
The spiritual-artistic practice of Hilma's Ghost: towards a theory of material solidarity

Author(s): Alex Bispham

Email: c2206617@courtauld.ac.uk

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This article argues that spiritual artworks offer solidarity through their process and use of materials. Exploring the practice of Hilma's Ghost, a New York-based collective formed by Sharmistha Ray and Dannielle Tegeder, it examines how their collaborative process works on material and immaterial planes. In their *Automatic Theorem Paintings* (2022) the artists engage with forgotten craft techniques. By highlighting the properties of their oil medium, I position these paintings as sites of resistance and feminist solidarity.

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Alex Bispham

A series of five luminous geometric abstractions, the *Automatic Theorem Paintings* (2022) by New York-based collective Hilma's Ghost are a dance of vibrant hues and diagrammatic forms. In painting #4 (Fig. 1), pastel tones intensify towards the edges of shapes, before being abruptly cut off along sharp lines where they meet with raw substrate. Floating in off-white cotton velvet, triangles become cones and rectangles become cylinders.



Figure 1: Hilma's Ghost, *Automatic Theorem Painting #3*, 2022, oil stained on cotton velveteen on wooden panel, 152 x 123 cm. Courtesy of Hilma's Ghost (Sharmistha Ray and Dannielle Tegeder); Carrie Secrist Gallery.

The paintings are manifestations of the collaborative practice between Sharmistha Ray (b. 1978, Kolkata, India) and Dannielle Tegeder (b. 1971, Peeskill, USA), who together form Hilma's Ghost. The two-person collective was founded in 2020 in response to the trauma and isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic. As 'believing sceptics', they practice tarot, séances, and magick, and channel the Swedish painter and mystic Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) in their name.¹ Af Klint's biography – of a long-ignored, queer, spiritual woman, who collaboratively created abstract art – emblematises the collective's own interests. Their spiritual-artistic solidarity is not limited to their namesake: rather, it is an invocation that highlights their platforming of women, trans, and nonbinary practitioners, and their promotion of spirituality as a political strategy. The artists engage in experimental pedagogy, transcultural dialogue, and collectivity through their teaching practice and public workshops, which are frequently disseminated digitally via Zoom or Instagram – their social medium of choice. In recent work, they have employed video and sound. Yet in this article, I am specifically interested in how their painting medium offers a site of resistance, reimagining, and radical solidarity.

Ray and Tegeder credit the Guggenheim Museum's 2018 exhibition *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* with opening a portal for increased receptivity towards the spiritual – what might be described as an 'occult turn' in both life and art.² Indeed, the impact of spirituality on the development of modern and contemporary art has long been recognised, with Maurice Tuchman's exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986) marking a key shift in discourse on modernist abstraction. Yet this engagement tends to privilege an artist or artwork's capacity for spiritual transcendence over the material properties that promote this – with the exception, perhaps, of nineteenth-century phenomena like spirit photography and ectoplasm that I will briefly return to later. A case in point is Hilma's Ghost: while the process-based nature of Ray and Tegeder's individual practices has been the subject of scholarship, in their work as a collective the question of how their painting practice enacts and interacts with their spiritual concerns merits further examination.³

¹ Adriana Furlong, 'Hilma's Ghost', *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 2022, <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/09/artseen/Hilmas-Ghost/>.

² Carrie Secrist Gallery, *Hilma's Ghost: Spectral Visions – A Feminist Collective Signals Magickal Futures*, exh. cat. (Carrie Secrist Gallery, 2024), 75. See also J. J. Charlesworth, 'The Return of Magic in Art', *ArtReview*, 30 May 2022, <https://artreview.com/the-return-of-magic-in-art/>.

³ See, for example, Claire Gilman, 'Dannielle Tegeder's Abstract Material', in Dannielle Tegeder and Tracy L. Adler, *Dannielle Tegeder: Painting in the Extended Field* (Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, Hamilton College, 2013), 32–37. And Sarah Burney, 'One Piece by Sharmistha Ray, The Night Is Dark and Full of Rainbows', *Kajal Magazine*, 15 August 2022, <https://www.kajalmag.com/one-piece-by-sharmistha-ray/>.

This reception perpetuates what art historians like Monika Wagner have described, in Western philosophy and aesthetics, as a charged dualism between matter and form. Pertinently for Hilma's Ghost's feminist project, Wagner notes its 'gendered implications,' with 'femininity inscribed in material' that is 'subjugated [...] as the expression of a male-conceived creator'.⁴ In contrast, by attending specifically to their techniques, I aim to demonstrate that the collective's feminist solidarity is the result of complex interactions between the immaterial and the material. Anthropologists and art historians such as Wagner, Tim Ingold, and Ann-Sophie Lehmann have developed theories of materials that highlight the agential properties of a medium, departing from otherwise static or abstract definitions of materiality.⁵ Throughout this article, I employ their arguments not only in relation to Ray and Tegeder's painting medium, but also to explore how spirituality, in its negotiations between the visible and the invisible, the physical and the transcendent, might contribute to a theory of material solidarity.

The *Automatic Theorem Paintings* are the result of research at the Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, Connecticut, the home of Theodate Pope Riddle (1867–1946): one of the first professional female architects in the United States, a philanthropist, and – crucially for Ray and Tegeder's project – a proponent of Spiritualism, the popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century movement affirming contact between the living and the dead. The period's séances gave rise to automatic drawing that count as early examples of western abstraction. Af Klint was also interested in such methods, before developing her own artistic and spiritual practices in collaboration with other women, based significantly on Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Like their namesake, Ray and Tegeder's collaborative spiritual practice is informed by a variety of traditions. Their other projects include work with colour magick and they make frequent use of the tarot, including an abstract deck they created in 2021. At the Hill-Stead Museum, the artists drew on Riddle's Spiritualist work: they viewed automatic writing and drawings by Riddle, and contacted her in a séance facilitated by the witch Sarah Potter, with whom the artists had previously worked. Riddle assured the artists that she did not wish to collaborate, but gave them her blessing nonetheless. The works are therefore not created in the traditional mediumistic manner in which the creative impulse is attributed to a channelled spirit, but instead tell a further story of material solidarity.

⁴ Monika Wagner, 'Material' [2001], trans. Kate Vanovitch in Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality* (Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 29.

⁵ See, for example, Tim Ingold, 'Materials against Materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1–16 and Ann-Sophie Lehman, 'The Matter of the Medium: Some Tools for an Art-Theoretical Interpretation of Materials', in Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, eds., *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c.1250–1750* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

A chance opening of a drawer during a tour of the house led to the discovery of a so-called theorem painting, made by either by Riddle's grandmother or great-grandmother (both named Judith F. Twain), which would inform Ray and Tegeder's own techniques on a material level.⁶ Theorem painting (Fig. 2) was a popular craft practiced by women and girls in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was brought to New England during British colonial rule over India – it is also known as Poonah painting.⁷ As contemporary manuals describe, the craft involved creating complex compositions, usually of floral arrangements and sometimes of mourning scenes, by staining paper or velvet through layered stencils.⁸



Figure 2: *Theorem Painting*, 1840-1860, painted cotton and velvet, stencilled, 69.9 x 110.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Anonymous Gift, 1949.

Ray and Tegeder's own compositions were created as automatic collaborative drawings, in a process they return to throughout their oeuvre, and using divinatory prompts from Potter. These were then scaled up and used to create two hundred mylar stencils for the paintings. The artists would then work side by side on large pieces of

⁶ The following description of the artists' process is drawn from *Hilma's Ghost, Radical Spirits* (2022) at Hill-Stead Museum, 2022 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6X6jE10Kzk>) and conversations with the artists, January–April 2025.

⁷ Hallie Manning, 'Theorem Painting', in Carol Crown and Cheryl Rivers, eds., *Folk Art*, The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 189–91.

⁸ See, for example, Matthew D. Finn, *Theorematical System of Painting: Or Modern Plan, Fully Explained, in Six Lessons, and Illustrated with Eight Engravings, by Which a Child of Tender Years Can Be Taught This Sublime Art in One Week: To Which Are Added, the Theory and Practice of the Old School, in the Introduction of Landscape and Figure Painting, with Many Valuable Receipts on the Subject* (James Ryan Broadway, 1830). For more recent manuals, see Linda Carter Lefko and Barbara Knickerbocker, *The Art of Theorem Painting: A History and Complete Instruction Manual* (Penguin, 1994) and Linda E. Brubaker, *Theorem Painting*, Heritage Crafts Today (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2009). Brubaker taught Ray and Tegeder the technique.

cotton velvet stretched over wooden panel, pushing oil paint into their unprimed support using pieces of the same velvet wrapped around their index fingers. Unlike a stain that relies on the absorption of a dilute binding medium, here the paint was heavily pigmented and rather dry. Through the physical pressure against the panel behind their substrate, the dense pile of the velvet meant that rather than spreading laterally along the support, the oil paint was absorbed directly into the exposed fibres and remained contained. This technique has given rise to defined lines, the gentle blending of intense tones, and explains the lack of bloom from the oil (Fig. 3).

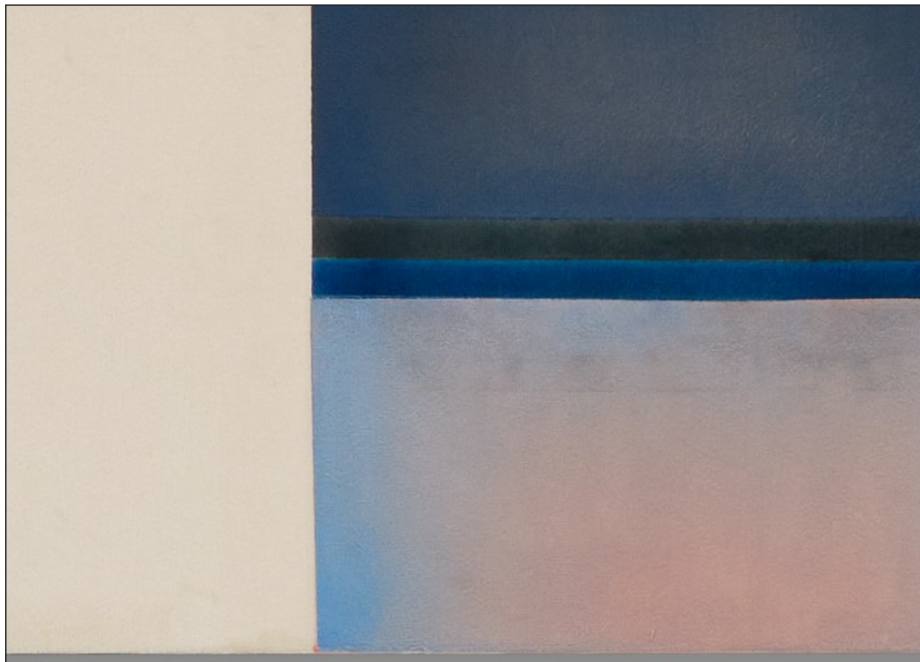


Figure 3: Hilma's Ghost, *Automatic Theorem Painting #3* (detail), 2022, oil stained on cotton velveteen on wooden panel, 152 x 123 cm. Courtesy of Hilma's Ghost (Sharmistha Ray and Dannielle Tegeder); Carrie Secrist Gallery.

Appropriating it into their idiosyncratic abstract language, the artists engage with the feminist and postcolonial implications of the technique. It differs from its original use, though, of which practitioners Linda Carter Lefko and Barbara Knickerbocker write: 'the painter's goal was to make the picture look as much like the model as possible, so there is little spontaneous expression'.⁹ Removed from the imitative function of the stencils, Ray and Tegeder's compositions instead draw on modernist abstraction and Indian textile patterns, the result of the artists' visual dialogue and from which, they say, a 'third entity' emerges.¹⁰

The paintings began with mediumistic conversations with Riddle, and end with Ray and Tegeder pushing oil paint into velvet, embodying a marginalised and

⁹ Lefko and Knickerbocker, *The Art of Theorem Painting*, 11.

¹⁰ Martin Benson, 'The Intersection of Art and Magic with Hilma's Ghost (Dannielle Tegeder and Sharmistha Ray)', *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* podcast (March 2025), 15:00.

forgotten practice. In them, im/material planes coalesce. Hilma's Ghost's materials are not only 'active constituents of a world in-formation', as Ingold describes them, but a rematerialisation of lost, forgotten, or invisible worlds across continents and centuries.¹¹ Through Ray and Tegeder's process, and the physical properties of their medium, these paintings become a site of solidarity – with each other in automatic dialogue, with Potter and Riddle, with countless unnamed creators of theorem paintings. As I conceptualise these art objects as material meeting points between immaterial planes, they are like the lightning bolt evoked by the physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad in her essay on 'Trans*/Matter/Realities': 'a lively play of in/determinacy, troubling matters of self and other, past and future, life and death'.¹²

In photography magazine *Aperture*, Wolfgang Tillmans and Olivia Laing wrote that 'spirituality is solidarity' and 'solidarity is spirituality,' respectively.¹³ And if a particular medium is called to mind by Barad, is it not the flash – or *Blitz* – of the photograph? The perceived indexicality of photographs led to their use as proof of what lies beyond the visible, be it the double image of a ghost, or jelly-like ectoplasm emanating from a spirit medium.¹⁴ I believe a spiritual solidarity can equally be found in a material reading of the *Automatic Theorem Paintings*, though they may be less palpably insistent upon the mechanics of their creation. As Lehmann has argued, while oil as a binding medium 'owes much of its success to transparency, an invisible material will also be quickly overlooked.'¹⁵ And perhaps it is precisely in negotiating this in/visibility that Hilma's Ghost enacts their im/material concerns. Rather than a forming a discrete paint layer, their oil paint becomes one with the support. Like the occult traces of a spiritual practice, and the hidden stories of forgotten artists and techniques, the intensely pigmented surfaces of the *Automatic Theorem Paintings* leave no trace of the medium that binds them.

Unlike spirit photographs, the *Automatic Theorem Paintings* do not claim to be mechanical reproductions of supernatural events. As in their abstraction, they remain in/determinate moments of connection: embodiments of Ray and Tegeder's spiritual practice, and a rematerialisation of the marginalised histories their process recovers. The work of the collective is transgenerational, transnational, and transmedial. Through their spiritual-material concerns, the artists forge radical objects of solidarity.

¹¹ Tim Ingold, 'Materials against Materiality', 11.

¹² Karen Barad, 'TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (1 June 2015): 389.

¹³ Wolfgang Tillmans with Martin Hägglund, 'Spirituality is Solidarity', and Olivia Laing with Mary Manning, 'Solidarity is Spirituality', in 'Spirituality', *Aperture* 237 (2019).

¹⁴ See Clément Chéroux, ed., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult, exh. cat.* (Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Ann-Sophie Lehman, 'The Matter of the Medium', 27-28.

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