Afterlife

THE IMPORTANT AND SOMETIMES EMBARRASSING LINKS BETWEEN OCCULTISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACT ART, CA. 1909–13[1]

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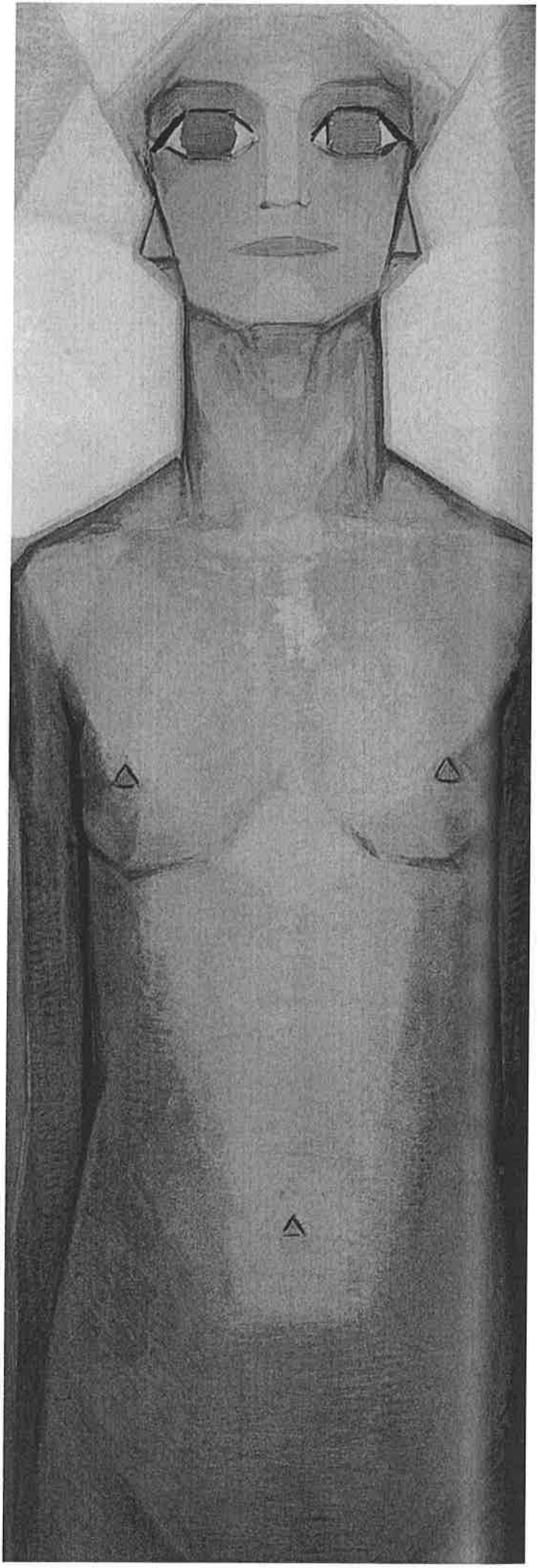

The idea that abstraction, an art of pure form freed from all literary and extrapictorial content, might have its origins in fin-de-siècle religious revivalism and esoteric spiritual theory has long been a source of discomfort to certain students of modernity. "Although this condition could be discussed openly in the late nineteenth century," as Rosalind Krauss reminded us in 1979, "now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence."[2] Yet, whether turbulently expressionistic or coolly geometric in style, many of the most significant early twentieth-century artistic movements developed, in part and indisputably, out of an acquaintance with an amalgam of spiritual sources — Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, kabbalistic, alchemical, and just plain wacky. What are the anomalous connections between advanced art and spiritualism, and how can we account for them?

It is worth keeping in mind, as every self-consciously advanced artist was well aware, that the great French Realist painter of the mid-nineteenth century, Gustave Courbet, had thrown down the gauntlet in a posthumous letter published in *Le courrier du dimanche* in 1886. Challenging any young practitioner who would still traffic in Christian or religious imagery, or even mythic subject matter, he wrote: "Art in painting should consist only of the representation of things that are visible and tangible to the artist. . . . An abstract object, not visible, nonexistent, is not within the domain of painting."[3] If Rosicrucianism had lost its hold on youthful practitioners by the time of the new century, other cults (some quite venerable) and "new religions" had significant roles to play in the move from empirically based naturalistic art to one kind or another of nonmimetic abstraction.

Convincingly argued by art historians since the late 1960s — a period especially open to cults and spiritualist initiatives — esoteric ideas of various kinds, and Theosophy, in particular, were crucial in allowing a number of artists, major and minor, to make the leap from the readily apparent (i.e., the empirically observable) to the hidden, invisible, or latent. Founded in New York in 1857 by Helena Blavatsky, William Quan Judge, and Henry Steel Olcott, the Theosophical Society (whose name expresses its self-conscious blend of theology and philosophy) soon spread east to London, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, and Anglo-India, among other places, with an ever-expanding circle of new adherents, including a host of new leaders and theorists (the movement appears to have peaked on the eve of the First World War). Theosophy was a New Age faith, combining the esoteric and the rational — the mystical and the scientific — in preparation for the coming "Epoch of the Great Spiritual," Vasily Kandinsky's term for a kind of heaven on earth of enlightened, peace-loving equals. The English wing of Theosophy, headed up by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, was especially attractive to artists because of its strong visual component, much of which was a reworking of earlier Symbolist notions of synesthesia (the correspondence of the senses). In Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible: Examples of Different Types of Men as Seen by Means of Trained Clairvoyance* (1903) and in their widely disseminated text *Thought-Forms* (1901), Besant and Leadbeater claimed that thoughts

Fig. 17 Vasily Kandinsky, *Sketch for "Composition II"* (*Skizze für "Komposition II"*), 1909–10
Oil on canvas, 97.5 × 131.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection 45.961

and emotions produce "radiating vibrations" and color-coded "auras" visible to the clairvoyant. In order to facilitate the progress of the initiate, both books provided a "Key to the Meaning of Colors," a grid of twenty-five hues accompanied by their intellectual and emotional significance:

> Clear brown (almost burnt sienna) shows avarice; hard dull brown-grey is a sign of selfishness. . . . Green seems always to denote adaptability. . . . Affection expresses itself in all shades of crimson and rose; a full clear carmine means a strong healthy affection of normal type; if stained heavily with brown-grey, a selfish and grasping feeling is indicated, while pure pale rose marks that absolutely unselfish love which is possible only to high natures.[4]

Mumbo jumbo of this sort and the rampant charlatanism or self-delusion of its contrivers has not been easy to square with the obvious brilliance and seriousness of purpose of abstraction's pioneers. But we should not underestimate the power bestowed by late nineteenth-century artistic theory and practice (from Impressionism onward), which strove to answer Courbet's prohibition against the "not visible," and which, in effect, delivered up several generations of immensely sophisticated artists equipped for radical change. Nor should we fail to recognize just how profound was the yearning on the part of young artists for an art of the ineffable (in the wake of conventional religion's loosening hold and the attendant loss of its entire range of sacred subject matter).[5] The combination of inordinate artistic potential and a dire need for spiritual sustenance should help us understand the otherwise mystifying power of the occult for those artists who came to maturity with the new century. Kandinsky explained in 1913, "A terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of responsibilities stretched before me. And most important of all: what is to replace the missing object? The danger of ornament revealed itself clearly to me; the dead semblance of stylized forms I found merely repugnant. . . . What is to replace the object? I sometimes look back at the past and despair at how long this solution took me."[6] Note here the precisely articulated fear of abstraction's potential for meaningless stylization that would continue to haunt modern art practice until at least the heyday of Abstract Expressionism (think of critic Harold Rosenberg's warning against painters creating mere "apocalyptic wallpaper"[7]), as well as Kandinsky's invocation of words like "danger" and

"despair." It was partly in answer to these kinds of apprehensions that Theosophy must have appeared to offer a solution, a way toward making visual art about the invisible. We know Kandinsky owned a copy of *Gedankenformen*, the 1908 German translation of Besant and Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms*,[8] and in his major theoretical text *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912), he deviated from his main line of argument to write of "One of the most important spiritual movements, one which numbers a great many people today, and has even assumed a material form in the Theosophical Society." He continued:

> This society consists of groups who seek to approach the problem of the spirit by way of *inner* knowledge. Their methods, in opposition to positivism, derive from an ancient wisdom, which has been formulated with relative precision. . . . Theosophy, according to Blavatsky, is synonymous with *eternal truth*. . . . Skeptical though we may be regarding the tendency of the theosophists toward theorizing and their excessive anticipation of definite answers in lieu of immense question-marks. . . . This movement represents a strong agent in the general atmosphere, presaging deliverance to oppressed and gloomy hearts.[9]

Yet, despite this more or less ringing endorsement, it was not until 1966 when Sixten Ringbom published his groundbreaking essay "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*[10] that Kandinsky's involvement with Theosophy was taken seriously, and then only in certain quarters.[11] This article was followed in short order by Rose-Carol Washton's important Yale University doctoral dissertation "Vasily Kandinsky, 1909–1913: Painting and Theory" (1968); later, as Washton Long, by her *Artforum* article "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image" (1972); and finally, by her full-length study *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (1980), all of which emphasized Kandinsky's debt to the Austrian Theosophist Rudolf Steiner (who referred to himself as an Anthroposophist). Contrary to the standard textbook version of the artist's career, Washton Long showed, by way of meticulous analysis, that Kandinsky had *not* become a truly abstract (i.e., nonfigurative) artist in 1910, but only after several years of creating intentionally "veiled," or hidden, images, much of it drawn not from Theosophy per se, but from Steiner's reading of the Gospel According to St. John (Book of Revelation, Apocalypse of John). In the Guggenheim's *Sketch for "Composition II"* (*Skizze für "Komposition II"*, 1909–10, fig. 17), for example, Washton Long was able to decipher what at first looks to be a brilliantly colored abstract painting but is, in fact, filled, at left, with apocalyptic motifs of the artist's own devising (those used repeatedly around 1909–13), including the horse and rider, the city on the hill, lightning bolts, fallen trees, dark clouds, boats on the waves, submerged and cruciform figures, and, at right, images of the Garden of Love (children playing, lovers reclining, etc.),[12] perhaps a fulfillment of the "Epoch of the Great Spiritual." After 1914, Kandinsky mostly painted fully abstract works of art — works without any discernibly "veiled" images — having become convinced of painting's power to speak of the ineffable on its own nonliterary, nonsymbolic terms.

Such, at this moment, was the pervasiveness of these antimimetic ambitions that we find even the great demystifier of modern art, Marcel Duchamp, dabbling in the mystical. While in Munich for a long visit in 1912, Duchamp bought a copy of Kandinsky's then newly published *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and proceeded to translate key passages from German into French, line by line (perhaps for his brothers, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Jacques Villon, who read no German).[13] The same artist who devoted himself to ridiculing the art world's cultural pretensions, who put a mustache and goatee on the *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), painted a wedding picture, *Young Man and Girl in Spring* (*Le printemps* or *Jeune homme et jeune fille dans le printemps*, 1911), for the (first) marriage of his sister Suzanne to pharmacist/chemist Georges Desmares, which, as John Moffitt convincingly noted, made reference to images in seventeenth- and early

Fig. 18 Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel (Portrait du Docteur Dumouchel)*, 1910
Oil on canvas, 100.3 × 65.7 cm.
Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950

eighteenth-century alchemical texts.[14] In a portrait from 1910 of Duchamp's childhood friend, medical student Raymond Dumouchel (fig. 18), the hand of the sitter "seems to blaze with fiery otherworldly vibrations,"[15] which, although suggestive of the Theosophists' discussions of colored aura, may have another source, a scientific one: X-rays (another of Duchamp's classmates, Ferdinand Tribout, was a pioneer of French radiology.)[16] Interestingly, "X-rays were an area where science and occultism readily met," as Linda Dalrymple Henderson has explained. "Given the penchant of French occultists in the early twentieth century to try to prove their claims scientifically, X-rays were a frequent element in occult literature in this period."[17] X-rays bridged the gap between the spiritually invisible and the invisible *tout court*. "The domain of occultism . . . ," Henderson has written, "was not so clearly demarcated from pure science as it is today. Many scientists . . . pursued psychical research or even spiritualism, and Occultists regularly drew upon recent scientific developments to argue their case for the reality of invisible worlds."[18] As Henderson also reminds us (and no one has more brilliantly revealed the links among art, the occult, and the new popular science of the turn of the century), the Italian Futurists, in their "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto" ("La pittura futurista: Manifesto tecnico," April 11, 1910), rhetorically asked: "Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies, since our sharpened and multiplied sensitiveness has already penetrated the obscure manifestations of the medium? Why should we forget in our creations the doubled power of our sight, capable of giving results analogous to those of the X-rays?"[19]

Although thoracic X-rays are what immediately come to mind, Piet Mondrian's *Evolution* (*Evolutie*, 1911, fig. 19) is probably less quasi-scientific than thoroughly Theosophical, as Robert Welsh first brought to light in his essay "Mondrian and Theosophy" for the catalogue of the Guggenheim Museum's centennial exhibition of the artist's work in 1971.[20] Within the history of advanced European painting of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, *Evolution* finds its place within an important group of three tripartite works: Jan Toorop's *Three Brides* (*De drie Bruiden*, 1893),[21] Paul Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* (*D'où venon nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous?*, 1897), and Umberto Boccioni's *States of Mind* (*Stati d'animo*, 1911), each of which, in its distinct way, offers a synthesis of the temporal and spiritual. The overall blue cast of Mondrian's triptych partakes of a celestial hue typically assigned spiritual value in religious art; in *Thought-Forms*, Besant and Leadbeater refer to the color blue as signifying "Pure Religious Feeling." Mondrian joined the Dutch branch of the Theosophical Society as early as May 1909,[22] a fact that did not escape the notice of his more astute observers, including the art critic M. D. Henkel, who made mention of Mondrian's Theosophical beliefs in reviews of the artist's work in 1910 and 1911.[23] When Mondrian moved from Amsterdam to Paris during the winter of 1911–12 and before he found a studio of his own, he rented a room in the headquarters of the French Theosophical Society.[24] Although it never appeared, he was asked to write an essay on art and Theosophy in 1913–14 for *Theosophia*, the leading organ of the Dutch Theosophical Society.[25] As Carel Blotkamp has shown, interest in art within the Dutch Theosophical community coincided precisely around the same time as with Mondrian's initial involvement with the movement.[26] Important for the artist's understanding of Theosophy at this point, as it was for Kandinsky, was Steiner's Anthroposophy; but even more crucial to Mondrian were Blavatsky's Theosophical ideas: "*I* got everything from the *Secret Doctrine* (Blavatsky)," Mondrian wrote to Theo van Doesburg, referring to Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888).[27]

Included in that "everything" was the Theosophical "Doctrine of Evolution," which Mondrian considered a determining factor in the history of art.[28] In occult literature, girls and young women were traditionally considered most susceptible to spiritual transmission; the three nude females in *Evolution* appear, nonetheless, mature enough to carry the symbolic weight of the human potential for spiritual enlightenment, or evolution, the specific path of which Mondrian's three panels were intended to convey (akin to Hindu belief, Theosophical evolution stresses a perpetual cosmic cycle of creation, death, and regeneration).[29] According to Blavatsky (apparently in

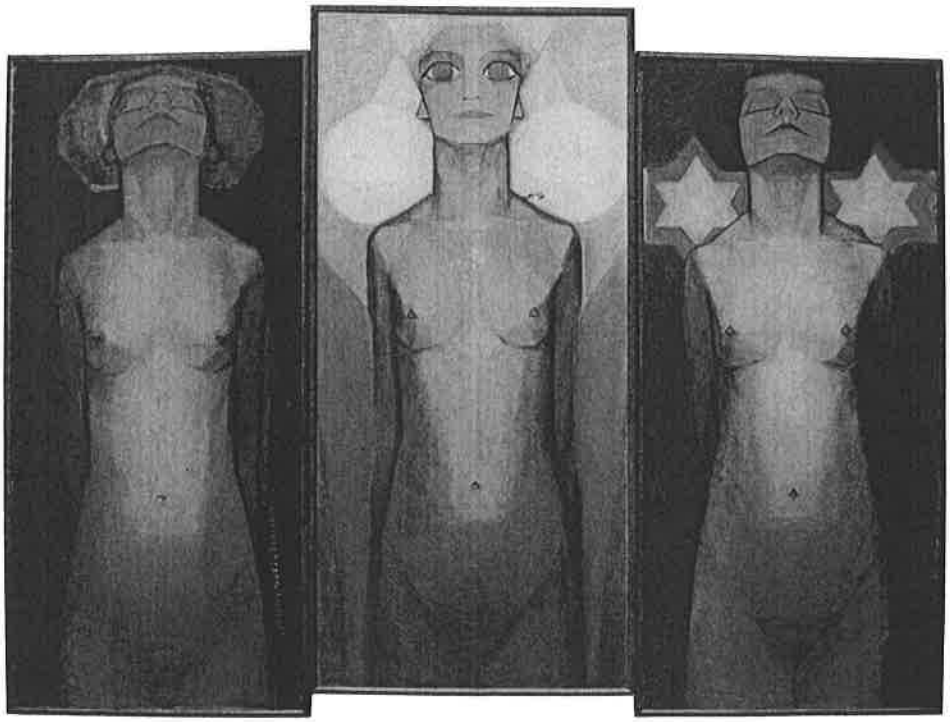

Fig. 19 Piet Mondrian, *Evolution* **(*Evolutie*), 1911**
Three panels, oil on canvas, left and right panel: 178 × 85 cm; center panel: 183 × 87.5 cm.
Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague

emulation of the mystic Paracelsus), "Three spirits live and actuate man. . . . The first is the spirit of the elements (terrestrial body and vital force in its brute condition); the second, the spirit of the stars (sidereal or astral body — the soul); the third is the *Divine* spirit. . . ."[30] Mondrian's triptych appears to be a poetic rendering of these spiritual states: the figure at left, with closed eyes and rich red amaryllis-like blossoms at her shoulders, presumably represents the brute, terrestrial body; the figure at the right, with eyes still shut, represents the soul (here, the flowers have turned to yellow stars); and the culminating figure at the center, slightly raised above her companions, represents the Divine Spirit, or complete enlightenment: eyes are now wide open, flowers and stars have become opalescent globes with upwardly pointing triangles within. "The triangle played a prominent part in the religious symbolism of every great nation," Blavatsky explained, "for everywhere it represented the three great principles — spirit, force and matter; or the active (male), passive (female), and the dual or correlative principle which partakes of both and binds the two together."[31] Thus, in support of this highly fanciful and misogynist doctrine, the terrestrial state at left displays downward-pointing triangles in the center of its blossoms and as the figure's nipples and navel; the sidereal state at right has conjoined triangles, pointing both upward and downward (the blossoms have become six-pointed stars, Theosophy's symbol), and the figure's nipples and navel have become diamonds; finally, in the case of the central figure, Divine Spirit, all triangles point upward — orbs, nipples, navel — in the state of full enlightenment (or is it full bodily excitation?), evolution finally achieved.

The hold of Theosophy and other esoteric cults on artists went a good deal beyond just Duchamp, Kandinsky, or Mondrian: František Kupka[32] and Kazimir Malevich,[33] as well as the little-known Hilma af Klint,[34] among many others, read esoteric literature, interested themselves in theories of the fourth dimension, or joined one or another occult society. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats, as we know, were involved, to one degree or another, with Theosophy (Yeats was a card-carrying member).[35] But, for visual artists at least, and apart from a nod toward the occult by a few Surrealists,[36] little of this interest or adherence survived the First World War. Mondrian gave up Theosophical figuration for a Theosophically infused vocabulary of plus and minus signs, and then he abandoned

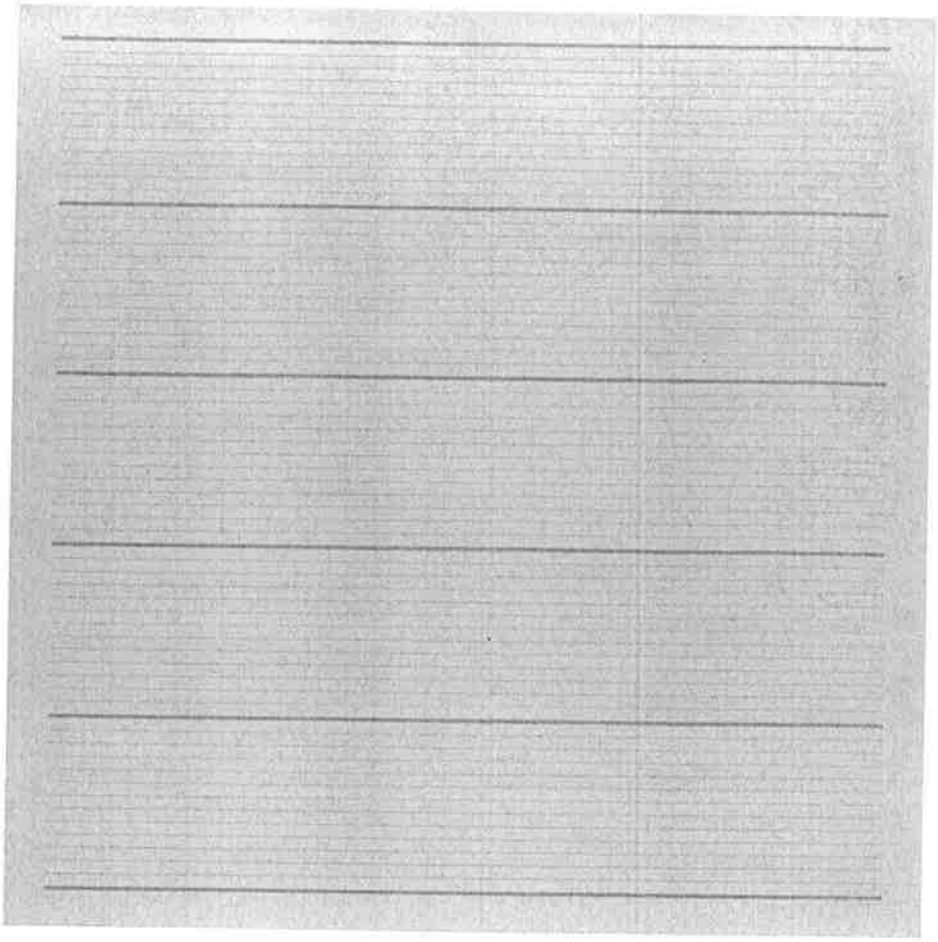

Fig. 20 Agnes Martin, *Fiesta*, 1985
Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 183 x 183.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, The American Art Foundation 92.4025

symbolic form altogether for a language of non-allusive grids. Proud and self-sufficient, abstraction flourished (abetted by numerous artists' groups) during the interwar years and after, without recourse to the supernatural. Did the reality of armed combat and national war make spiritualism look frivolous? Had the ghastly facts of war rendered the utopian turn of mind that characterized much esoteric religion, and Theosophy in particular, hopelessly naive? Or had contemporary art simply outgrown its need for the moral support, and spurious legitimacy, provided by the new alternative religions? The fact that the two artists who probably had the greatest impact on our acceptance of abstraction as a viable artistic language, Kandinsky and Mondrian, both had to back into (and then out of) subjectless art by way of Theosophy is nonetheless significant: it suggests that the realm of pure abstraction is anything but pure, and no matter how hard we try to remain down-to-earth, the ecstatic feeling, which some of us experience in the simple act of looking, is transportive.

If only by the slenderest of threads, the link between abstract art and spirituality survived the Second World War, and persists to this day, although it is now more likely to be allied with conventional religion, or no specific religion at all, than with spiritualist cults: think of the abstracted stained glass of Henri Matisse's Dominican chapel at Vence and its Stations of the Cross,[37] as well as the great abstract *Stations* by Barnett Newman;[38] don't forget that Agnes Martin's austere works (fig. 20) were, among much else, informed by her lifelong study of "Old Testament Calvinism, expressions of visionary Christianity, Platonism, transcendentalism, Vedanta, Zen Buddhism and . . . Taoism";[39] and keep in mind that even as seemingly pure an aesthete as Ellsworth Kelly, at the time of his death, was looking forward to the completion of his designs for a nondenominational chapel at the University of Texas at Austin.[40]

1 Although I invoke the term "afterlife" in the spiritual (or spiritualist) sense, which is not at all how she intends it, I am cognizant of Nancy J. Troy's use of the term in the title of her excellent study, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), concerning the artist's posthumous reputation.

2 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979), p. 54, reprinted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 12.

3 Gustave Courbet, "Letter from Gustave Courbet to the Young Artists of Paris" (December 25, 1861), *Le courrier du dimanche* (December 29, 1886), p. 4, in *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, ed. and trans. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 203–04.

4 Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, rev. ed. (1901; repr. Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), pp. 22–23.

5 See Kenneth E. Silver, "New Spirits and Sacred Springs," in Nathalie Bondel et al., *Voyage into Myth: French Painting from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum, Russia*, exh. cat. (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002), pp. 17–43.

6 Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences" (1913), in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), vol. 1, p. 370, cited in Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," in Maurice Tuchman and Judi Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 131.

7 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), p. 34.

8 Ringbom in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 135, 152.

9 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: And Painting in Particular* (1912), trans. by Michael Sadleir et al., *The Documents of Modern Art*, vol. 5 (New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1976), pp. 32–33 (italics in the original).

10 Sixten Ringbom, "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), pp. 386–41.

11 Marja Väätäinen explains that some of the negative reaction to Sixten Ringbom's 1966 article on abstraction and Theosophy was due to the fact that his celebrated, Finnish, art historian father, Ivar Ringbom, had been a Nazi sympathizer, and thus the son's interest in the spiritualist roots of abstraction were seen as a potentially dangerous recrudescence of irrational Nazi ideology. See Marja Väätäinen, "From Ringbom to Ringbom: The Art of Art History of Lars-Ivar Ringbom and Sixten Ringbom: A Mythmaker and a Myth-Breaker in Åbo, Finland," *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012), pp. 1–20.

12 Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 110–11.

13 Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, p. 60 n. 94. Tuchman explains: "This volume was discovered by Pontus Hultén among Jacques Villon's papers; I am grateful to him for bringing it to my attention and for his willingness to lend it to the exhibition." Tuchman and Freeman's huge and thorough exhibition catalogue is the essential starting point for all questions regarding the relationship between "spiritual" questions (widely conceived) and abstract art.

14 John F. Moffitt, "Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 259–60.

15 Ibid., p. 258.

16 Jean Clair, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne; Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, 1977), p. 33. For Duchamp's Catholic upbringing, see "Catholicism and the Symbolist Inheritance," in Dawn Ades et al., *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 24–41.

17 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the* Large Glass *and Related Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 7. See also her discussions of Theosophy in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

18 Henderson, *Duchamp in Context*, p. xx.

19 Ibid., pp. 4, 237 n. 10.

20 Robert Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944: Centennial Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1971), reprinted in Patricia E. Kaplan and Susan Manso, eds., *Major European Art Movements, 1900–1945: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 250–74; this is the version I cite.

21 Toorop showed at the first Salon de la R+C in 1892.

22 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 251.

23 Ibid. Welsh mentions Henkel's two reviews: "St. Lucas-Ausstellung," *Kunstchronik* (June 6, 1910), and "Ausstellung der Kubisten in dem 'Moderne Kunstkring' zu Amsterdam," *Kunstchronik* (December 22, 1911).

24 Carel Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, p. 102. See also Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

25 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," pp. 252–53.

26 Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism," p. 96.

27 Ibid., p. 103 (italics in the original).

28 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 263.

29 Ibid.

30 Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), vol. 1, p. 212, cited in Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 265 (italics in the original).

31 Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), vol. 2, p. 269, in ibid., p. 266.

32 See Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "X-Rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp, and the Cubists," *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (December 1988), pp. 323–40. For Kupka's involvement in spiritism and Theosophy, see Meda Mladek, "Central European Influences," in Margit Rowell, ed., *František Kupka, 1871–1957: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1975), pp. 13–45, and Jaroslav Andel and Dorothy M. Kosinski, eds., *Painting the Universe, František Kupka: Pioneer in Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; Prague: National Gallery Prague; Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1997).

33 See Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 185–99.

34 There has been a good deal of interest recently in the art and mysticism of Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, with three major exhibitions in the last few years; see Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widoff, *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet; Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013); Daniel Birnbaum et al., *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Galleries; Koenig Books, 2016); and Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell, *The Keeper*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, 2016).

35 On spiritualism, Theosophy, and literature, see Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), and David Garrett Izzo, *The Influence of Mysticism on 20th-Century British and American Literature* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009).

36 On Surrealism and spiritualism, see Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Katherine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

37 See Kenneth E. Silver, "Matisse at Vence: An Epilogue to *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 81–90.

38 See Barnett Newman's short essay "The 14 Stations of the Cross, 1958–1966," *ARTnews* 65, no. 3 (May 1966), pp. 26–28, and Lawrence Alloway, ed., *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross (lema sabachthani)*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), where Newman writes of the Aramaic phrase: "Lema Sabachthani — why? Why did you forsake me? . . . This question that has no answer has been with us so long — since Jesus — since Abraham — since Adam — the original question" ("Statement," p. 9).

39 Jacquelynn Baas, "Agnes Martin: Readings for Writings," in Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell, eds., *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Enterprises, 2015), p. 224 n. 6.

40 See Elizabeth C. Baker, "Kelly's Late Shift," *Art in America* 104, no. 6 (June/July 2016), pp. 116–25. At the time of the announcement of his gift of the designs to the University of Texas, Kelly said of Austin: "I think people need some kind of spiritual thing because, as you can see, there are spots around the world that are blowing up and we don't want that. No one wants that." Quoted in Robin Pogrebin, "Texas Museum to Build Ellsworth Kelly Design," *New York Times* (February 5, 2015), p. C30.

Nancy J. Troy's use of the term in the title of her excellent study, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), concerning the artist's posthumous reputation.

2 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979), p. 54, reprinted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 12.

3 Gustave Courbet, "Letter from Gustave Courbet to the Young Artists of Paris" (December 25, 1861), *Le courrier du dimanche* (December 29, 1886), p. 4, in *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, ed. and trans. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 203–04.

4 Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, rev. ed. (1901; repr. Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1986), pp. 22–23.

5 See Kenneth E. Silver, "New Spirits and Sacred Springs," in Nathalie Bondel et al., *Voyage into Myth: French Painting from Gauguin to Matisse from the Hermitage Museum, Russia*, exh. cat. (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2002), pp. 17–43.

6 Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences" (1913), in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), vol. 1, p. 370, cited in Sixten Ringbom, "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," in Maurice Tuchman and Judi Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 131.

7 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), p. 34.

8 Ringbom in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 135, 152.

9 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: And Painting in Particular* (1912), trans. by Michael Sadleir et al., *The Documents of Modern Art*, vol. 5 (New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1976), pp. 32–33 (italics in the original).

10 Sixten Ringbom, "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), pp. 386–41.

11 Marja Väätäinen explains that some of the negative reaction to Sixten Ringbom's 1966 article on abstraction and Theosophy was due to the fact that his celebrated, Finnish, art historian father, Ivar Ringbom, had been a Nazi sympathizer, and thus the son's interest in the spiritualist roots of abstraction were seen as a potentially dangerous recrudescence of irrational Nazi ideology. See Marja Väätäinen, "From Ringbom to Ringbom: The Art of Art History of Lars-Ivar Ringbom and Sixten Ringbom: A Mythmaker and a Myth-Breaker in Åbo, Finland," *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012), pp. 1–20.

12 Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 110–11.

13 Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, p. 60 n. 94. Tuchman explains: "This volume was discovered by Pontus Hultén among Jacques Villon's papers; I am grateful to him for bringing it to my attention and for his willingness to lend it to the exhibition." Tuchman and Freeman's huge and thorough exhibition catalogue is the essential starting point for all questions regarding the relationship between "spiritual" questions (widely conceived) and abstract art.

14 John F. Moffitt, "Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 259–60.

15 Ibid., p. 258.

16 Jean Clair, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Catalogue raisonné*, vol. 2, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne; Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, 1977), p. 33. For Duchamp's Catholic upbringing, see "Catholicism and the Symbolist Inheritance," in Dawn Ades et al., *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 24–41.

17 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the* Large Glass *and Related Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 7. See also her discussions of Theosophy in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

18 Henderson, *Duchamp in Context*, p. xx.

19 Ibid., pp. 4, 237 n. 10.

20 Robert Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in *Piet Mondrian, 1872–1944: Centennial Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1971), pp. 35–52. Reprinted in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *Art in America 1900–1945: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 250–74; this is the version I cite.

21 Toorop showed at the first Salon de la R+C in 1892.

22 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 251.

23 Ibid. Welsh mentions Henkel's two reviews: "St. Lucas-Ausstellung," *Kunstchronik* (June 6, 1910), and "Ausstellung der Kubisten in dem 'Moderne Kunstkring' zu Amsterdam," *Kunstchronik* (December 22, 1911).

24 Carel Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and Early Abstraction," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, p. 102. See also Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

25 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," pp. 252–53.

26 Blotkamp, "Annunciation of the New Mysticism," p. 96.

27 Ibid., p. 103 (italics in the original).

28 Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 263.

29 Ibid.

30 Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), vol. 1, p. 212, cited in Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," p. 265 (italics in the original).

31 Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), vol. 2, p. 269, in ibid., p. 266.

32 See Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "X-Rays and the Quest for Invisible Reality in the Art of Kupka, Duchamp, and the Cubists," *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (December 1988), pp. 323–40. For Kupka's involvement in spiritism and Theosophy, see Meda Mladek, "Central European Influences," in Margit Rowell, ed., *František Kupka, 1871–1957: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1975), pp. 13–45, and Jaroslav Andel and Dorothy M. Kosinski, eds., *Painting the Universe, František Kupka: Pioneer in Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; Prague: National Gallery Prague; Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1997).

33 See Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles," in Tuchman and Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 185–99.

34 There has been a good deal of interest recently in the art and mysticism of Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, with three major exhibitions in the last few years; see Iris Müller-Westermann and Jo Widoff, *Hilma af Klint: A Pioneer of Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet; Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013); Daniel Birnbaum et al., *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Galleries; Koenig Books, 2016); and Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell, *The Keeper*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, 2016).

35 On spiritualism, Theosophy, and literature, see Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), and David Garrett Izzo, *The Influence of Mysticism on 20th-Century British and American Literature* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009).

36 On Surrealism and spiritualism, see Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Katherine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

37 See Kenneth E. Silver, "Matisse at Vence: An Epilogue to *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 81–90.

38 See Barnett Newman's short essay "The 14 Stations of the Cross, 1958–1966," *ARTnews* 65, no. 3 (May 1966), pp. 26–28, and Lawrence Alloway, ed., *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross (lema sabachthani)*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), where Newman writes of the Aramaic phrase: "Lema Sabachthani — why? Why did you forsake me? . . . This question that has no answer has been with us so long — since Jesus — since Abraham — since Adam — the original question" ("Statement," p. 9).

39 Jacquelynn Baas, "Agnes Martin: Readings for Writings," in Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell, eds., *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Enterprises, 2015), p. 224 n. 6.

40 See Elizabeth C. Baker, "Kelly's Late Shift," *Art in America* 104, no. 6 (June/July 2016), pp. 116–25. At the time of the announcement of his gift of the designs to the University of Texas, Kelly said of Austin: "I think people need some kind of spiritual thing because, as you can see, there are spots around the world that are blowing up and we don't want that. No one wants that." Quoted in Robin Pogrebin, "Texas Museum to Build Ellsworth Kelly Design," *New York Times* (February 5, 2015), p. C30.

Mystical Symbolism

THE SALON DE LA ROSE✕CROIX IN PARIS 1892–1897

VIVIEN GREENE

GUGGENHEIM