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Citation

Pasi, Marco. "Esoteric Transgression in Modern and Contemporary Art". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

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Esoteric Transgression in Modern and Contemporary Art

Marco Pasi

Edited by Aaron Michael Ullrey.

Published in September 2025

The following Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

In the last 20 years, the art world has shown a growing interest in esoteric and occult themes. Large exhibitions have demonstrated that the history of modern and contemporary art is far more metaphysically inclined than formalist perspectives would have us believe. However, what is not always adequately understood is the ways in which transgression connects art and esotericism. Some artists transgress artistic canons and conventions by claiming to take inspiration from higher spiritual beings to create innovative works. Other artists explicitly step over moral and societal norms by creating a radical aesthetic of transgression. Artists of both types draw upon esoteric themes and techniques.

Visionary artists such as Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884), active in England in the mid-Victorian period, and Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), active in Sweden in the first half of the twentieth century, produced art under the perceived influence of higher spiritual entities. Their esoteric practices—based on mediumship, automatism, and visualization of other dimensions of reality—enabled them to break away from predominant artistic norms. If they transgressed what they knew were the rules of a good artistic composition, it was because they believed higher spirits commanded them to do so. That transgression, instilled in them by the spirits, made them produce artwork that, while incommensurate with their own, irresistibly speaks to us today.

Houghton and af Klint died ignored by the art world, but they were rediscovered long after their deaths. Both continue to receive growing attention due to the uncanny modernity of their works, which seem to anticipate the turn towards abstraction in avant-garde art. It's not just critics and historians who are fascinated by their rediscovery, but also the broader public. Af Klint's 2019 exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York City was the most attended event in the history of the museum. The spirits enabled these artists to produce works that reveal to us the beauty transgression can take when transformed into art.

Until the mid-1980s, art criticism, with only a few exceptions, was relatively blind to the esoteric, mystical, spiritual, and irrational dimensions of twentieth-century art. In 1986, Maurice Tuchman curated his groundbreaking exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition showed how important these dimensions had been and still were in modern and contemporary art. Its oft-reprinted catalogue is a testimony to the

vastness of long-neglected occult territories. Recent exhibitions, including *Traces du sacré* (Paris, 2008), *L'Europe des esprits* (Strasbourg, 2011-2012), *World Receivers* (Munich, 2018-2019), and *Black Light* (Barcelona, 2018), have displayed wide-ranging historical, modern, and contemporary art inspired by esoteric perspectives. Houghton and af Klint were far from being anomalous.

Transgression is not always a collateral aspect of art but can also be a deliberate choice of esotericism-inspired artists, especially in performance art. Hermann Nitsch (1938-2022) and Genesis P-Orridge (1950-2020) exemplify the intersection of transgression and esotericism, using extreme performances that involve bodily fluids, sex, and real or staged violence. In a recent work on Viennese Actionism, the artistic group in which Nitsch was involved in the 1960s and 1970s, Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir uses the terms “subversive esotericism” and “aesthetic radicalism” to characterize the work of these artists. Nitsch, a painter and composer, may not have explicitly referred to esoteric literature, but he presents his performances as re-enactments of rituals from ancient mystery cults, such as Eleusis and the cult of Dionysus.

These kinds of references and re-enactments are a recurrent trope in modern esotericism. Genesis P-Orridge was an important performance artist and musician active in the 1970s and 1980s industrial music scene in Britain. Their art was full of references to notoriously transgressive occultists, such as Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, and their artistic performances as a member of the COUM Transmissions group were magical rituals where sex, bodily fluids, self-mutilation, and even violence often played a crucial role.

Considering all of this, transgression appears to be a catalyst in creative processes and is an effective tool for artists who are interested in esoteric practices and ideas. It is not the only factor in the connection between art and esotericism, but it is certainly a very important one. However, transgression inevitably depends on social context. What was considered transgressive a hundred years ago may not be so challenging today. Hermann Nitsch was perceived as a dangerous subversive radical in his own country, Austria, in the 1960s, but he came to be recognized and even celebrated by mainstream cultural institutions in more recent years. He now has a museum entirely dedicated to his art in the small town of Mistelbach, Lower Austria. Similarly, Houghton and af Klint were viewed critically or just ignored in their lifetimes, but now they are prominently featured in large-scale exhibitions and art history books. In an increasingly globalized and fluid world, where all parts are peripheries of a centre that does not hold, we should ask ourselves: where are the next frontiers of esoteric transgression in art?

Suggested Citation:

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Bio: Marco Pasi (Visiting Scholar, CSWR, Fall 2025) is an Associate Professor and the Director of the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and related currents at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). He has published extensively on the history of modern Western esotericism, especially in relation to magic, art, and politics. He is the author of *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (Routledge, 2014). He has been a Frances Yates Fellow at the Warburg Institute (London), a research fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies and at the Max Weber Kolleg (Erfurt), an invited professor at various academic institutions, and a member of the research network Enchanted Modernities, focusing on the influence of Theosophy and related movements on visual, musical, performing, and applied arts. He has also served as the General Secretary of the European Association for the Study of Religions and is the chief editor of the *Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism*, published by Brill.