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## **Art, Knowledge and the Spiritual; a hermeneutical perspective**

Keywords: Art, Knowledge, Practice-Led Research, Hermeneutics, Spiritual

### **Introduction**

The capacity of art to contribute to knowledge has been a central issue in the continuing debate surrounding the legitimization of practice-led research. In seeking to engage with this topic, this paper addresses three main themes. First, I conduct a brief survey of recent literature pertaining to the hermeneutic analysis of knowledge production in practice led research. Second, I identify an intersection here with issues raised within post-Idealist aesthetic philosophy that implicate the spiritual nature of creativity. Third, I explicate these issues with reference to the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, Japanese calligrapher Tairiku Teshima, and a National Art School MFA Drawing candidate, Lana Ryles. I conclude that, given its prevalence, the use of the term spiritual warrants closer scrutiny.

### **1. Art and Knowledge**

The question of art's capacity to contribute to knowledge, and in what sense, has been of philosophical significance since Plato's formulation of representation as an imitation of some pre-existing model whereupon art is only ever an imperfect copy of ideal form. As a poor imitation of the real, the ensuing problem was therefore whether art could in fact convey truth or moral insight about the world. 'The artist's representation is...a long way removed from truth,' declares Plato, '...merely manufacturing shadows at third remove from reality' (Plato, cited in Hursthouse 1992, p. 246).

This sceptical attitude toward art's claim to knowledge persists throughout philosophical aesthetics. In the eighteenth century Kant argues that art will always be inferior when its potential for knowledge is compared to reason. Kant separates art from cognition; both must inhabit separate realms independent from each other. Subsequent philosophers such as James O. Young and Noel Carroll argue that if art is a source of knowledge, it is limited in its inquiry and at best can only point out things we already know (Young 2001, p. 94). Hence, what knowledge art does impart is trivial and in the end useless (Carroll 2002 in Worth 2005, p. 3-4).

On the other hand, support for art's claims to knowledge has recently emerged from within the contemporary art academy. The 'research revolution' in the visual arts sees a burgeoning literature engaging not only with the question of how art contributes to knowledge but also with the kinds of knowledge that art as research is concerned with. The number of texts and conference proceedings on this topic is now well over a hundred (Solleveld 2012, p.78).

At stake here is what is meant by 'knowledge.' As Stanford Professor of Art Elliott Eisner (2007 p. 4) points out, 'What it means depends on how inquiry is undertaken and the kind of problem one pursues.'

Very broadly, theories of knowledge distinguish between propositional knowledge, or facts about the world, and knowledge as skill, a distinction that draws on Aristotle's differentiation between theoretical and practical knowledge. This opposition is now thematised in philosophy as a distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', where practical knowledge – the 'knowing how' required for making (poiesis) and doing (praxis) – is associated with tacit or implicit knowledge, an internalised non-propositional knowledge not amenable to verbal explication or conceptual expression (Borgdorff 2007, p. 10).

Appeals to the notion of tacit knowledge are common within the literature dealing with the contribution to knowledge by practice-led research. Here traditional epistemological understandings of propositional knowledge have given way to a hermeneutic view of knowledge drawn from the work of Michael Polanyi and others who regard tacit or implicit knowledge as fundamental to all knowledge (Borgdorff 2007, p. 11).

With its roots in early Romanticist aesthetics, hermeneutics is concerned with 'illuminating the conditions for the possibility of understanding and its modes of interpretation' (Mueller-Vollmer 1985, p. 9). Contemporary hermeneutics builds upon Polanyi's observation that an integral part of all knowledge is via the subjective participation of 'our personal knowing – our indwelling' (Polanyi, cited in Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman 1991, p. 4). In highlighting the tacit dimension of judgement, hermeneutics is sensitive to the novelties and contingencies encountered in situations where ideas that may initially appear fragmentary or contradictory can be seen to converge and cohere (Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman 1991, p. 7). In this framework knowing is an activity of discovery.

Dutch academic Henk Borgdorff (2007; 2012) draws from Polanyi to argue that 'Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge' (Borgdorff 2007, p.14). Hermeneutics provides an analytical method whereby this tacit, pre-reflective knowledge embodied in art practices can be accessed and articulated (Borgdorff 2012, p. 168; Rust 2007).

Hermeneutics embraces the inherent ambiguity of art wherein interpretation is always unfinished. Rather than demanding an explicit contribution to knowledge, the hermeneutic approach holds that incomplete or 'unstated' contributions to inquiry can be a valuable part of the enterprise of creating knowledge (Rust 2007). Hence, in the hermeneutic context practice-led research does not involve knowledge production in the usual terms but remains open to alternate creative possibilities. Borgdorff (2012, p. 163; 172) argues that the hermeneutical method is 'a form of world disclosure...directed at a 'not-knowing, or a not-yet-knowing,' a means of accessing the 'world-revealing power of art'. The non-conceptual

nature of this act of revealing comes before any theoretical reflection about the world and invites us to unfinished reflection. 'It creates room for that which is unthought, that which is unexpected – the idea that all things could be different' (Borgdorff 2012, p.173). Through the intuitive dimension of the tacit we acknowledge that we do not yet know what we don't know, or as Rust (2007, p. 2) observes, 'artists make in order to know what they wanted to make.'

This is not to say that all art practice results from purely intuitive, irrational or non-cognitive processes that render its manifestations unsusceptible to analyses. The phenomena surrounding the creative process may well be cognitive and rational, but in this framework knowledge is not always reducible to language. As Polanyi says, we know more than we can tell; 'Ineffable knowledge is not an oxymoron' (Polanyi, cited in Eisner 2007, p. 5).

## **2. Art and Metaphysics**

This privileging of the ineffable has its roots in a romanticist aesthetics of transcendence, which holds that art can disclose aspects of human experience that science for instance cannot. For the romantic philosophers, such as Schelling and Schiller, art's failure to claim propositional knowledge is countered by its ability to highlight metaphysical dimensions of being. Idealist aesthetics draws on Kant's notion of genius, which Kant describes as an 'innate predisposition of the mind through which nature gives the rule to art' (Kant 1790, §46). The animating principle of such creative activity is 'spirit' (*Geist*), which in turn gives rise to the 'aesthetic idea', which Kant describes as the creative capacity of the imagination to elicit presentations in the mind that 'language can never render directly intelligible' (Kant 1790, §49). Kant's inference that art has the capacity to embody a kind of non-conceptual knowledge introduces the conviction that through the materiality of the medium in the artwork something is presented that transcends materiality (Borgdorff 2012, p. 153).

The attribution of works of art with meanings above and beyond the empirical evidence of their existence has been critiqued since the 1930s as a metaphysics of presence, the logocentric belief that truth and meaning is somehow inscribed in an object or image. Despite such criticism, however, metaphysics is returning within recent discourse. For example, philosopher of art Paul Crowther (2006) draws from Kant and Merleau-Ponty and engages a phenomenology of creativity to argue that the prevalence of post-structuralist theory and post-Duchampian conceptual strategies in contemporary art practice downplays the significance of making. The act of making art involves an act upon the world that changes one's relation to both the represented object and to oneself, he says. To make art 'involves literally acting on reality in a way that changes the existing relation of subject and object of experience at all levels'. 'As an aesthetic exemplar of the bonding of human subject and world, art takes on an intrinsic spiritual significance' (Crowther 2006, p126). In a similar vein, Donald Kuspit (2003) claims that the creative act involves a projection of the artist's

subjectivity into objective reality; a process which he says imbues reality with a spiritual consequence it otherwise lacks.

It is at this point that an interesting convergence emerges. The Kantian conception of aesthetic experience as a connection between humans and the world that can reveal our inner nature, or humanity, intersects with the hermeneutical assessment of the embodied knowledge within practice-led research and attendant 'world-disclosing' power of art that explicitly extends the phenomenology of creativity into a metaphysics of the 'spiritual'.

### **3. Art and the Spiritual**

The spiritual is a much used and abused term in the visual arts. The term itself notoriously eludes meaningful definition and, as Wikipedia helpfully outlines, ranges in understanding from an extreme form of subjectivity whereupon any meaningful or transformative activity can be regarded as 'spiritual', to the neuroscientific conception of spirituality as a benign form of psychosis. In addition, the tradition of the sublime, such as Rudolph Otto's 1917 'non-rational metaphysic' of the 'numinous', remains an influential non-religious conception of the spiritual (Evans 2013, p. 80).

Acknowledging the elasticity of the term, historians Roger Lipsey (1988), Kathleen Regier (ed. 1987) and Maurice Tuchman (ed. 1986) establish an art historical framework for the spiritual that contextualises abstract painting in terms of the influence in the early twentieth century of spiritual writings, occultism and mystical belief systems such as Theosophy on artists seeking an alternative to the materialistic values of modern society. More recent literature continues to favour this generalised approach to the historical relationship between art and spirituality where understanding is dependent on context rather than precise definition (Perlmutter & Koppman 1999; Arya 2013).

However, an altogether more specific conception of the spiritual is found in the case of Swedish artist and clairvoyant Hilma af Klint. Whereas the spiritual outlook of other early abstractionists such as Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian enlisted the aesthetics of transcendence in the service of a Utopian ideal, af Klint believed her abstractions were the outcome of her direct contact with spirits who guided her practice. Via séances and states of trance she obtained visions of the esoteric construction of the universe and, guided by messages from the so-called 'Higher Masters', saw her practice as the means by which this occult knowledge of the hidden unity of all existence could be communicated to the world (Sandqvist 2013, p. 209).

But despite being the channel for this esoteric knowledge, af Klint had little understanding of what her work meant. As the artist responsible for the work she was troubled by her inability to decode its symbolism and worked at developing a system of knowledge that might allow her to access the occult content of the work. Indeed, af Klint has been described as a

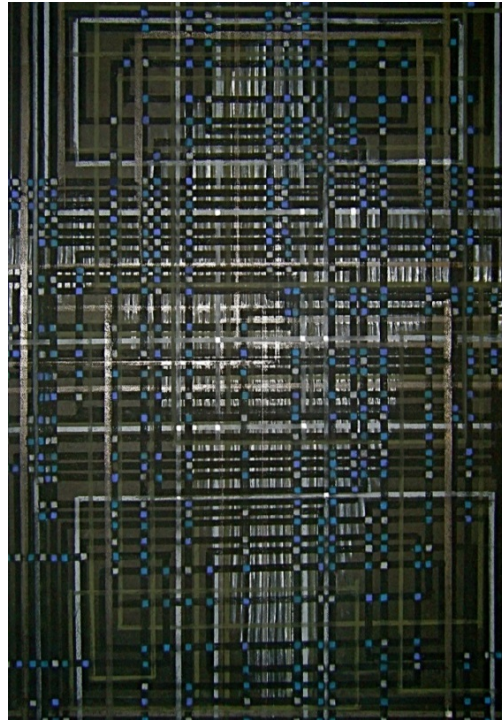
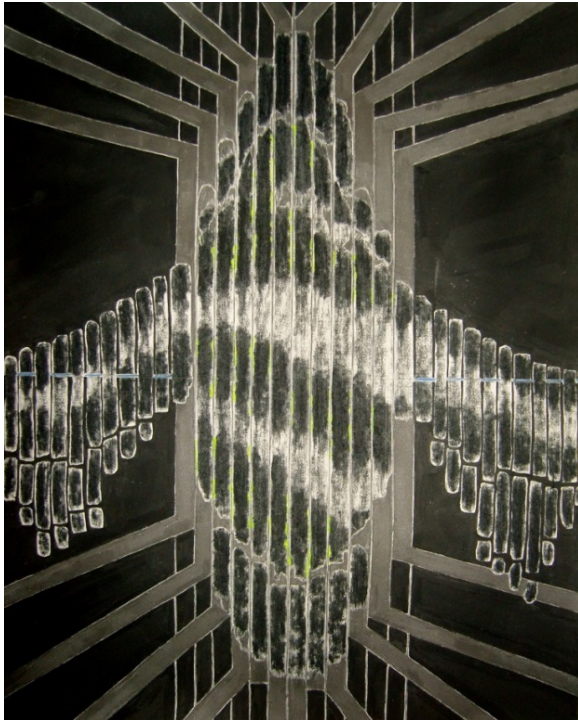
'prototype research artist' (Sandqvist 2013, p. 207). But despite her efforts she regarded her 'inability to understand her own work the tragedy of her life' (Fant 1986, p. 158).

Although the meaning of af Klint's work remains obscure, her studio methodology endows her work with a mysterious authority; their aspirations are not confected. Whereas other early abstractionists operated consciously according to a shared ideology, af Klint worked unconsciously, using psychic automatism to access the astral realm. She says: 'The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke' (af Klint, cited in Higgins 2013). As UK critic Adrian Searle (2006) observes, 'There is no irony whatsoever in af Klint's painting, no consistency and no self-reflection...' What for other abstractionists 'was a generalised utopian spirit, for Af Klint was a matter of personal psychic survival'.



Figure 1 Installation view, Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2013

A similar case is highlighted with Lana Ryles, an MFA candidate I supervised in 2009. Ryles' drawing practice was motivated by her personal experience of temporal lobe epilepsy, in which epileptic episodes would induce visions that the candidate experienced as intensely 'spiritual' in that they seemed to emanate from some non-material plane of being. These visions take the form of abstract grid-like depictions of light and space. Whatever the neurological explanations might be for such visions, the experience left her in no doubt that they enabled an inner source of imagery that was as personal as it was undecipherable.



L: Figure 2 Lana Ryles, Bird, charcoal on paper, 130x90, 2009

R: Figure 3 Lana Ryles, Life Drawing, charcoal on paper, 98x70, 2009

Like af Klint, the candidate found it difficult to explain her work and she was sensitive to disclosing the subjective impulses for her practice and the private nature of the imagery. Despite this she was able to meet the exegetical requirement of the HDR by contextualising her project within a field of practice and discourse that encompassed the relationship between abstraction and spirituality established by Tuchman. Focussing on af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin and contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Emily Kngwarreye, she was able to draw on a body of knowledge associated with the legitimization of abstract painting by means of what Osborne (1991, pp. 63-64) describes as its appropriation of a neo-Platonic aesthetics of transcendence in which art expresses, but does not depict, an ideal transcendent, but phenomenologically present, reality.

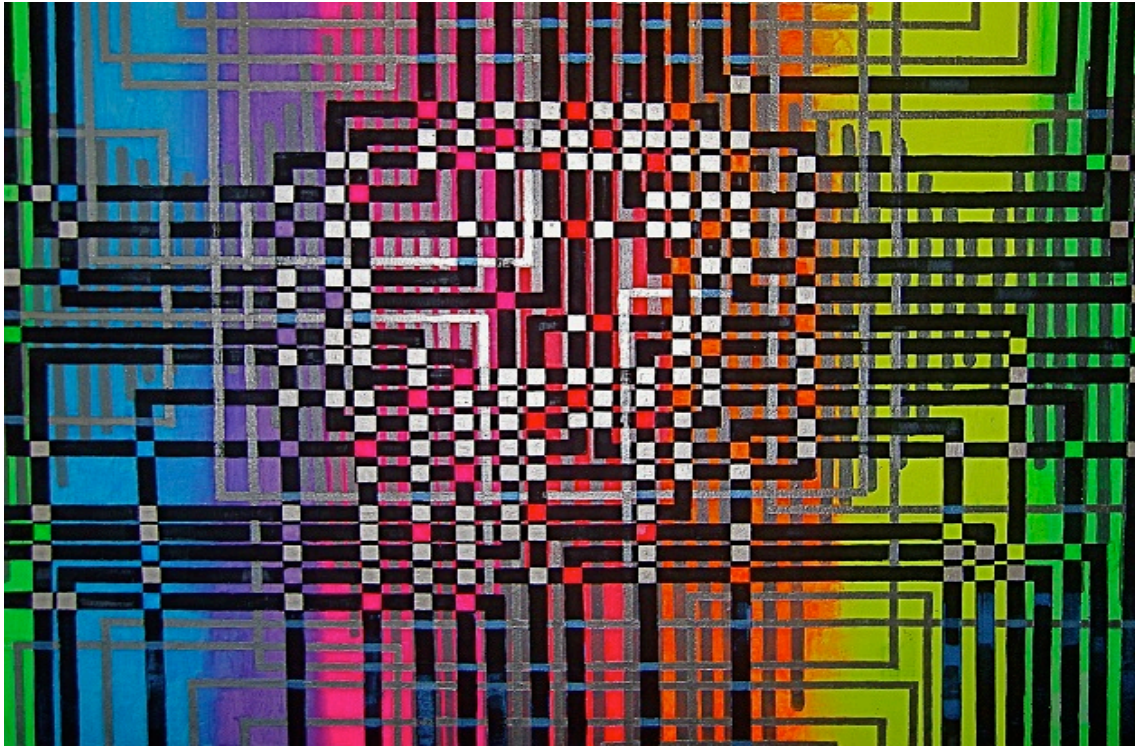


Figure 4 Lana Ryles, Grid 3, acrylic on board, 60x90, 2009

Claims that abstract art can embody or convey spiritual experiences are sceptically regarded by pragmatists as esoteric self-aggrandisement, with the Dadaists being particularly scathing at the time of Kandinsky's influence on Expressionism (Long 1986, p. 208). Indeed, Kandinsky himself came to doubt that art was a vehicle for transcendence; that it could transmit a sense of transcendence of what it represented in the act of representing it (Kuspit 2003).

In the case of af Klint and Ryles, rather than appealing to the conventional terminology of transcendence such as the 'absolute', the 'unknown' and the 'sublime', etc, their understanding of the spiritual takes on a more specific nuance, an ontological inflection consistent with the apparent source of their imagery and their understanding of the creative impulses driving it. In both cases their work is a consequence of their experiencing a state of being temporarily disconnected from the here and now that originates in an immaterial domain that, by its nature, is normally inaccessible.

Where might this domain be located? Recent speculation points to a current frontier of physical inquiry, the quantum vacuum and the postulation within it of ultra-small elementary particles beyond the reach of current science; a 'realm of astral particles, infinitesimal spiritual particles and ultra-infinitesimal spiritual particles' (Sukyo Mahikari 2010, p. 3; 2002, p. 253-4). The possible existence of additional elementary particles beyond those that physics is already familiar with was suggested by the maverick physicist David Bohm (1980), whose Implicate Order theory proposed the potential of deeper levels of reality within the

atom, which he described as a universal sea of energy underpinning all existence – the ‘holomovement’ – and from which all things emerge.

In this conception the spiritual realm interpenetrates and interacts with the physical. To a western culture steeped in the rationalist tradition of post-Enlightenment empiricism, such unverified metaphysical speculation is not always appreciated (as Bohm found via the criticism of his more sober colleagues). However, Eastern cultures have traditionally been more comfortable with incorporating the metaphysical into their outlook.

For example, Japanese artist Tairiku Teshima devotes himself to understanding the unseen realm of infinitesimal particles: ‘The realm of nothingness [which] abounds in the power that brings things into material existence. This power is called *ki*, “spiritual energy”’ (Sukyo Mahikari 2012, p. 4).



L: Figure 5 Tairiku Teshima, Ame (Rain), 2008

R: Figure 6 Tairiku Teshima, Gen (Origin), 2008

Teshima practices a contemporary form of calligraphy called *Shosho* or one-ideogram calligraphy, the objective of which is to materialise the artist’s philosophy and thought through form (Ito 2013, p. 20). To its devotees *Shosho* is the ultimate form of expression. According to one commentator, it should not be just well formed but should reveal the heart and spirit of the artist, ‘the pulse of life that speaks the truth existing in the mind’ (Kajikawa 2013, p.18).

As Teshima (2013, p. 5) puts it:



'The union of symbol and metaphor can help us to perceive that which is eternal and it is for this reason that the calligraphy of the single word is only successful when it is filled with one's innate energy, that energy which animates the soul. In other words, the 'light' or vibration that emanates from such works can perhaps be regarded as being truly divine.'

Here, the spiritual provides both an impulse to create art and a means by which art is informed. As American academic and *Shosho* scholar Susan Nakao (n. d.) summarises:

If we define spirit as that which is non-material, originating from an unseen, unlimited and currently unexplainable source, then spirit moves from this unlimited source through the artist's own emotions and cognitive structures into the material realm both as art making and as art.



Figure 7 Tairiku Teshima, Hikari (Light), 2009

In this outlook, the work of art participates in a transferral of energy from the immaterial to the material. This is the view of Teshima's teacher, Kotama Okada. Art's power derives from the will or seriousness of intent of the artist; 'the vibrations or "prayers" that were in their hearts... "ride on" their finished products' (Okada 2004, p. 50).

In other words, the 'personal indwelling' (to use Polanyi's term) of the artist rides on their will or innermost attitude and manifests in the work of art, energises it. Rather than a passive submission to an external reality, or as a denial of that reality as illusion or *maya*, here the condition of being is an active engagement with the conditions of creative agency that motivate all artistic practice.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of the hermeneutic analysis of creative practice, these examples provide a unique perspective on the capacity of art to embody a kind of tacit or implicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is not confined to 'know how' but also encompasses a person's individual experience, practice and values, feelings, emotions and intuition (Puusa and Eerikainen 2010). For these artists the spiritual is real; possessing a phenomenological dimension that is part and parcel of their subjective experience of being-in-the-world. The personal knowledge derived from such experience, although resistant to conceptual expression, is consistent with Polanyi's understanding of tacit knowledge as 'that knowledge that claims to have made contact with reality: a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations' (Polanyi, cited in Mulherin 2010, p. 70).

Hermeneutics provides an appropriate methodology to engage with such 'unexpected manifestations'. That there is ongoing interest in this topic is confirmed by a recent UK conference and publication, 'Contemplating the spiritual in art', which highlights both its currency and its potential for further research (Arya 2013). In identifying commonalities within philosophical aesthetics and the hermeneutic analysis of practice-led research that converge on the spiritual, this paper hopes to initiate a useful framework for the closer scrutiny of this often alluded to, though rarely explicated, aspect of the discourse.

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