

### **Conclusions about Painting in Hilma Af Klint's *Old Age, No.10***

In his essay on originality, Richard Shiff argues that due to the slipperiness of the term, “originality becomes a matter of what people at a given time believe, why they believe it, and how they express their belief.”<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is extended by art historian Rosalind Krauss, whose 1986 essay, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” all but dismisses an objective notion of originality: “this experience of originality, felt by generations of artists, critics, and viewers is itself false, a fiction.”<sup>2</sup> For Shiff and Krauss, to productively investigate originality is to uncover how specific discourses of originality originate and circulate. Therefore, this paper picks up on Krauss’ call to situate originality as an “assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I focus on Krauss’ identification of the grid, a symbol that countless avant-garde artists have deployed in their practice, as an example of a visual discourse of originality. As a case study for this function of the grid, this paper will examine Hilma Af Klint’s painting, *Group IV, The Ten Largest, No.10, Old Age* (1907), the only painting in her *The Ten Largest* series that includes an explicit grid. Through a theoretical and visual analysis of the painting, as well as an overview of existing scholarship on the series, this paper shows that *No.10, Old Age* can be understood as a diagrammatic representation of Af Klint’s conclusions about her artistic practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Shiff, "Originality," in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds. *Critical Terms for Art History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 146.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant Garde,” in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avante-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Krauss, “Originality,” 7.

Before showing how Krauss' notion of originality helps us understand the place of *Old Age, No.10* in Af Klint's broader artistic project, it is necessary to understand the implications of Krauss' argument regarding the deployment of the grid. For Krauss, the grid is a recurrent and paradoxical element within the work of avant-garde artists. In one sense, Krauss demonstrates that the grid is the "image of an absolute beginning," a compositional element that provides the creator with a sense of "schematized reduction."<sup>4</sup> However, despite the fact that artists often claim to have rediscovered it, the grid provides little room for invention due to its repetitive use and formal restrictiveness. This is the paradox that Krauss identifies: "Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid can only be repeated."<sup>5</sup> The inherently cyclic nature of the grid, then, is inextricably tied to avant-garde artists' desire to seek an origin for their practice. While Krauss identifies numerous artists, including Mondrian, Martin, and Albers, whose works are exemplary of the role of the grid as representative of artistic process, she does not reference Hilma Af Klint. This is not necessarily surprising. Until the Guggenheim Museum's 2019 solo exhibition of her works, Af Klint's practice had been largely excluded from Western art historical canons of abstract art. Thus, by applying Krauss' conception of the grid to Af Klint's work, this paper sheds new light on how the presence of the grid in *Old Age, No.10* reveals Af Klint's use of formal and compositional elements to represent her own artistic process.

While *The Ten Largest* series is among the most examined, reproduced, and lauded over group of works by Af Klint, previous scholarship and criticism on the series has focused primarily on the first eight paintings in the series. Furthermore, this writing has centered Af

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<sup>4</sup> Krauss, "Originality," 8.

<sup>5</sup> Kraus, "Originality," 9.

Klint's interest in the intersection of science, spiritualism, and Swedish art rather than locating the investigation of artistic originality as the foundation of her work. For example, in Tracey Bashkoff's essay in the Guggenheim's exhibition catalogue, she argues that the presence of spirals, botanical elements, and orbs in *The Ten Largest*, as well as its division into phases of life, represent Af Klint's interest in humanity's relationship to the universe.<sup>6</sup> In another catalogue essay, Vivien Greene focuses on how the floating floral patterns, lettering and scale of *The Ten Largest* are potentially borrowed from Swedish *bonader*, wall tapestries that Af Klint had most likely witnessed before creating this series.<sup>7</sup> These arguments privilege certain elements of Af Klint's practice while ignoring the ways in which the final painting in the series upends some of these tropes. Moreover, scholarship and criticism outside of the catalogue has also sought to understand the implications of this series apart from notions of originality and process. In an overview of modernist engagements with spacetime, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that this series expresses theoretical collisions of science and spiritualism.<sup>8</sup> And, in a review of the Guggenheim's show in *The New Yorker*, art critic Peter Schjeldahl remarks on how the abstract shapes in each painting signify Af Klint's search for eternity and truth.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, several of *The Ten Largest* paintings, notably the ones that depict floral patterns, orbs, and spirals, show up in promotional materials for the show: a reproduction of *Adulthood, No.7* graces the cover of the

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<sup>6</sup> Tracey Bashkoff, "Temples for Paintings," in Tracey Bashkoff and David Horowitz, ed. *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Vivien Greene, "Hilma Af Klint and the Swedish Folk Art Revival," in Bashkoff and Horowitz, *Hilma af Klint*.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, "Scaling Planerarity: *Spacetime* in the New Modernist Studies – Virginia Woolf, H.D., Hilma Af Klint, Alicja Kwade, Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner." *Feminist Modernist Studies* 3, no. 2, May 3, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Schjeldahl. "Hilma Af Klint's Visionary Paintings." *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2018, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/22/hilma-af-klints-visionary-paintings>

exhibition catalogue and *Childhood, No.2* is replicated on apparel that the Guggenheim sold as part of the show. While the series has been analyzed and commodified as representative of the connection between Af Klint's thematic and aesthetic interests, notably absent is *Old Age, No.10*. The lack of discussion and interest in this painting may in part be due to its relative dissimilarity from the rest of the series, revealing precisely the reasons why it is the focus of this paper.

*Old Age, No.10* upends dominant understandings of this series by revealing Af Klint's desire to depict a schematized representation of her own artistic process on the canvas. It is my contention here that just as the titles and structure of *The Ten Largest* series relate to the phases of human life, the formal and aesthetic evolution present throughout this series relate to similar phases of Af Klint's artistic practice. In this sense, *Old Age, No.10*, as the final painting in the series, represents a concluding visual statement for Af Klint. The fact, then, that the grid as visual symbol only appears in this painting lends credence to the applicability of Krauss' notion of the grid as a doubling of the two-dimensional surface:

through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas;  
through its network of coordinates it organizes a metaphor for the plane geometry  
of the field; through its repetition it configures the spread of lateral continuity.<sup>10</sup>

While these paintings were completed on paper that was then mounted on canvas, if we understand *The Ten Largest* to be a series of investigations of personal aesthetic interests, it is notable that Af Klint completed the series with a rendering of the two-dimensional surface on the picture plane itself. More than purely self-referential though, *Old Age, No.10* demonstrates Af Klint's interest in how the evolution of pictorial and aesthetic elements throughout a series of works can reveal what she wants in a completed painting.

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<sup>10</sup> Krauss, "Originality," 10.

While it is difficult to say whether Af Klint understood *No.10* as *more* complete than any other picture in the series, the presence of the grid in *Old Age, No.10* is clearly a stark departure from the rest of the series. There are other diagrammatic and geometric elements in the series, such as the yellow-blue cross in *No.3*, the white and black dashed lines in *No.6*, and the overall gridded, mirrored structure of *No.9*. However, the grid in *Old Age, No.10* stands out due to its black outlining, red-blue-yellow chromatic theme, and relatively dominant compositional position. Moreover, the grid provides a unique compositional role in relation to the other elements in the painting. It is notable, for example, that the spiraling white S-shapes terminate in the upper left and right corners of the grid, lending visual privilege to the grid's vertices. Furthermore, the elements that surround the dominant grid lend the grid itself more compositional prominence. The coloring of the grid forms a cross of white squares that appear to extend to the edges of the canvas, leading the viewers eyes to spiraling color wheels on the far left and right of the composition, swirling lines at the top, and spirals that wrap into a window-like, egg-shaped form at the bottom-center. These forms, external to the gridded structure, act as framing devices due to their relative size, complexity, and positioning. The presence of these shapes, then, provides compositional focus on the grid despite its slightly right-of-center positioning, a location that calls into question ideas of compositional balance.

Af Klint's grid in *Old Age, No.10* is situated in relation to the rest of the painting just as the entire composition is situated in relation to the rest of the series. The white border around the grid separates it from the composition, making it appear either raised or depressed relative to the surface. The grid appears as a framed image, distinct from the light-pink wash of the rest of the canvas. Further, the small elements that surround the grid are reappearances of formal elements from previous paintings in the series, while the grid itself, as discussed, is unique to this painting.

Thus, relative to both the rest of the series and the composition itself, the grid is an outlier that functions as structural glue. The grid, then, is a visual symbol denoting the positioning of the painting itself relative to the rest of the works in the series. *Old Age, No.10*, more generally, can be understood as a diagram of artistic process, revealing how the formal elements of Af Klint's compositions act as signifiers for her broader artistic practice. This argument is in line with Briony Fer's analysis of Af Klint's later works on paper, which reveal her "desire to record her own process of investigation...attempts to categorize what she has done and what she has made."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, *Old Age, No.10* may be an early instance of Af Klint's interests in diagramming and recording her own process. Af Klint's grid in *Old Age* reveals her approach to painting as both expressive and diagrammatic: the canvas is a surface upon which one enacts a relationship to artistic practice.

Throughout this series, Af Klint expresses how the cyclical evolution of formal characteristics within one's visual language mirrors the life cycles of human beings. The progression of forms culminating in *No.10* reveals the painting as a concluding statement from Af Klint. Just as humans adopt repetitive and derivative ways of being in the world, Af Klint sought to create and track her use of formal elements she may have recognized as unoriginal. We often expect individuals of old age to have reached a level of contentment with their place in the world; in a similar way, Af Klint's *Old Age, No.10* teaches us about her perspective on what constitutes a completed painting. Therefore, for Af Klint, painting was an investigative practice allowing her to express and account for her own originality.

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<sup>11</sup> Briony Fer, "Hilma Af Klint, Diagrammer," in Bashkoff and Horowitz, *Hilma af Klint*, 168

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