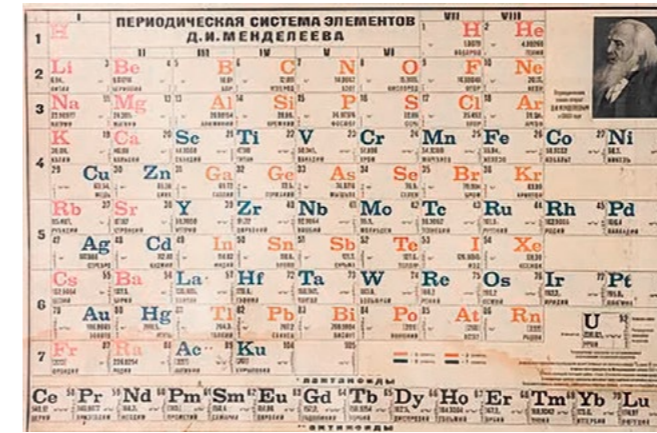


fig. 2) Dmitri Mendeleev, Periodic Table, 1869.

when British Universities first allowed degrees for female students in 1878. As a botanist and biologist, but also a chemist-manqué, she had been very clear in her analysis of the role of female scientists in the Victorian Age: Female researchers would have little to no chance to be fully recognized as members of the academic community. From this fact, or at least from this assumption, Professor of British Literature Sumangala Bhattacharya starts her 2017 essay "The Victorian Occult Atom: Annie Besant and Clairvoyant Atomic Research." Based on a spiritual and sensory experience of different planes of existence, Besant and fellow theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater practiced clairvoyance as a study tool. Without a laboratory or any other classical research means, they performed their investigations through imagining materiality in its smallest elements. In 1908, the envisioned mappings of what had been microscopically observed were published

as *Occult Chemistry. A Series of Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements*. This book's rich diagrammatic illustrations do not visualize elementary states but evolutions of 'living matter.'

Based on the esoteric idea of the unity of life, we might say that chemistry is what happens when we breathe, when we touch, when we react, and even our behavior with others is chemistry at some greater level. Easily refutable by 'proper' chemistry and quantum physics, *Occult Chemistry* may nonetheless be seen as one example "of the dissenting movements of science"⁷ of that time.⁸ The historical dissent was found in the way of doing science that "blurred the distinction between the experimenter and the experiment: the experimenter's embodied participation is the instrumentation generating results."⁹ In other words, deferring the classical scientific ethos of strict neutrality and disengagement reveal the implicit research presuppositions. As Bhattacharya writes: "Emerging from a subjective and embodied perspective, the scientific narrative offers a type of 'situated knowledge' that presents a compelling resistance to the rationalized and progressive historiography of atomic science and quantum theory and thus to the hegemonic cultural authority of science."¹⁰ This recent reception of Besant as an outsider scientist who had chosen to *not* subject herself to the demands of objectivity of the normative sciences should also apply to af Klint in general, yet especially to her spiritual research into the atom in her multipartite *Atom Series* of 1917 (fig. 1). In addition, it's remarkable that Besant did not craft the explanatory drawings by herself, but had them done by others after her verbal accounts or 'dictates' (as af Klint would do when asking a friend to annotate *Flowers, Mosses, Lichens*, originally *Blumen, Moose, Flechten* in German language).

Appropriating the periodic table of the elements of her time, first created by the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev in 1869 (fig. 2), Besant had been convinced that the visualization itself should correspond to the liveliness of the matter investigated and for that reason contain visual signals of change and transmutation (fig. 3). The trends that had been uncovered with the categorizing of elements based on mass and proton number had provided an unlimited amount of new research to be conducted in order to explain what was conspicuous to chemists and mysterious in its origins. To communicate this idea from a spiritual point of view, the singular artistic signature was of no importance. Hilma af Klint and Besant seem to have shared an interest in chronographing processes and transformations rather than in displaying an object's properties and thus confirming materialism. Both modes of investigation span an experimental field between (German) "Anschauung" and "Schauung." "Anschauung" means intuition directed towards a subject to thoroughly observe, whereas "Schauung" relates to a suggestive immaterial practice of envisioning.

A further differentiation of the visual paradigm of the 1890s comes from quite a different epistemological angle. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* were published in 1895, and

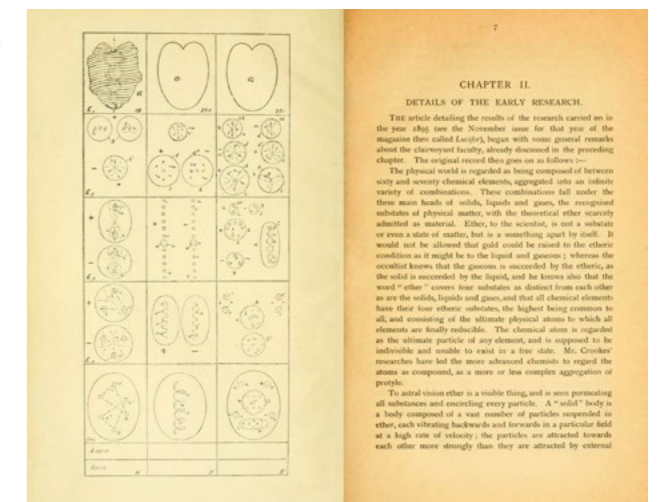


fig. 3) Annie Besant, Charles W. Leadbeater, *Occult Chemistry. Clairvoyant Observations on the Chemical Elements*, Theosophical publishing house, London 1919, p. 6–7; <https://archive.org/details/occultchemistry00besa/page/n19/mode/2up>, last accessed September 25, 2025.

7) Sumangala Bhattacharya, "The Victorian Occult Atom: Annie Besant and Clairvoyant Atomic Research," in Lara Karpenko, Shalyn Claggett (eds.), *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2017, pp. 197–214, p. 197.

8) Chemist's and Auschwitz survivor's Primo Levi's short stories collection *The Periodic Table* (1975, trans. 1984) could be summarized in a political understanding as "purity protects; but impurities give rise to change, and generate life."

9) Bhattacharya, "The Victorian Occult Atom," p. 198.

10) Ibid.

in 1893, Freud had written the obituary for the famous French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. He had studied with Charcot a decade earlier and appreciated the neurologist for his realizations based on the visual realm while at the same time distancing himself in favor of a different analytical instrument, namely language. “He [Charcot] was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist—he was, as he himself said, a ‘visuel’, a man who sees. Here is what he himself told us about his method of working. He used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him.”¹¹ I shall not elaborate on the nosological (and gender biased) consequences of Charcot’s method of discovery any further here. But we may realize that Besant’s, the pseudo-chemist’s, method of close viewing matter and especially the periodic elements and atomic structures wasn’t totally off track back then.

Media theorist Friedrich Kittler provides us with an additional perspective on visual research. He reverses the relation between science and vision in his media analytical approach to hysteria and image production. In his 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* he writes: “Likewise, Charcot and his assistants studied dust-covered files on witches and the obsessed as they were transforming mysticism into a psychiatrically proper diagnosis of hysteria.”¹² As we see, visions and the mythic had been at play then, yet not as the opposite of technologies and media, but entangled with them. Kittler in his poststructuralist view of impure media again: “the invention of the Morse alphabet in 1837 was promptly followed by the tapping specters of spiritistic seances sending their messages from the realm of the dead. Promptly as well, photographic plates—even and especially those taken with the camera shutter closed—furnished reproductions of ghosts or specters.”¹³ Communication technologies and apparitions of all kinds had been, and still are, interdependent and the boundaries permeable. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the examination of a subject through looking or beholding was commonly accepted as a respectable method of scientific discovery. However, Freud didn’t forget to mention in his obituary for Charcot that for the novel medium of truth to appear there would have to be a certain language practice or what Breuer’s female patient, Anna O.,¹⁴ had coined the ‘talking cure’ shortly before. Obviously, there has been a paradigm shift concerning the notion of the subject-to-be-observed, from being looked-at to speak and being heard, monofocalism contra dialogue. Freud unlocked images to decode the puzzles of their signifiers—as opposed to store them—or, in Kittler’s words, the “talking cure is deployed *against* the images seen or hallucinated.”¹⁵ Different from psychoanalysis’s interest in the decoding of unconscious reminiscences, af Klint (and Besant as well) deliberately based her work on the affection for the imaginary of calls, announcements, and apparitions. She must have even felt a certain duty to find the right devices to propagate the latent side of arcane things and of existence in general. Whether we share the framework of theosophical beliefs or not, a certain attitude and conviction to fulfill a clear task has to be admitted to her. Still, the research into the occult wasn’t executed with formal artistic means only—as said before: the graphic line, the geometric compositions, the change between symmetrical and irregular, ‘vivid’ elements¹⁶—the indulgence in the image was completed by the artist’s making use of alphanumeric reminiscences from Judaic tradition.

Alphanumeric Potentials as Diagrammatical Practices

Alphabets are alphanumeric sign systems consisting of a limited number of discrete symbols.¹⁷ The letters of an alphabet can be combined to create a vast number of possibilities of communication, translation, and mathematical application. As a universal matrix that distills every linguistic term into an abstract system, alphabets also operate, however, as imperialistic infrastructures.¹⁸

This is how the most recent and long-term project *The New Alphabet* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2019–2021) was introduced in the beginning of 2019. Conceived by filmmaker Alexander Kluge, the program focuses on the politically necessary criticism of the abstracting and hierarchical impact of the cultures of the alphabet compared to those cultures whose knowledge production is not based on script (examples of this I shall introduce when speaking about Harry Smith). At the same time *The New Alphabet* offers ways of thinking and forms of (artistic) materialization *within* the alphanumerical system which go beyond the colonizing power of alphabetical writing. In his statement “Reading and Writing. How can I live? What can I know? What does the future hold?” Kluge claims non-encodable occurrences within or at the margins of the alphabet’s universal abstract structure in digital times. For that, he refers to the Kabbalah, but he could have likewise mentioned the neo-platonic idea of the alphabet.

The twofold operation of letters as basic language units and of letters as numbers and basic entities for calculation in the Kabbalah might work as a (historical) model for the interconnectedness of

two different emancipatory cultural, social, and political potentials: of the potential of ‘analogous literacy’ and the potential of ‘digital literacy’. A firm believer in education and learning experienced as *creative activities*, Kluge states: “Letters are not technical. In many cultures, letters have a numerical value. The Kabbala sets forth a theory of the Numbers and Letters of God. Both, numbers and letters, are living creatures. That which in children or adults ‘learns,’ is among the most vital traits and forces human beings possess.”¹⁹ In my view, this double vital force of learning through letters and numerals, but, at times, beyond decoding, has a lot in common with what guides Hilma af Klint’s transcriptions of her visions and dictates into the beautiful diagrams and iconographs. In her case, the glossary *Letters and Words*²⁰ and, in addition, certain ornaments and other often repeated grammatical or mathematical signs, appear as the visually explicit converters of the transvisual into the visual.

The Kabbalah is known as an esoteric training, a discipline, and a school of thought that includes stories of mystical experiences, from visitations by angels to prophetic dreams and visions. It had an important influence on the theosophist Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) whose Theosophical Society (founded in 1875) af Klint joined in 1889 and whose leader Annie Besant became in 1907. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* of 1888 is said to have been in Hilma af Klint’s library. According to the book’s subheading, Blavatsky defined theosophy as “the synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy” and practiced it—as af Klint later did with visual means—as a teaching mechanism instead of solely as an idea or a belief system.

In the triplicity of science, religion and philosophy, “science” certainly benefited from a culturally legitimizing power over religious superstition and dogmatism, even if it were only rhetorical.

Besides her syncretistic philosophical research across cultures but also deeply involved in the study of Western mystical traditions such as Gnosticism, Kabbala, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism, Russian born Blavatsky also translated one of Leo Tolstoy’s short stories and was known as an in-depth-reviewer of his spiritual writings. Tolstoy had not only been a moralist and a spiritualist but also a great educator who promoted brotherhood as a key objective. Twenty years after he had started his holistic pedagogical work in the 1850s, he submitted his own ABC-book in 1872. It contained the alphabet—letters in combination with little pictograms—grammar, thus combining reading, writing, counting, and had notes for teachers about how to use the “Azбука.” He even founded and financed a school for peasant children, where he and his elder children taught

through his primer, according to his conviction that ‘brotherhood’ will never be achieved without education. Having become a pacifist, social educator and renouncing all personal possessions, the late Tolstoy also corresponded with Mahatma Gandhi who, on his part, had been a member of Blavatsky’s Theosophical Lodge in 1891.

Hilma af Klint’s pictorial cosmos consists of numbers and letters as well as of all kinds of different signs reminiscent of punctuation marks and arithmetic operators; as we have already seen, it also comprises pictograms looking like pulsing circles and spirals, shapes reminiscent of snails and eggs, and at times a secret symbolics are part of what circulates between belief and calculation. Among these signs, we remarkably often find the shape of zero, 0, an empty outline rarely distinguishable from the egg form, so often used in her works. In an alphanumerical sense, it may refer to such different meanings as nothing or emptiness, but in a more general sense also to the paradoxical and the multitude. It is common knowledge that even the digital world of ones and zeros was first invented in order to explain God’s creation of the Earth from nothingness. Here it was God,

the *almighty One*, creating being and unity out of the void, infusing zeros with ones. Notebook 1040 *Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint*, n.d., for example opens with the two mathematical operators “+” and “×” (fig. 4) and includes the remarkable entry dated June 21, 1907: “The following three concepts are taken as a starting point: 00 0 00.”²¹ The opposite page opens with letter *a* and systematically lists combinations of *a* with one or several letters in alphabetical

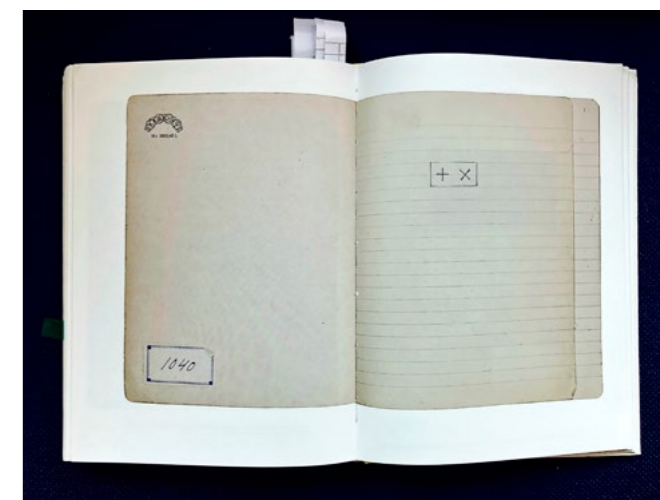


fig. 4) Hilma af Klint, “Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint,” [notebook #1040; n. d.] in Christine Burgin (ed.), *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*; publication in collaboration with the Hilma af Klint Foundation, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, pp. 246–285, pp. 248–249.

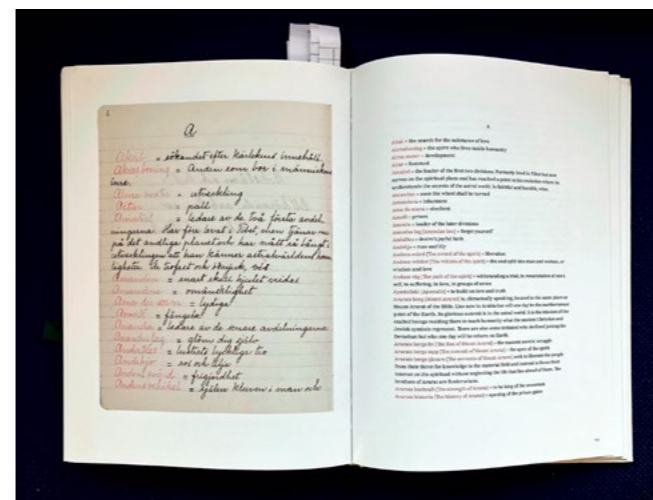


fig. 5) Hilma af Klint, “Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint,” [notebook #1040; n. d.] in Christine Burgin (ed.), *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*; publication in collaboration with the Hilma af Klint Foundation, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, pp. 246–285, pp. 254–255.

19) Alexander Kluge, “Reading and Writing. How can I live? What can I know? What does the future hold?” in *ibid.*, pp. 33–46, p. 40.

20) Hilma af Klint, “Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint,” [notebook #1040; n. d.] in Christine Burgin (ed.), *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*. Publication in collaboration with the Hilma af Klint Foundation, texts by Iris Müller-Westermann and afterword by Johan af Klint, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, pp. 246–285 (individual pages from the notebook are reproduced here together with the English translation of the complete glossary, originally in Swedish).

21) *Ibid.*, p. 266.

11) Sigmund Freud, “Charcot” (1893), *Freud—Complete Works*; pp. 275–284, p. 276;

http://freudcompleteworks.com/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf, last accessed June 29, 2025.

12) Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 148; see also Désiré Magloire Bourneville and Paul Régnard, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, 2 vols., Paris 1877–78, 2: pp. 208–26.

13) Kittler, *Gramophone*, p. 12.

14) In later life Anna O. or Bertha Pappenheim became a distinguished social worker and a noted campaigner for women’s rights—and a remarkable collector of lace; see *Spitzen und so weiter...: Die Sammlungen Bertha Pappenheims im MAK/ Lace and so on ... Bertha Pappenheim’s Collection at the MAK*, exhibition catalog ed. by Peter Noever, Schlebrügge, Vienna 2007.

15) Kittler, *Gramophone*, p. 141; emphasis mine.

16) See Loreck, “Critical Knowledge Practices from the Margins: Plants and the Like.”

17) ‘Discrete symbols’ means clearly distinguishable symbols.

18) Bernd Scherer, Olga von Schubert, “Foreword,” in *The New Alphabet—Opening Days*, pp. 5–7, p. 5; <https://mediathek.hkw.de/en/document/the-new-alphabet---opening-days---program-booklet?p=2&list=documents&backscreen=documents>, last accessed June 29, 2025.

order (fig. 5). Graphically, the logograms or tokens and their denotations are linked in the form of a mathematical equation. Here we see in detail a great example of the alphanumeric order put to work.

The above example emerged when leafing through Christine Burgin's beautiful edition *Hilma af Klint. Notes and Methods* and its selection of reproduced spreads of some of af Klint's 126 surviving notebooks. *Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint* is one of them. For me, this compendium—in alphabetic order—attached to her work by the artist herself as well as a work of its own constitutes a significant, though not the only link between alphanumeric and diagrammatic researching and teaching practices in Hilma af Klint. It shows the immense importance of decoding the only seemingly autonomous pictorial aesthetics and suggests the possibility of translating the specific visual and alphanumeric symbolism of the images into a narrative, into messages and information of spiritual relevance. Compiled according to scientific criteria, any glossary serves as a reliable academic tool to acquire knowledge in any province. Despite the method's linguistically systematic organization, however, the semantics here remains mysterious and hermetic even though it is clearly reminiscent of biblical, occult, and religious thought, ethics, personnel, rituals, and agency. Albeit the reader does not get out of Hilma af Klint's strange cosmos full of aspirations and demands, the 'feel' of sincerity prevails as does the general idea of search and cognition. Why should she have produced any diagrammatic tools if not to enable both herself and her future recipients to actually share her investigations, read the messages and realize the visual signs? However, instead of concrete doctrines or conclusions, we find those visual and verbal techniques of an approach per se, a direction of search which we know from scientific exploration, mathematics as well as from religious, esoteric, mythic, occult and/or cabbalistic practices: annotations, captions, pictograms, diagrams and the like. Burgin evaluates af Klint's method as "a closed system, but [...] not an individualistic one."²² In retrospect, her publication of several of the notebooks gives methodological evidence of what I had claimed earlier just from a close-viewing of af Klint's drawings and especially my close-viewing of the plant notebook of 1919/1920.²³ In addition: Would anyone of her age group catalogue her works in a portfolio to carry with her if not to show the work at all times? Af Klint did so in the ten so-called *Blue Books*. She placed a black-and-white photograph of each of the chosen examples from her most important 193 pictures series, *The Paintings for the Temple*, opposite an incredibly exact copy in watercolor of the same painting. Like in natural science schoolbooks, sometimes details are extracted and magnified (as if to demonstrate with graphic means what Annie Besant had introduced as her clairvoyant research methodology into the atomic structure to show "the structure of matter as 'visible and living realities'"²⁴); letter-pictogram-combinations are appended. Again, translatability is suggested or, in other words, the transformation from a latent to a manifest content when assisted by her own glossary *Letters and Words Pertaining to Works by Hilma af Klint*. However, the visual and the alphanumeric come in separate parts, and s/he who wants to decipher them has to work on it. This kind of work resembles research. Methodologically, today the researcher continuously switches between her information channels: from Wikipedia to a dictionary to some e-publication or academic platforms, from an image search to a text search and back again. Technically speaking, there is a constant flow beyond what can be fixed in a two-dimensional diagram, a chart or in columns. The act of better understanding is at least as much about processes as it is about data.²⁵ For me, af Klint's ways of preparing for propagation were everything but a personal or intimate endeavor only. She chose her strategies according to contemporary ideas of distribution; replacing mechanical modes of image reproduction in full color (which only came up in the late 1930s) with her handmade drawings, she was even ahead of her time. The *Blue Books* are certainly conceived as a safe keeping of a lifelong dedication, ambition, and conviction with the intention to open her experience up to others, for those to come, or, as Christine Burgin summarizes it, the *Blue Books* "preserve what she hoped would be a re-spiritualized world of the future the messages she had received so long ago."²⁶ Archiving itself comes as a scriptural practice, both preserving material and making tools available for the material's later use: indexes, annotations, glossaries etc. In addition, af Klint might have been well aware of the Nazi regime defaming non-objective art as Degenerate Art. Yet with her compilation, she might have also intended to take measures not only against the possible destruction of her whole oeuvre but also made preparations against any mistaking her—and The Five's—search for spiritual cognition for the, at that time then virulent, fascist version of the esoteric and of occultism.²⁷ The boundaries are fluid here, and with respect to today's general cultural interest, including my own curiosity, in phenomena like mediumistic practices in fine art and in literature, critics have to keep in mind that this interest may not only be of subversive pop cultural value in the name of so urgently needed alternative approaches to nature, economies, and, above all, to power, but that occultism has also had this common history with fascism. Furthermore, esoteric circles, the orders and lodges, are mostly highly elitist. They are held together by a hermetic or secret (and certainly not an 'open access') doctrine and by rather totalitarian laws, rules, and hierarchies. Making use of the diagrammatic system as a means to convince visually also belongs to the

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22) Burgin, *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*, p. 246.

23) See Loreck, "Anlässlich von Hilma af Klints Notizbuch #588: Blumen, Moose, Flechten."

24) Bhattacharya, "The Victorian Occult Atom," p. 207.

25) Burgin, *Hilma af Klint: Notes and Methods*, p. 34.

26) Ibid.

27) See Marty Bax, *Theosophy and the Society in the Public Eye. Hilma af Klint revisited. Part III: Anna Cassel, Hilma's 'other half'*, Theosophy Forward, April 4, 2018: "Sweden was a neutral country, but that does not imply that either Western Esotericism could flourish in the open or that Fascism had not taken roots. The Swedish society, and notably the upper class, being closely linked to both politics and economy, was very aware of both the dangers of Fascism and of members enthusiastically embracing it at the same time. Fascists had declared an open war on Western esoterists." <https://www.theosophyforward.com/articles/theosophy-and-the-society-in-the-public-eye/2315-hilma-af-klint-revisited-part-iii-anna-cassel-hilma-s-other-half>, last accessed April 28, 2025.

scientification of material otherwise regarded as random or irrational. The diagram's big advantage is that it claims potential activity and the liveliness of data within a fixed scheme or even despite it. And the diagram aligns itself with the virtual since what can be deduced from it is something abstract, something whose consequences might become effective in the future. Still, af Klint's application of the diagram and derived practices cannot belie the fact that her version reflects bourgeois ethics and ideologies, even in the form of philanthropical attitudes.

Harry Smith

Harry Smith was a US-American anthropologist and ethnomusicologist,²⁸ a Beatnik, filmmaker, occultist, and Shaman-in-Residence. It was Smith, the filmmaker,²⁹ however, who had declared that his "movies are made by God, I am just the medium for them."³⁰ Exactly this bold statement relates his approach to Hilma af Klint's. Though Smith almost certainly did not know of the artist and her work, the two of them share the same intellectual and spiritual background from

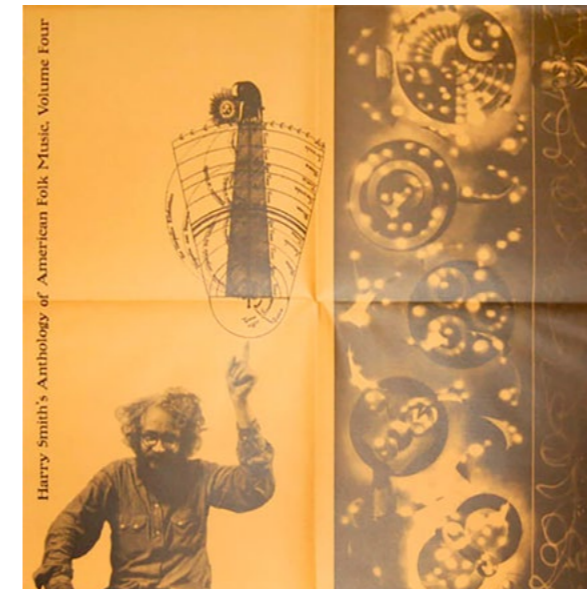


fig. 6) Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music, Volume Four, promotional flyer; <https://oldtimeparty.wordpress.com/2012/04/05/from-the-archives-harry-smiths-volume-4/>, last accessed September 23, 2025.

mediumship to the Kabbalah—and, as I shall argue—methodologically a comparable diagrammatic approach. Of course, their respective use of diagrammatical methods differs from each other. Where af Klint appears overly systematic, frail, and cautious, Smith's encyclopedic knowledge allowed him to playfully operate with allusion, rough analogies, associations, or visual similes. Under universal and occult auspices, it wasn't too difficult for him to find affinities. And these affinities were mostly graphically proven. Born in 1923 to a family deeply invested in Madame Blavatsky and theosophy, in occultism, and freemasonry, but also in the 'Wobblies' (Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)), Harry Smith liked to propagate alternative biographies, including his birth from the Russian Grand Duchesse Anastasia Romanov (which means from his mother as her imagined incarnation, whereas Anastasia's mother, Tsarina of Russia, had indeed supported his maternal grandmother's founding of a school in Alaska—see the school again!) on a Russian gunboat off the coasts of Alaska in 1918. Once more we find allusions to Russia, probably inspired by Russian-born Blavatsky. Like Hilma af Klint and her self-assessment that she would have painted for the future, Smith, too, was convinced that "his work would not be fully recognized until at least 50 years after his death."³¹ Since we live in times of acceleration and compared to af Klint, it took him only half that time to be

revisited. The artist had drawn his knowledge not only from abstract or non-narrative early film-making à la Hans Richter³² but also from his huge collection of artifacts, both material and sound pieces, ranging from geometrically patterned quilted textiles of the Seminole Indians (quilt-like or patchwork fabrics) to Ukrainian Easter eggs and paper airplanes³³ and beyond that to transitory practices like creating string figures.³⁴ What is fascinating about his collected influences is the fact that Smith did not choose according to canonic values and the conventional high-and-low designations invalidating the anonymous everyday and so-called applied art over so-called autonomous art. Polymath Smith saw the diverse objects—from folk art to the results of popular entertainment—as "indexes to a great variety of thoughts. They're like encyclopedias of design."³⁵ For a start, this doesn't sound esoteric at all. However, Smith's eager search for the intercultural and transhistorical patterns behind the different, mostly unknown or marginalized cultural expressions intersected with his New Age interest in mythic, alchemist and esoteric wisdom and their designs of communication. He was also "unique in associating folk music with the occult,"³⁶ as if folk music—as assembled in the afore mentioned *Anthology of American Folk Music* and his main focus in his early research and collecting—came from other worlds (fig. 6). "It was an occult document disguised as an academic treatise on stylistic shifts within an archaic musicology."³⁷

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28) Smith compiled an extensive selection of folk songs and blues from his collection of rare '78s issued between 1926 and 1932. The compilation was released by Folkways as *The Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952 in the form of three sets of double LPs.

29) This text originates from a talk given at the symposium *World Receivers. Mediumistic Art in Theory and Practice 1850–1950* on January 25 and 26, 2019, on the occasion of the exhibition *World Receiver: Georgiana Houghton—Hilma af Klint—Emma Kunz. With Films by John Whitney, James Whitney, and Harry Smith*, exhibition at Kunstbau / Lenbachhaus Munich, November 6, 2018 – March 10, 2019.

30) Bill Breeze, "In Memoriam, Harry Smith" in Paola Iglori, *American Magus Harry Smith. A Modern Alchemist*.

With a Partial List of the Things He Gathered, Inanout Press, New York 1996, pp. 7–9, p. 8.

31) Rani Singh, "Anthology Film Archives, New York 1995", in Paola Iglori, *American Magus Harry Smith. A Modern Alchemist*.

With a Partial List of the Things He Gathered, Inanout Press, New York 1996, pp. 13–17, p. 13.

32) Hans Richter (1888–1976) believed in the magic, the poetic, and the inexplicable as essential cinematographic qualities and made spirits appear in film (*Vormittagsspek* (Ghosts before Breakfast), 1928).

33) See John Klacsmann with Andrew Lampert (eds.), *Paper Airplanes: The Collections of Harry Smith: Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume I, J&L Books/Anthology Film Archives, New York 2015. The catalog documents Smith's "extraordinary aeronautic pursuit and highlights the tangled history and myths that accompany them."

34) See John Klacsmann and Andrew Lampert (eds.), *String Figures: The Collections of Harry Smith: Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume II, with texts by John Cohen and Terry Winters, J&L Books with Anthology Film Archives, New York 2015; see also: http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/sitewide/pdf/Harry_Smith_booklet_regular.pdf, last accessed April 28, 2025.

35) Harry Smith quoted from Singh, *Anthology*, p. 16.

36) No author, *Harry Everett Smith*, <https://www.revolvy.com/topic/Harry%20Everett%20Smith>, last accessed March 13, 2019.

37) Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America (Excerpt)*; <https://genius.com/Greil-marcus-the-old-weird-america-excerpt-annotated>, last accessed April 28, 2025.

The connection is established conceptually, through design again and, in fact, bridges four centuries to make up a universal collective memory. Smith chose Theodore de Bry's³⁸ 1617 engraving of a great hand, God's hand, tuning what he called the *Celestial Monochord* (fig. 7) to be printed on the four boxes' covers. Issued in 1952, each box was colored in the color equivalent of earth, air, water, and fire. The one-stringed instrument symbolized the ancient ideas of the music of the spheres and had illustrated the treatise *De Musica Mundana* (Mundane Music) of 1618 by the Elizabethan magus Robert Fludd. But what should we conclude from that? At first, the necessary criticism of classical anthropology and the universal or eternal in structures as opposed to difference in context, historical time, and social environments, comes up. At the same time, the collector and scholar's obsession with the strange counts since forms and practices like, for example, string figures aim at mediacy, though not in written language. "First described in Western anthropological literature by Franz Boas in 1888," fellow artist Terry Winters (*1949) writes about the string figures in 2012, "these patterns—made by looping or weaving lengths of string into geometric forms or shapes that often evoke familiar objects—have been produced throughout history, both as a secular pastime and as a spiritual practice."³⁹ Resembling the patterns of sacred geometry, the forms are symmetrically organized. According to Smith himself, they are to be found everywhere except for Europe and Asia and in those places where there has been no written alphabetical language system. In this sense, string figures don't signify something, but "are essentially pictures of something" (ibid.). As Smith said—and we have to forgive him of his completely uncritical use of the word 'primitive':

It was some universal thing that seemed to be more widely distributed than anything else in places that didn't have so-called "civilization." It was the only thing that I could isolate off hand that was produced by all primitive societies and by no "cultured" societies. For example, string figures are found everywhere in the world except Europe and Asia, except for a few peripheral areas like the hills in the Philippines and Scotland. None of these places like France, Russia, Japan, China, Turkey have string figures, despite a great interest in games [...] I've had various theories for that. Possibly it has to do with the parts of the brain that memorize letters (which usually seem to be around 30 or 50—the things you have to learn to write a language), because string figures don't occur in a place where *writing is done*.⁴⁰

This playful social exchange includes the diagrammatic in the sense of organizing a multitude of possibilities of rather abstract narratives within the same material. It includes both a mathematical and a linguistic operation while visually showing different geometrical forms. The originally native game's aim has always been to end without any knots, nothing tangled, but with a continuous piece of strip circle. Although Smith directed his interest towards the non-verbal and non-written form of communication working without letters, we may relate it to the alphanumeric system: the empty string circle, this one piece of thread in the form of a zero, can be figured both realistically and geometrically. Depending on the respective culture, "flowers and stars and things" appear or "animals, birds, and people"⁴¹ are represented.

In film no. 3: *Interwoven* (1947–49) and part of Smith's own film compilation *Early Abstractions* of 1964, the non-narrative structure prevails: animated geometric shapes move within a grid structure, hastily changing color, form, and position whilst radiating bright colors in translucent flashes. Here we don't find any traditional occult symbolism, but an excessive pulsing and rhythmic alteration. In the early years, Smith had batiked and painted on 35mm frames or cut out images to be meticulously filed and organized. Painted directly on the film stock, the optical impression in the screening is the result of an almost alchemic reaction between the sensitive film and the paint. Around 1950, his work was followed by optically printed non-objective studies and later by semi-realistic animated collages made as part of his alchemical labors of 1957 to 1962.⁴² Furthermore, the optics comes out of synaesthetic experiences⁴³ which, as Blavatsky believed, were a way of sensing the astral world.

Ten years later, the cut-and-paste collage and animation film *Heaven and Earth Magic* (ca. 1957–62) is no longer an abstract pulsing work, capturing the spectator's imagination through flickering color fields in a kaleidoscopic and crystalline manner. Instead, it is much more explicit regarding occultism. A number of image sources are referenced, including neurological diagrams, the Kabbalah, as well as visuals of the, in the 1870s, newly inaugurated sewers of London. Smith was also influenced by Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), which documents

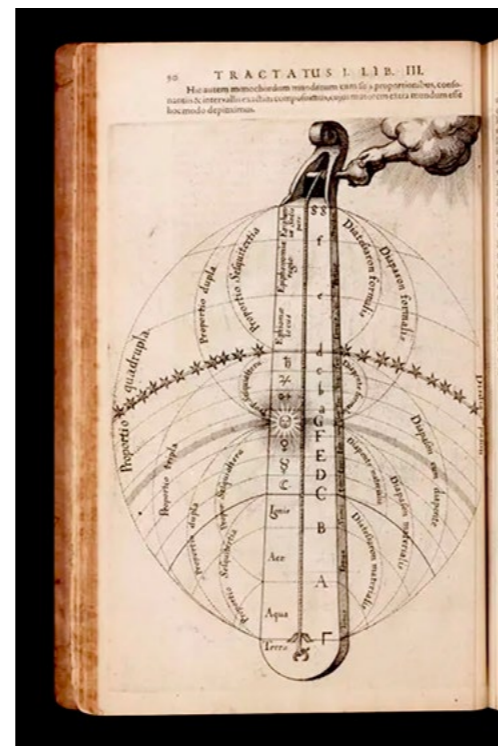


fig. 7) Theodore de Bry, "Celestial Monochord," 1617, engraving; illustration for Robert Fludd, *De Musica Mundana* (Mundane Music), Oppenheim 1618.

the author's two nervous breakdowns (in the late 19th century) and describes them as visionary experiences through which he made contact with God. Yet the diverse sources have something in common. It is the dynamism and the channeling of fluids, flashes, rays, and psychic visions which is then transferred to the non-linear storyline. Despite the imagery itself, it is exactly the speedy change in surreal constellations together with the accompanying scratchy, non-narrative noises that make the viewer feel herself in a supernatural field of forces.

At age 16, Smith had started with phonograph-recordings of Indian spiritual dances. These records helped him with, what he called, "diagramming the pictures," he had witnessed. "Whatever he couldn't put in a diagram wouldn't interest him," Kabbalist Lionel Ziprin remembered and continued that Smith, whom he called a scientist, had always searched structures. Structures, however, are not synonymous with rigid systems, with classification and stratification; on the contrary, they are more likely showing the possibilities of ever new combinations. But Smith had also recorded famous Rabbi Nuftali Zvi Margolies Abulafia singing liturgical chants in Hebrew, Arabic, and Yiddish. This very Rabbi was Ziprin's grandfather. The poet, Ziprin, came from a long line of mystics and rabbis,⁴⁴ for whom the Kabbalah was a household text. In the 1950s, Smith (and filmmakers Bruce Conner and Jordan Belson) saw him and his wife almost every day to make a living following up a greeting card design business, but also to be let into the arcane knowledge by Ziprin (fig. 8). "What is clear is that Ziprin was both a magnet and catalyst, and that all sorts of people, from the pianist Thelonius Monk⁴⁵ to the illustrator William Mohr,⁴⁶ were drawn to him," art critic John Lau writes on the occasion of the 2013 exhibit *Qor Corporation: Lionel Ziprin, Harry Smith and the Inner Language of Laminates* at Maccarone in New York.

In my opinion, Smith's methods—and their practices—are related to Hilma af Klint's scriptings of her mediumistic or spiritual research. Individual spiritual religious convictions, visions, confessions, and beliefs can hardly be verified in terms of their content and especially not in terms of their truth. Transmitted into images and embodied in signs—be them images, pictograms, diagrams, numbers or letters, or other graphic representations, the familiar systems enable the viewer to participate in the other's personal experience of the invisible. Then, the arcane can be shared on the basis of the laws of the visual artistic realm: It is the scriptings that organize the transvisual as the visual.

Therefore, they make use of scientific and artistic systematics while at the same time alienating those means from their conventional disciplinary aims. Remarkably, the translation followed exactly the prominent scientific studies of their times. For Hilma af Klint, they were math and biology, botany primarily, for Harry Smith, structuralist anthropology and, though not outspoken, cybernetics and information or communication technologies in the fifties and sixties. Smith's approach cannot be traced back to one and only source. It is everything but pure. Instead, it reveals itself as an exciting, in parts, rather bizarre mixture of eclectic interests: struggle became structured in a scientific and scholarly manner to demonstrate the "interconnectedness of symbols from dead, forgotten worlds as well as from living, vibrant cultures [...]"⁴⁷ Smith's analogous method, though, is everything but chaotic. "The whole purpose is to have some kind of series of things. Information as drawing and graphic designs can be located more quickly than it can be in books. The fact that I have all the Seminole designs permits anything that falls into the cannon of that technological procedure to be found there. It's like flipping quickly through. It's a way of programming the mind, like a punch card of a sort."⁴⁸ Once the pattern was uncovered, Smith assumed, their then unlocked powerful truths would change society.

In this sense, his conception of a happening conceived against the Vietnam War on October 21, 1967 is coherent. The American 'investigative poet,' singer, social activist, and environmentalist Ed Sanders recounts that Harry Smith was the key advisor for Allen Ginsberg and The Fugs' effort



fig. 8) Harry Smith, "Untitled [Zodiacal hexagram scratchboard]," c. 1952, india ink on cardstock, 7 × 5 1/2 inches (17.8 × 14 cm), Lionel Ziprin Archive, New York; photo: courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

38) Interestingly, the Belgian-German engraver Johann Theodor de Bry had published a substantial 'Alphabetbuch' in 1596.

39) See introduction to "Harry Smith: String Figures," Cabinet Magazine, exhibition booklet, September 2012, http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/sitewide/pdf/Harry_Smith_booklet_regular.pdf, last accessed April 28, 2025.

40) Harry Smith in Excerpt from "A Rare Interview with Harry Smith." Interview by John Cohen, in "Harry Smith: String Figures," an exhibition drawn from the collection of John Cohen and organized by Terry Winters, September 19 – November 3, New York City 2012, p. 8; emphasis mine. http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/sitewide/pdf/Harry_Smith_booklet_regular.pdf, last accessed April 28, 2025.

41) Ibid., p. 10.

42) See no author, "Harry Smith: An Ethnographic Modernist in America. Full Biography," <https://harrysmitharchives.com/biography/full/>, last accessed April 28, 2025.

43) See Jamie Sexton, *Alchemical Transformations: The Abstract Films of Harry Smith*, Sense of Cinema, July 2005;

http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/experimental-cinema/harry_smith/, last accessed July 24, 2025.

44) According to John Yau, Lionel Ziprin was not only a poet but also the "grandson of Rabbi Nuftali Zvi Margolies Abulafia, who was a living storehouse of Jewish liturgical music dating back centuries. The name Abulafia itself has a long and rich history stretching to 13th-century Spain and Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, one of the earliest Kabbalists. Abraham ben Samuel also wrote books instructing the reader on the practice of becoming receptive to divine forces. He was a serious practitioner of gematria, the study of letters as numerals, a form of divining messages within messages." John Yau, *The Poet-Magus of the Lower East Side*, Hyperallergic, October 20, 2013; <https://hyperallergic.com/89359/the-poet-magus-of-the-lower-east-side/>, last accessed April 28, 2025.

45) Thelonious Sphere Monk (1917–1982) was an US-American pianist and composer who was among the first creators of modern jazz. As the pianist in the band at Minton's Playhouse, a nightclub in New York City which Ziprin and Smith visited almost every night, in the early 1940s, Monk had great influence on the other musicians who later developed the bebop movement.

46) William George Mohr (1878–1955), a painter who obviously did not make it into the canon—almost no information on the internet!

47) Rani Singh, "Harry Smith, an Ethnographic Modernist in America" in Andrew Perchuk, Rani Singh (eds.), *Harry Smith: The Avant-Garde in the American Vernacular*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2010, pp. 15–60, p. 15.

48) Harry Smith, quoted from Andrew Perchuk, "Struggle and Structure" in: Andrew Perchuk, Rani Singh (eds.), *Harry Smith: The Avant-garde in the American Vernacular*, pp. 3–13, p. 9.

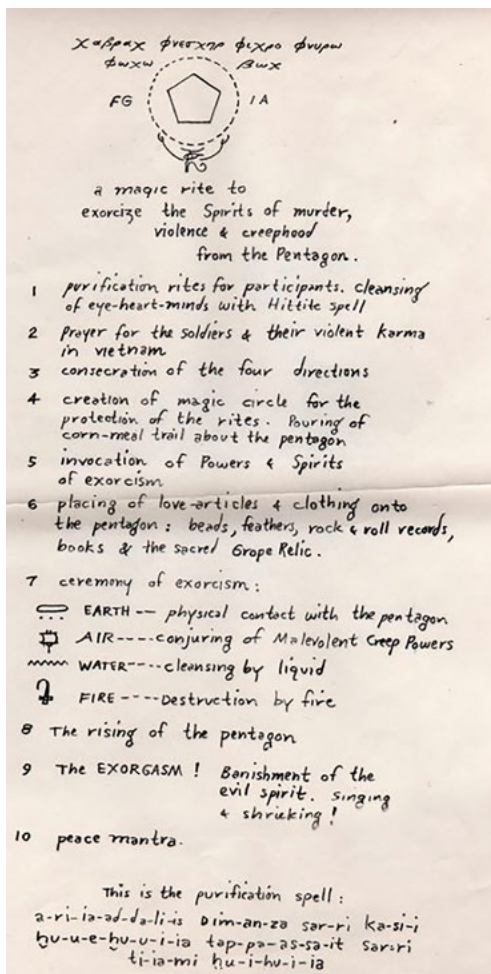


fig. 9) Ed Sanders, script for the ritualistic happening "Levitation of the Pentagon," March on the Pentagon in October 1967.

to levitate the Pentagon. "In the fall of 1967," Sanders wrote, "a bunch of us decided to exorcise the demons from the Pentagon as part of a big demonstration against the Vietnam War. (You can get a flavor of that day from Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*.⁴⁹) I was in charge of coming up with a structure for the Exorcism. I knew Harry would know what to do so I conferred with him. He gave me the basic outline, which was to use the symbols of the four directions, and to use the symbols of earth, air, fire, and water. He also suggested adding a cow, to represent the Goddess Hathor.⁵⁰ We did have a cow prepared, painted with mythic symbols, but the police stopped it from getting near the Pentagon. The Exorcism was duly recorded by WBAI's Bob Fass, and can be found on The Fugs's album *Tenderness Junction*."⁵¹ (fig. 9) 100,000 protesters came. They formed a circle around the building and "started chanting and singing, since, as Time Magazine dutifully explained: "[B]y chanting ancient Aramaic exorcism rites while standing in a circle around the building, they could get it to rise into the air, turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled. The war would end forthwith."⁵² The building wasn't levitated—and also the war had not ended. Still, the temporary closing in on the five-sided polygon—here related to the pentagram as the figure of 'evil' power at the center of kabbalistic esoteric teaching—by the Anti-Vietnam War protestors is a powerful image and at that a symbolically effective one too. Though disdained as "counterculture folklore" by the critics, one of the protest's leaders, Jerry Rubin, summarized the effect of what, at the heyday of the New Age movement, was called Magical Politics: "We had symbolically destroyed the Pentagon, the symbol of the war machine, by throwing blood on it, by pissing on it, dancing on it ... painting 'Che lives' on it. It was a total cultural attack on the Pentagon. The media had communicated this all over the country and lots of people identified with us, the besiegers."⁵³ Obviously, the symbolism of shouting "out demons out" in refrain was materially complemented with the opposite of controlling bodily fluids (Julia Kristeva would grasp the abject's culturally and socially disrupting function for conventional orders and regimes of normalization theoretically shortly after, in 1980). Together with the large amount of refuse left behind and

that brought ridicule from the officials, the message came through. Yet, should the impurity of the roots of the movement—which also included incense and a "psychedelic bomb," but soon shifted from protest to resistance—be an argument against this very happening or, in general, against any artistic action or ceremony? Today, artists investigate the human-made structures and designs that have pushed the planet to the threshold of climate change. The contemporary aesthetics of artistic research looks quite different, but the displays and performances make use of imagination alike. Imagination and the imaginary, too, have a potential and the power of the symbolic to provoke or even anticipate a change in thinking and attitude when directed against the unsustainable social and political condition.

49) Here, Norman Mailer speaks about "Revolutionary Alchemists."
 50) One of the most important ancient Egyptian goddesses, Hathor was seen as the cosmic lady, the lady of the stars and a personification of the Milky Way, upon which both the Sun God Ra and the King sailed. In other roles, she was a goddess of music, dance, foreign lands and fertility who helped women in childbirth, as well as the patron goddess of miners. Her animal appearance is a cow or a woman with a cow's head. Hence, why Hathor? Hathor was later associated with Isis. Smith, a firm proponent of Blavatsky's, might have had her first major book in mind: *Unveiled Isis. A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, New York 1877.
 51) Ed Sanders, biographical essay in: *Liner Notes to Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music*, Volume 4, Revenant RVM 211 (2000), p. 24. Narratives of the Pentagon March as the first nation-wide Anti-Vietnam War protest differ significantly, especially with regard to the main protest designers' names. The version in question already forms the so-called counterculture folklore narrative but, of course, shares the demand that "The only vanguard is the vanguard in action. [...] What's needed is a new generation of nuisances, who are freaky, crazy, irrational, sexy, angry, irreligious, childish and mad." Jerry Rubin, "I AM the Walrus", essay in Win, circa 1968.
 52) Nadine Bloch, *The day they levitated the Pentagon*, Waging Nonviolence, October 21, 2012; <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/the-day-they-levitated-the-pentagon/>, last accessed May 11, 2025.
 53) Jerry Rubins, quoted from Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond*, Grove Press, New York City 1992, p. 205.