Outside, it was cold and dark. Inside, brightly colored forms seemed to swirl and spread. It was February, 2013, the evening of the opening of "Hilma af Klint—A Pioneer of Abstraction" at Moderna Museet, in Stockholm. Among the attendees was Kurt Almqvist, a white-haired man in his mid-fifties. Though Almqvist considered himself something of an expert on fin-de-siècle intellectual history—he had written a book on Carl Jung—he was seeing af Klint's paintings for the first time.

Almqvist, the C.E.O. of a nonprofit foundation that had financed a seminar to accompany the exhibition, had been to other shows at Moderna Museet—"smashed bottles and things like that," as he put it to me—and found the frank beauty of af Klint's work a relief. Many of the canvases, painted a century earlier, were enormous; some towered over his head. Odd but familiar shapes pulsed from their surfaces: eggs, petals, celestial bodies. Almqvist was standing in front of a series of small geometric paintings of ornamented circles—some looked like beach balls, others a bit like lunar phases—when he was approached by a flummoxed-looking woman. *Did he understand them*? she wondered. *Could he explain them to her*? "I really don't know anything," Almqvist recalled telling her. "I suppose it's all symbolic for . . . something. Perhaps it has to do with religion?"

In the following months, the exhibition drew a record number of visitors. There were the usual suspects—art students, well-read retirees in statement eyewear—but also, in the diplomatic words of one museum employee, "other kinds of people." Diaphanously costumed dancers. Self-described psychics. A Finnish man came every day for weeks, stayed until closing, and spoke to no one. The show proved especially popular with women, many of whom reported feeling a mysterious warmth spread through their lower bodies, accompanied by an irrepressible urge to weep.

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"It is, without a doubt, one of the most extraordinary exhibitions I have ever seen," a co-editor of the contemporary-art magazine *Frieze* wrote. Much of the press coverage emphasized the fact that af Klint had begun painting her nonrepresentational works in 1906, four years before the attempts of Kandinsky, long considered the father of abstract art. Soon, Sweden's postal service issued stamps bearing images of af Klint's paintings. Posters of her work began to replace decorative Buddha statues as stock interior décor in Stockholm's real-estate listings. There was an Ikea collaboration.

The paintings were gorgeous, and so was the story of their creation, every element of which seemed lifted from a fairy tale. It began with af Klint's birth, in 1862, to a noble family, in a palace just outside Stockholm. The building had been converted into a military academy, where her father taught naval cadets. As she got older, she began to see visions she could not explain—empty coffins, floating numbers. She went to school, where she learned to paint. At first, she was diligent about portraying the world as others saw it: she made portraits of important people, landscapes of recognizable terrain, careful illustrations of botanical and zoological life. But, in time, she became unsatisfied.

"Wow—the horses are really little tonight."

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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When she was in her early thirties, she joined a circle called the Five; together, they took down messages from spirits and from the dead. The voices of astral beings suggested to af Klint that she should paint not reality as it seemed but a truer version, which lay beyond the material world. She obeyed, covering canvas after canvas with images of hidden forces, portrayed in strange shapes and vivid colors. In middle age, she showed the work to Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian occultist whose syncretic theories about everything from agriculture to education and the afterlife came to be known as anthroposophy.

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Later, af Klint claimed—implausibly, according to some historians—that Steiner had warned her that the world was not ready for what she was attempting to reveal, and that, discouraged, she stopped painting for eight years. When she resumed, she said, she worked at great scale and intensity. But she decreed that the works were to remain unseen for twenty years after her death, protected from ignorant audiences. Only decades later would it become evident that Hilma af Klint had produced one of the most significant creative innovations of the twentieth century.

"It was delicious," Louise Belfrage, a scholar and a colleague of Almqvist's, said. "You have this woman genius, a prophet, making abstract paintings before Kandinsky? I mean, come *on!* It's just so *attractive*." Belfrage spoke of af Klint's story like someone who had just been caught swiping icing off a cake: helpless, only half sorry. "It's almost irresistible," she said, and laughed.

Soon after encountering af Klint's work, Belfrage and Almqvist began to organize more seminars on her through the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit, the research and education nonprofit that Almqvist heads. Held everywhere from Oslo to Israel, they featured an impressively interdisciplinary selection of scholars, whose lectures touched on everything from early-twentieth-century scientific breakthroughs to occult philosophy. For Almqvist, af Klint became the magnifying glass through which a remote age could come alive. Almqvist and Belfrage compiled the talks into luxuriously produced books; Almqvist himself contributed essays and introductions.

When, in 2018, the Guggenheim exhibited "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future," "it was as if the Vatican of abstraction had canonized her," Julia Voss, a German historian whose biography of the artist appeared soon afterward, said. The choice of venue seemed almost prophetic. Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral rotunda looked eerily like a temple to house her works which af Klint had once imagined. The show became one of the most visited in the Guggenheim's history, and its paintings became a permanent backdrop on social media. In the *Times*, Roberta Smith wrote that af Klint's paintings "definitively explode the notion of modernist abstraction as a male project."

Video From The New Yorker

The Dream of Finishing One's To-Do List in "Retirement Plan"

In the past decade, Hilma af Klint's life has been reimagined as historical fiction, a children's book, and a graphic novel. It has inspired at least two operas, a documentary, a bio-pic, a

virtual-reality experience, and a six-hundred-square-foot permanent mosaic inside the New York City subway system.

To Voss, this is the promise of art history: that death can confer the glory that life refuses, that what looks like failure might in fact be redemption deferred. "It's soothing, I think, to see something so great and so beautiful that was not successful in its own time," she said.

Almqvist has come to believe that the resurrection of af Klint has also produced fantasies. In the nearly thirteen years since his first encounter with the artist, Almqvist has instated himself as a kind of one-man Greek drama—chorus and actor both, once the herald of plot and now its complicator. His own writing on af Klint, he told me, has turned out to be riddled with mistakes. "When you have someone like Hilma, where there are just so many holes to fill in, it opens things up for, well, conspiracy theories, quite frankly," Almqvist said. "Most of what one knows about, or what one encounters in the literature about Hilma, is actually just myth."

But even myths require caretakers. In recent years, the question of who those caretakers should be—and what, exactly, they are protecting—has become something of a national debate in Sweden. As af Klint's fame has grown, so have the questions—about what she believed, whom she worked with, and who should be allowed to speak in her name. The disputes play out in boardrooms and court filings and newspaper columns. They are often framed as debates about af Klint's life and her past, but what is really at stake is her afterlife—her legacy, what it means, and who should get to define it in the future.

The voices of astral beings suggested to af Klint that she should paint not reality as it seemed but a truer version, which lay beyond the material world.Photograph from Science History Images / Alamy

In the autumn of 1944, when af Klint was eighty-one, she fell while getting off a streetcar in Stockholm; a few weeks later, she died from her injuries. In her will, she named her nephew, Erik af Klint, as her heir. Erik, an admiral in the Navy, was too busy to administer his aunt's body of work, so Olof Sundström, a close friend of hers, catalogued the archive. But Erik remained involved. "It is my opinion that, at least for the time being, the work should only be seen by people who understand its value and can feel reverence for it," he wrote to Sundström, in 1946. Journalists, he added, "are, of course, not allowed to come near it."

It was not until Erik had retired from the military that he began to tackle the question of what to actually do with the massive corpus of material—more than twelve hundred paintings and drawings and a hundred and twenty-four notebooks. He considered it his responsibility to find a permanent home for the works, but he was unsure how best to proceed and consulted various scholars and museums. To one, he spoke of a desire to "organize an exhibition to generate interest in it among a wider audience"; to another he said that the work should be displayed only "within closed societies," and warned that "releasing it to the public can never lead to anything good." In 1970, Erik met with people from Moderna Museet and the national museum to discuss a large-scale exhibition, but the idea was eventually abandoned. Ultimately, the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden agreed to house the archive, and in 1972 Erik established the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Its statutes prohibit the sale of af Klint's most significant works—so as to safeguard them for, in the words of the four-page document, "spiritual seekers"—and require that the board be chaired by a member of the af Klint family, with the remaining seats occupied by members of the Anthroposophical Society.

For nearly four decades, the foundation operated serenely. af Klint was a New Age obscurity, not yet an art-world darling, and there was little to quarrel over. Even as a handful of her works were exhibited at prominent international museums, beginning in the late eighties, she remained of interest mainly to Swedish art critics.

But, in 2011, Erik's son Johan, an international financier, took over as the chairman of the foundation. He approached the role with zeal, telling people that, when he was three years old, Hilma had instructed him to help protect her work. He made himself available to curators, scholars, and journalists, often retrieving interested parties from train stations and driving them to the archives. It was Johan who arranged the Ikea collaboration. Under his purview, a rotating selection of af Klint's paintings were loaned to the private collection of Sweden's largest bank.

Almost immediately, tensions arose between Johan and the anthroposophist majority of the board. Their disagreements concerned the question of how and where to show the sprawling collection of drawings and paintings. The anthroposophists wanted the work to be displayed in what would be a new, specially designed building forty-five minutes from Stockholm, in Ytterjärna, where the country's Anthroposophical Society is centered. Johan strongly objected. After reading some of Hilma's writing, he felt that he had gained an entirely new perspective; he now saw her as a mystic and her work primarily as a spiritual message. The society's suggestion, he said, did not align with Hilma's own wishes.

In 2010, without consulting anyone in the family, Anders Kumlander, a board member and a former secretary-general of the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden, wrote a letter to the administrative authority that regulates nonprofits and foundations, outlining plans to sell off a selection of af Klint works in order to finance the construction of a museum. When Johan found out about this, he felt that the anthroposophist board members wanted to benefit from af Klint's name. "Hilma," he said, "was not there to save the Anthroposophical Society." Not long afterward, he conducted a series of meetings of his own, proposing that the collection be donated to the Swedish state, where it could be housed at Moderna Museet.

Neither side's efforts were successful. The board initiated legal proceedings to remove Johan as chair; Johan, in turn, tried to remove Kumlander. Leadership of the board changed, then changed again, and plans for the museum collapsed. The very purpose of the foundation became a kind of ontological puzzle. Was it an art-historical trust meant to help disseminate creative works or was it a religious one meant to protect and propagate a spiritual mission? A similar question could be asked of af Klint's paintings themselves: Were they representations or revelations?

Every year, beginning around Easter, Almqvist and his partner of three decades, Viveca Ax:son Johnson, decamp from their apartment, in central Stockholm, to an Art Nouveau manor near the Baltic Sea. Ax:son Johnson, whose family's fortune is one of the largest in Sweden—her great-grandfather, a shipping magnate, broke the international coffee monopoly at the turn of the twentieth century—drives into the city a few times a week for business meetings. Almqvist spends much of his time on the five-hundred-acre property, where, from the window of his study, he can monitor a grazing herd of Highland cattle.

It was here, during the Covid lockdown, that Almqvist first read af Klint's journals, which comprise twenty-six thousand pages. He had recently been invited to join the board of the Hilma af Klint Foundation and wanted to understand the intricacies of its rules. To determine whether they corresponded to af Klint's wishes, Almqvist decided to read the notebooks in full, which few had ever done.

"You do eight years undercover as a pot plant and they decide to legalize it."

Cartoon by Paul Noth

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Soon, he understood why. The task, which took two years, was disorienting and fundamentally unpleasant. The notebooks were filled with evasions, contradictions, abstractions, abrupt tense shifts, and unattributed dialogue. "It was extremely difficult not to get irritated," Almqvist said.

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Until then, most of what Almqvist knew of af Klint's biography derived from what had been, for decades, the most complete account of her life: a short text written by Erik af Klint, marked "confidential," and distributed to about a dozen people in 1967. Aside from a few vivid details—her vegetarian diet, the silver necklace strung permanently around her throat—Erik's portrait of Hilma resembles that of a martyr. Her most defining feature, he wrote, was "the purity and moral highness she radiated." Hilma, in his eyes, was delivering a message from a higher world

which nobody was willing to hear, not unlike "how Christ's message was once received by humankind."

Almqvist told me, skeptically, "It was probably written in order to convince his relatives that Hilma af Klint was something worth taking notice of."

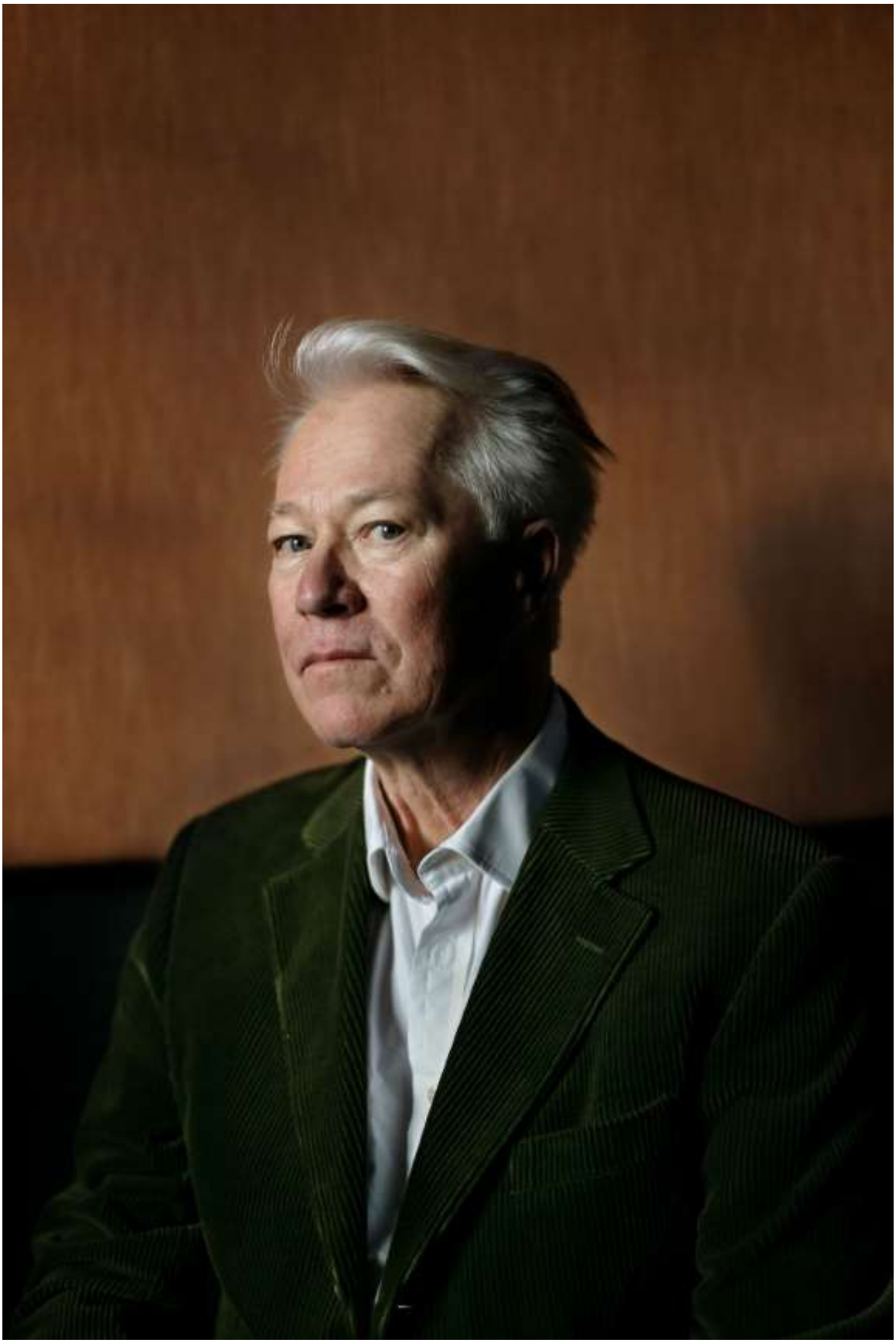
He thought that the notebooks gave a quite different impression than the one Erik had spread. Almqvist began listing adjectives to describe af Klint as she came across to him in the journals: "aggressive," "self-determined," "daunting." She lacked empathy, he said. She was not generous, she was not sentimental, she was not very sympathetic generally. She was a fanatic. Her fervor sometimes read as paranoia or grandiosity; she was suspicious even of the friends who shared her esoteric pursuits. Her well-being, she wrote, "depends on how well you manage to detach yourself from your invisible enemies. They are everywhere and . . . able to insinuate themselves into your thoughts." She accused one friend of being a "parasite" and of possessing "arrogant perception."

For Almqvist, what began as ambivalence toward af Klint's personality became a kind of compulsive determination to seek out further evidence that the legend of Hilma af Klint—which he had helped to spread—was essentially false. This past spring, I visited Almqvist at his home by the Baltic. He had assembled reams of research material in the wood-panelled library, transforming it into a kind of war room. A vast larch table served as his command post, its surface an armory of letters, photographs, clippings, books, and annotated documents. "Here you can see how the myth was made!" he announced, as he showed me into the room.

The scholarly consensus that af Klint chose to live a simple, ascetic life had downplayed her financial security, according to Almqvist. He found an estate inventory from after her death showing that she had had substantial savings, and he believes that she would have received her mother's widow's pension. Her sexuality, he argued, has been under-covered. He has assembled ample archival evidence indicating that she had multiple romantic and sexual relationships with women in the course of many decades. A gymnastics instructor who lodged with af Klint for years wrote in her diary of sharing a bed with her and kissing her. af Klint, who showed some support for women's rights, has been embraced as a feminist. "It depends how you define the term, of course," Almqvist said. "But I would define it as being part of some sort of intellectual or collective movement at the time, and she wasn't." He laughed. "Despite having ample opportunity," he added, a reference to her sister, who was a suffragist. He mentioned a recent doctoral dissertation that argued af Klint's paintings were a commentary on women's domestic labor and laughed again. The author did not know Swedish, and, he claimed, had misattributed Biblical metaphors about wheat and yeast to af Klint's own life.

Such corrections—and the cross-checked dates, disputed quotations, and reëxamined footnotes on which they depend—make up a book that Almqvist is writing, which exceeds five hundred pages and which he talks about with an odd combination of ambition and modesty.

But, unlike many of the rabbit holes into which Almqvist has been burrowing, there was one question whose implications extended beyond historical revisionism: Was af Klint an anthroposophist? Erik, in his 1967 document, wrote that she was "deeply moved" by the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and "to a great extent influenced by the world of ideas of Anthroposophy." Johan, his son, considers the latter a misreading: although she was a member of the society, he said, she was not an ardent believer. In the afterword he contributed to Voss's biography, he claimed that she had eventually turned away from the group.



Kurt Almqvist is writing a book that claims that the legend of Hilma af Klint—which he helped to spread—was essentially false.Photograph by Åsa Sjöström

"I really wanted to see," Almqvist told me, "did she deviate from that belief system or not?" The answer would affect not only the interpretation of af Klint's work but also how the foundation established in her name would manage it going forward. If she was not an anthroposophist, the very organization of the board was faulty, and af Klint's family might have grounds on which to claim greater control.

In the spring of 2021, Almqvist drove to Ytterjärna. From the highway, he could see the Anthroposophical Society's cultural center, a massive violet structure with multiple protrusions and a barrel-vaulted roof which squats on the landscape like a grounded spacecraft. When Almqvist was in high school, his mother became an anthroposophist; if not for this, he said, he doubted that he'd be capable of understanding anything about the belief system. "They call what they are doing 'spiritual science,' " Almqvist said, sighing. "A friend of mine has been 'researching' the color orange for forty years. What does this mean? It means he paints in orange." He laughed. "Making clear distinctions is just not a part of anthroposophical culture." He turned onto a dirt road edged with irregularly undulating hedges, reverently trimmed to avoid right angles, and continued through biodynamic farmland dotted with some twenty structures: a clinic, a mill, a school, each painted a different color of the rainbow. Many of the people he encountered were dressed in purple.

Eventually, in a hidden vault, Almqvist discovered proof that af Klint had joined the Anthroposophical Society on October 12, 1920, and remained a member for the rest of her life. The discovery came as little more than corroboration of what he already suspected to be true, and, he thought, it undermined the claims of her heirs. Back in Stockholm, a few days later, though, he received a call from Ytterjärna: More material had been found. Would he like to see it?

When Almqvist returned to the Anthroposophical Society, he was led down a narrow hallway. At the end, there was a ladder leaning against a wall. He climbed up to a dim annex. In a corner sat a box woven from birch bark and tied with a blue tag labelled "Anna Cassel" in a neat black script. Almqvist knew the name—Cassel had been a member of the Five, and, according to his reading of af Klint's notebooks, her lover. He opened the box. Inside were about sixty notebooks. He asked for permission to bring them home.

For the next few years, Almqvist read and reread Cassel's journals. "It was like opening a door," he said. "The light came in, and you could suddenly see things in perspective." The journals made Almqvist begin to doubt the veracity of Hilma's account of her own artistic and spiritual practice, which made her out to be a leader of her friends, with a unique relationship to higher

intelligences. In the late twenties, Hilma had deliberately destroyed writings from the period during which she created her most ambitious works. The reason, Almqvist thought, was "very simple": the paintings had not been made by Hilma alone. They were, in fact, a collaborative effort with her esoterically inclined friends, most significantly Anna Cassel.

The revelation, if true, unsettled the foundation of af Klint's legacy. No longer could she be considered a sole conduit through which higher powers channelled their way onto canvas. She was one of many, engaged in a collaborative act of creation, with all the logistical and interpersonal friction such endeavors inevitably involve.

In 2023, Almqvist and Daniel Birnbaum, a former director of Moderna Museet, edited "The Saga of the Rose," a lavish monograph devoted to Cassel. Tucked amid its reproductions and archival materials was an essay by Hedvig Martin, a Swedish historian, whose findings mirrored Almqvist's.

In the essay, Martin maintained that "The Paintings for the Temple," a series that's considered af Klint's magnum opus, "did not derive from the efforts of a single artist, but was rather the product of collaboration between af Klint and her friends"—Cassel, but also other women in the Five and, later, more still. *Artforum* called the revelation "astonishing," and suggested that "af Klint scholarship is on the brink of some radical changes regarding attribution and authorship."

Almqvist, whose nonprofit partly funded Martin's graduate studies, gave me her contact information but warned that it might be difficult to get in touch with her. He said that she was living in "some sort of hut in Dalarna," a rural province known for its traditional crafts and vernacular architecture. The truth turned out to be less romantic: Martin lived in an ordinary cottage, with high-speed internet, and she was quick to reply to my e-mails and to arrange a Zoom meeting. "I *am* in the forest?" she said, to help explain the rumor of her inaccessibility.

Martin told me that she had suspected Cassel's involvement for years. "But I was too young and too insecure to make any large assumptions," she said. By 2020, she felt better prepared to investigate the matter. She was living in Amsterdam, working on her dissertation, during the pandemic. Quarantine so closely resembled her ordinary life as a graduate student that she hardly noticed her confinement.

Joe Dator

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For a few weeks, Martin devoted herself to the series "Primordial Chaos," which marks the beginning of "The Paintings for the Temple." The vertically oriented compositions share a palette of blues, greens, and yellows. Frenzied shapes—sparks, ribbons, spirals, glyphs, shadowy crosses, serpents—float among them through an undefined ether, as if transmitting cryptic information.

On New Year's Day, 1906, when af Klint was forty-three, she received her first major commission from the higher beings. The message came to her through an intermediary spirit named Amaliel. Her assignment, to which she was to devote a year, was, she recorded in her journal that day, to depict "the immortal aspect of man" and paint "a message to humanity."

Martin gave herself the task of cross-referencing each journal entry from 1906 and 1907 with the art works made during those years. She went chronologically. The twenty-six paintings of

"Primordial Chaos" began as drawings, and there were many more drawings than were ever turned into paintings. "It was, like, O.K., she's talking about this drawing here or that painting there, and, well, which one is it?" Martin groaned at the memory. "So I just went through everything very carefully, and when you put everything in order and make it match, you discover that Cassel is credited as the author of some of the paintings. And that was it, basically."

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Of the drawing that would become No. 10 of the series—a dense schema of symbols which looks something like a cuneiform tablet—af Klint wrote, "A[nna] was instructed to paint it in such a way that she tried to imagine the colour." Of the drawing that would become No. 15 of the series—a peachy orb centered in an expanse of green—she wrote, "A[nna] may perform this, be passive."

From such correlations, Martin was able to discern stylistic differences between the two women and identify Cassel's contributions with some confidence. af Klint's brushwork was, she wrote, "notably drier and more expressive," and Cassel's was "thicker and smoother." Martin hypothesized that af Klint was responsible for about twelve of the paintings in the series, and Cassel for about fourteen. "It was not just that they channelled messages together or had ideas about some sort of collaboration—they actually collaborated," Martin told me.

In the sprawling, nearly incomprehensible cache of writing, these attributions—"A shall paint, H sketch"—are some of the most straightforward bits of text. Why hadn't anyone else made anything of them before? "People claim they've read the notebooks, but they haven't always," Martin said.

Martin admitted that her work was "not very fun always." af Klint, she went on, had become "such a darling." The revised story that Martin has been attempting to tell about her life and work is a less appealing one. "People can be a bit upset when I write about the co-creators," she said. "They say, 'Male artists all had assistants! Why is this even important to bring up?' And my feeling is that it's important because it's the truth."

A few days before Martin's research was published in "The Saga of the Rose," Johan sent her an e-mail about her contribution to the book, which he had read an advance copy of. (He also sent Almqvist a detailed memo, with twenty-seven points of contention.) The e-mail opened in a courtly and complimentary manner, but it ended by arguing that, though af Klint may have "occasionally received help . . . this does NOT mean that Hilma af Klint was not the person who, through her good contacts with the spirits, was central to the creation of the works." It was af Klint and af Klint alone, Johan went on, who "developed the new forms, images, symbols, texts, etc." The letter ends with a plea: "I ask you from the bottom of my heart, do not

exaggerate the involvement of Anna Cassel and the other women—to the detriment of Hilma af Klint."

It had been twelve years since Johan first became directly involved in the maintenance of his great-aunt's legacy. Initially, he had made every attempt to popularize her work, but he had come to think of some of those efforts with regret. He began working on a book of his own, using the phrase "symbolic works" to refer to af Klint's paintings and lamenting that they had ever been called art. They were precise representations of what she visualized in the astral plane, he wrote—labelling them "abstract" was a kind of blasphemy. Johan, though no longer on the board of the foundation, still felt himself to be her protector against those who threatened to dilute her spiritual message and those who sought to profit from it.

The cultural center of the Anthroposophical Society of Sweden, in Ytterjärna, where much of af Klint's work was stored for many years.Photograph by Åsa Sjöström

Allegedly, there had been multiple attempts. In 2020, Kumlander, the influential anthroposophist, purchased one of two sets of "Tree of Knowledge"—eight watercolors that af Klint painted between 1913 and 1915—from an anthroposophical institution in Switzerland, reportedly claiming that he was acting on behalf of the prospective af Klint museum in Sweden. (Kumlander denies misrepresenting his role.) But, by the fall of 2021, the series was in New York

City, hanging on the walls of David Zwirner's Upper East Side gallery. The paintings had been consigned by a private entity. That winter, Zwirner, one of the most prestigious and powerful gallerists in the world, announced that the series had been sold to a private museum outside Washington, D.C. The board members of the Swiss institution later wrote Kumlander a letter expressing their sense of betrayal: they'd believed that they had sold the works to an "anthroposophical friend" who was acquiring the series on behalf of a like-minded institution. The transaction, they wrote, was a "mockery" and a "slap in the face." The letter ended with a request for a donation.

The following year, Zwirner travelled to Stockholm. He had been invited to attend a meeting of the board—including the new chairman, Johan's nephew Erik—to discuss the terms of a contract that would make him the foundation's official gallerist. Erik, however, disapproved of the partnership, and postponed the meeting. A few days later, he leaked details of the thwarted meeting to the *Guardian*, saying that the deal—which he called a "plundering" and a "hostile takeover"—was in violation of the foundation's statutes. Zwirner claimed that the charges were "absurd."

Another profit-seeking scheme sounded like the sort of dream that dissolves completely by morning—a clutter of acronyms and proper nouns and improbable alliances. Acute Art, a London-based virtual-reality company directed by Birnbaum—the former director of Moderna Museet and, for a time, a board member of the foundation—created digital versions of works from "The Paintings for the Temple" in conjunction with Stolpe, a publishing company affiliated with the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation for Public Benefit. They would be auctioned off as non-fungible tokens on a digital platform launched by the musician Pharrell Williams. Promotional language promised collectors that purchasing one of the N.F.T.s would make it possible to "secure your piece of history." Birnbaum said that the proceeds from the sale would go to the foundation, which would also receive a complete set of the N.F.T.s. Although Birnbaum speaks of N.F.T.s dismissively—a "fashionable little silly thing" he called them, in a conversation with me—at the time he described the endeavor in lofty terms, telling a reporter that af Klint's series could now "be owned by people all over the world."

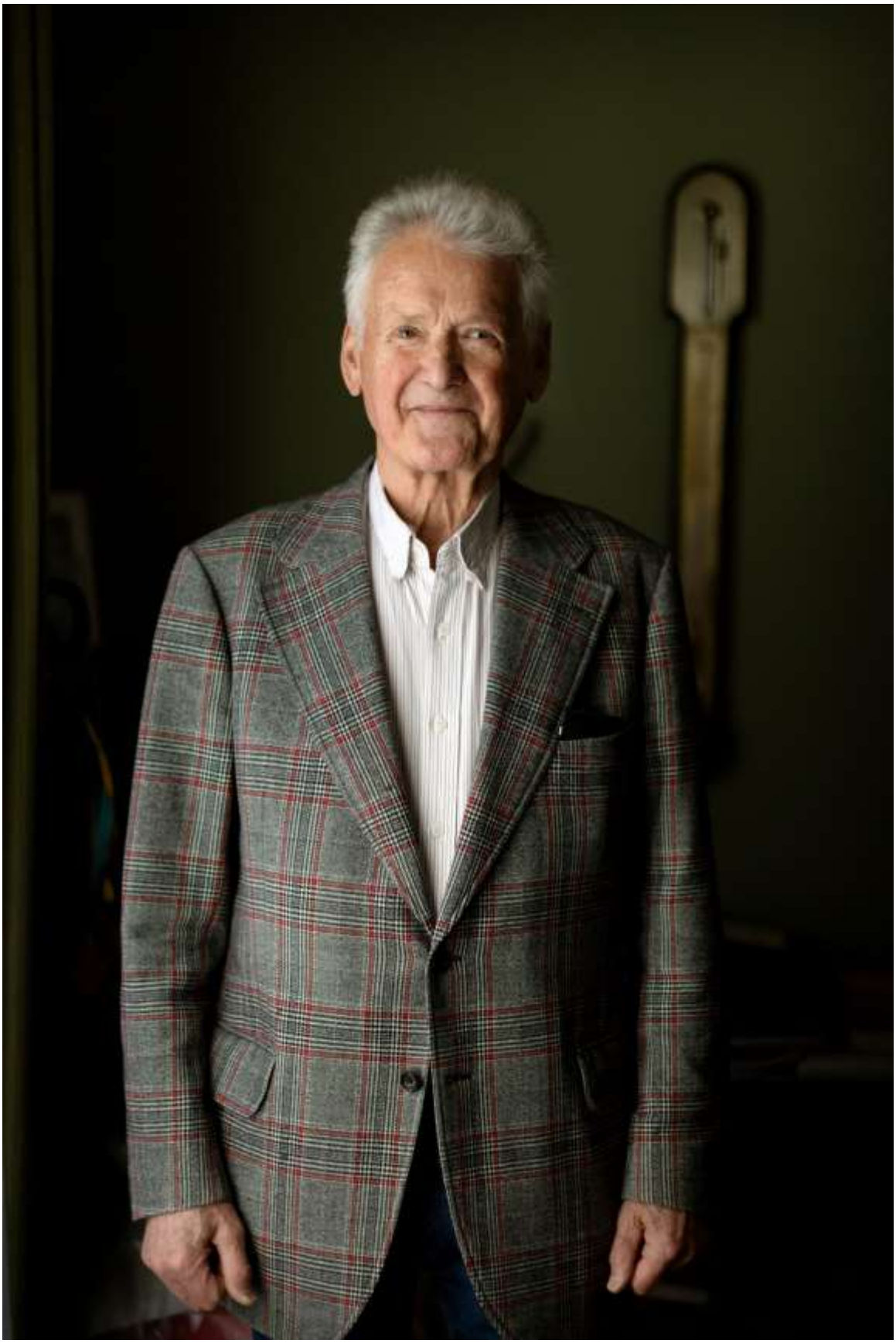
The af Klint family was outraged: this was shameless and sloppy commercialization. Ulrika af Klint, Johan's niece, who preceded Erik as the foundation's chair, claims that the board had not properly authorized the project, and that the full proceeds never reached the foundation. (Almqvist and Birnbaum disagree.) Another family member took to Twitter, demanding that the N.F.T.s be cancelled, and told a reporter that the paintings were never meant for anyone to own. A few months later, after Ulrika stepped down and Erik replaced her, he asked for an inquiry and filed a police report about the other board members and the C.E.O. of the foundation, accusing

them of collaborating on deals that would enrich them, not the foundation. (The inquiry was eventually dismissed.)

In March, a couple of months before I arrived in Sweden, a story about the ongoing fracas at the foundation was published in the country's largest newspaper, under the headline "Hilma af Klint's art could be hidden from public view—in a temple." It was illustrated with a moody black-and-white portrait of Erik, who had recently filed a petition in court, seeking once more to have the board members removed, this time arguing that they had neglected their duties. He claimed that af Klint's paintings were never meant to be publicly displayed, and that every attempt to disseminate them—books, exhibitions, merchandise—was a violation not just of Hilma's wishes but of the Swedish Foundation Act, which legally governs how nonprofits are run. In the context of af Klint's work, he believed, the very act of curation was akin to the profane use of a sacred object. Enforcing the foundation's statute that the work be available only to spiritual seekers was of paramount importance, he declared; and any engagement should be rooted in the artist's esoteric Christianity. "It must be a spiritual seeking in line with Hilma's," he told the reporter. "It cannot be spiritual seeking in the way of a Muslim or a Hindu."

Erik is a rheumatologist by training and a devout Christian by conviction. In the fall of 2023, to offset the costs of litigation, he sold his large apartment in a tony part of Stockholm and moved to a small one on the city's outskirts. I visited him there, this spring; he had prepared tea, and his wife, Michelle, was baking shortbread. There was no evidence of af Klint inside the house. On one wall was an oil painting of a ship, artist unknown. Erik told me that he found the composition majestic. "There's no message in it," he said. "So it's not threatening." af Klint was a different story: "She sacrificed everything for her"—he paused, unsure of how to end the sentence—"work."

Erik described chairing the Hilma af Klint Foundation as something of a burden, one that he resisted for years. He now sees it as his responsibility to "put the camp in order," he said. He compared the idea of selling af Klint's work to the hypothetical selling off of the Gospels. "Let's sell the Gospel of John!" he bellowed in a mock-menacing tone. He laughed.



Johan af Klint, Hilma's grandnephew, felt himself to be her protector against those who threatened to dilute her spiritual message and those who sought to profit from it.Photograph by Åsa Sjöström

He walked to a corner of the living room and extracted a volume of af Klint's seven-part catalogue raisonné, which was published in 2022, by Stolpe. He opened the book to "Primordial Chaos." "So this has to do with the beginning of the world," he said. He flipped to another page and pointed out various forms and figures: "Here's a woman, a man, and there's something else there—what could it be? Hmm, interesting." He turned the page. "Here's a cross, a spiral, and here are more crosses. There's blood. There's a heart. There's shame and also sadness. . . . There's a lot of strange things." He flipped the page again, and pointed out a white bird. "So what's happening with the dove?" he asked.

I said it looked as though it was falling from the sky. A little desperate, I added that perhaps the vague shape in the upper part of the painting was God's hand. "Yes!" he said. "Absolutely!"

The dove, he went on, was Christ. "God broke his wings so that he would come to earth!"

Erik continued to flip through the pages while quoting from Genesis. He sighed. "I'm just saying that there are things here to interpret if you want, and no one is doing it." He believed that the paintings were not meant to be viewed as isolated works of art, as they are often exhibited in museums, and that their sequencing was crucial to their message. Viewing them out of context, he said, was like removing chapters of a book and expecting the story to retain its sense.

The sound of a dish rattling echoed from the kitchen, where Michelle was still puttering.

Erik joked, "Michelle, sometimes she asks me, Erik, do you have a mistress? Is her name Hilma?"

They both laughed.

"Erik has the energy," Michelle said.

"And my wife has the forgiveness," Erik added. "We both believe that truth will always come. It's just a matter of when and how. But it will."

The court had denied Erik's request to remove the foundation's other board members immediately, pending a final decision, which is expected next year. But the oversight agency opened a review, which is still ongoing, into whether the foundation's various agreements complied with its statutes. In August, Anders Kumlander resigned from the board, citing poor health.

More than a century after making "The Paintings for the Temple," Hilma af Klint remains largely absent from the marketplace: her most significant works are held by the foundation and cannot be sold under its statutes. Yet her presence in museums and popular culture has hardly diminished since the 2013 Moderna Museet show. In 2023, Tate Modern mounted "Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life," and there have been exhibitions in Tokyo and Bilbao and Düsseldorf and the Hague; two more will open next year, in Dublin and in Paris. When, this past spring, MoMA mounted a show of forty-six of her botanical illustrations—decidedly minor works, self-described "studies"—the galleries were packed for months. Her story remains fractured—saint, prophet, brand, fabulist—but her status as one of modernism's most disruptive figures is secure.

Typically, when art circulates, it produces a ledger: sales, contracts, loans, dollar figures. But the story of Hilma af Klint lacks the blunt clarity of balance sheets, and her afterlife suggests that money, far from debasing art, is what pins it to the world. "There are no institutions or collectors with financial interests really lobbying for her," Voss, the biographer, said. Without ever being converted into a dollar figure, the work has been left suspended and endlessly interpretable. "This is not typical. It's quite bizarre," Voss said. To Anna Maria Bernitz, a Swedish art historian who is working on a book about the foundation's internal struggles, the fact that the paintings cannot be bought only enhances their allure. "If you are rich and powerful, what would you like to have? You would like to have the impossible-to-have painting," she told me.

"This is work that really touches people, that actually has upended a previous reading of art history, that's loaned out to the most important museums in the world," David Zwirner told me. I asked him if there were any comparable situations, and he thought for a moment: "I mean, maybe van Gogh, in the sense he didn't really sell work within his lifetime? But no, no. There's nothing else like it."

Then, there is the matter of af Klint's collaborators, whose names are known but who remain as obscure as af Klint once was. One of the largest private collections of Anna Cassel's paintings is housed in an unassuming apartment on the outskirts of Stockholm which belongs to Marie Cassel, Anna's seventy-three-year-old grandniece. Books on af Klint line the foyer, and the living room is outfitted with immense pieces of antique furniture that originally furnished a larger Cassel family home. The art collection—mostly landscapes—hangs in the bedroom. "I was brought up with these paintings," Marie said, as we crossed the threshold, gesturing at a small, sober composition depicting a cluster of cabins.

She grew up knowing about her great-aunt's art—it hung everywhere—but she did not think much about its creator until the early nineties, when the last of her older family members died and she came into possession of a collection of work she knew little about.

"I have a sorrow in me," Marie said. "I want to resurrect the contributions of Anna and the other women. I think it's very unfair that you can just drive over a person." But she understood the resistance: "The whole narrative about Hilma is built upon this notion of one person's perfect ideas. I think it's a shame that this story is so cemented, but I think it will never change—people are so in love with it." Marie, who flew to New York City in 2018 for the Guggenheim opening, said she arrived feeling "like a cat who had dragged in a dead animal." Nobody, she knows, wants to hear a good story dismantled.

Throughout the morning, Marie cycled through polite outrage and weary resignation. It would be a great thing if both women's works could be fully analyzed to determine exactly who contributed what, but in the meantime she was not going to "waste" her life on it, she said. "Why should I be angry? These women did this—hooray." ♦

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