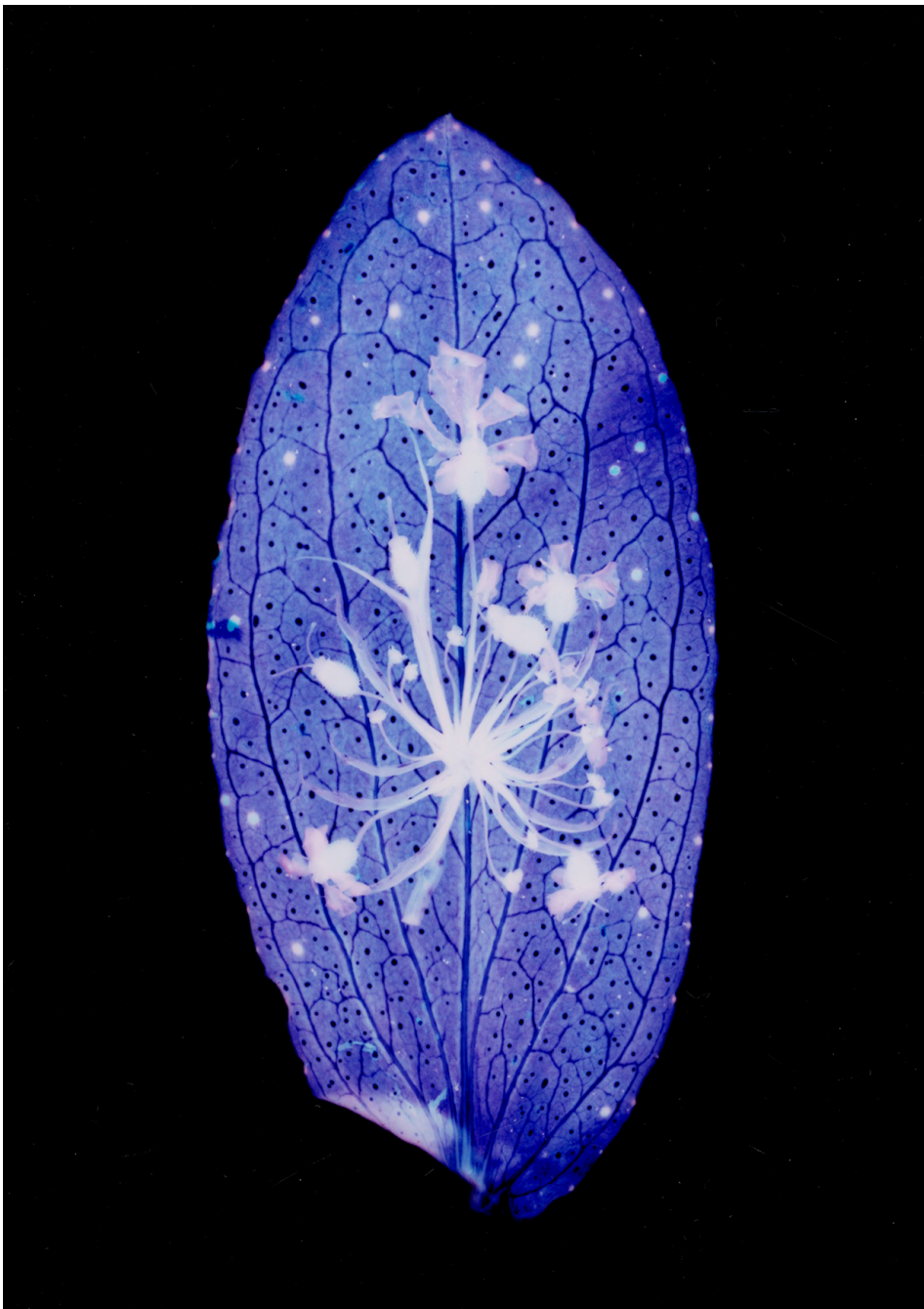


The Aesthetics of Esoteric Practices: Materialities, Performances, Senses

Fondazione Giorgio Cini



Natasha V. Moody, Logos VI, Ph(y)toforms, photograph 8x10", 2021

Conference

12 — 14 November 2024



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE
fondazione ONLUS
GIORGIO CINI



CAS-E
Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective



**History of
Hermetic Philosophy**
and related currents

Funded by



Deutsche
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Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg

The conference is organized jointly by the Giorgio Cini Foundation (Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities), DFG-funded Center for Advanced Studies “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective” (CAS-E) at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at University of Amsterdam, and Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices (RENSEP).

Tuesday, 12 November 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore

09:30 – 10:00

Welcome greetings by:

- **Francesco Piraino** (CCSC at Giorgio Cini Foundation)
- **Lina Aschenbrenner** and **Andreas Nehring** (DFG-funded CAS-E at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)
- **Marco Pasi** (HHP at University of Amsterdam)

10:00 – 11:00

Keynote speaker:

- **Ann Taves** (University of California at Santa Barbara), “ What Do Practices Do?”

11:00 – 11:30

Coffee break

11:30 – 12:30

- **Alessandro Cancian** (The Institute of Ismaili Studies),
“Fragrances Fit for a Prophet: a Nineteenth-Century Islamicate Treatise on Perfumes between Craftsmanship, Therapy, and Esotericism”
- **Raquel Romberg** (CAS-E, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg),
“ ‘Look How Beautiful This Magic Work Is!’ On the Esthetic, Performative and Affective Magic Efficacy of Shimmer”

14:00 – 15:30

- **Rachel Denniston** (The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London),
“Space, the Senses, and the Affective Exhibition in the ‘Museum as Temple’: a Comparative Study of Hilla Rebay and Galka Scheyer’s Curating as Esoteric Practice”
- **Heather D. Freeman** (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)
and **Amy Hale** (Falmouth University), “Generative Gnosis: Embodied Encounters with Digital Spirits in Contemporary Art and Magical Practice”
- **Veronica Caciolli** (Academy of Fine Arts, Ravenna / Independent Curator),
“The Exhibition as Medium”

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00

RENSEP artist’s award

- Welcome Address by RENSEP’s co-founder **Andrea Centore**
- Laudatio by **Judith Noble** (Arts Plymouth University)
- Speech by the prize winner **Natasha V. Moody**

Wednesday, 13 November 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore

10:00 – 11:00

Keynote speaker:

- **Katharina Wilkens** (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen),
“Being Perceptive: Some Thoughts on Secrecy, Skepticism and Aesthetic Ways of Knowing”

11:00 – 11:30

Coffee break

11:30 – 12:30

- **Charles Stang** (Harvard Divinity School),
“Sensing the Daimon: The Aesthetics of Ancient Demonology”
- **Beatrice Bottomley** (University of Bologna),
“Seeing is Transforming: Aesthetic Approches to the Manipulation of the Natural World in the Premodern Islamic Tradition”

14:00 – 15:30

- **Fryderyk Kwiatkowski** (AGH University of Science and Technology),
“‘Knowledge Is a Rumor until It Lives in Your Body’: How *The OA*’s Magical Dance Inspired Political Activism”
- **Marco Castagnetto** (University of Turin),
“Force The Hand of Chance: the Esoterrorist Aesthetics of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV”
- **Davide Marino** (CAS-E, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg), “Eradicating the Three Scourges: a Chinese Cinematic Perspective on *Xiéjiào*”

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00

- **Owen Coggins** (Brunel University),
“The Black Flame of Black Metal: Meta-Esotericism, Aesthetic Noise and Crypto-Fascism”
- **James Mansell** (University of Nottingham), “The Big Ben Silent Minute: Esoteric Listening Practice and the ‘Spiritual Front’ in the Second World War”

18:00 – 19:30

Piano Concert organized by the Institute of Music

- Introduction by professor **Gianmario Borio**, director of the Institute of Music, Fondazione Giorgio Cini
- **Luca Ieracitano**, piano

Thursday, 14 November 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore

10:00 – 11:30

- **Keith Edward Cantú** (CSWR, Harvard Divinity School),
“Esoteric Music: Bauls, Fakirs, and the Cultivation of Inner Natures (bhāva)”
- **Conerly Casey** (Rochester Institute of Technology),
“As Spirits Ride Their Mounts: Sensing, Materiality and Intimacy in Bori Ritual Practices”
- **Mariano Errichiello** (SOAS University of London),
“Aesthetics, Ritual Efficacy and Ontological Dynamism among Zoroastrians”

11:30 – 12:00

Coffee break

12:00 – 12:30

Lecture recital

- **Anne Dorothy Harley** (Scripps College),
“Ecstatic Audiation: Three Esoteric Performances/Practices”

14:00 – 15:30

- **Monika Bednarczuk** (University of Bialystok),
“Aesthetics and Performativity of Esoteric Practices in Late Socialist and Post-Socialist Poland”
- **Zsófia Johanna Szóke** (University of New Mexico),
“Objects of Meditation in Béla Hamvas’ Esoteric Practice”
- **Hajar Masbah** (EHESS - Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales),
“From the Patrimonialization to the Artification of Whirling Dervishes in France”

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00

Plenary lead by RENSEP’s scientific director **Bernd-Christian Otto**

Concert program

Wednesday, 13 November 2024

Auditorium “Lo Squero” | Fondazione Giorgio Cini

18:00

Greetings and introduction by professor **Gianmario Borio**.

Luca Ieracitano, piano

Erik Satie “Le fils des Étoiles”: Prelude du Premier Acte – La Vocation

Renato De Grandis, dai Preludi:

I libro n.1 “Claire de lune”

I libro n.7 “Il richiamo del giardino invisibile”

II libro n.2 “Sul ritmo” (a A. Skrjabin)

II libro n.3 “Vivo”

II libro n.4 “Echi”

II libro n.9 “Quasi adagio, calmo”

IV libro n.11 “Alleluia”

Erik Satie “Le fils des Étoiles”: Prelude du Deuxieme Acte - L’Initiation

Niccolò Castiglioni: Dulce Refrigerium

Erik Satie “Le fils des Étoiles”: Prelude du Troisieme Acte – L’Incantation

Aleksandr Skrjabin “Vers la flamme” op.72

Olivier Messiaen “Le baisee de l’Enfant-Jésus” (da Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus)

Abstracts

“Aesthetics and Performativity of Esoteric Practices in Late Socialist and Post-Socialist Poland,” Monika Bednarczuk, University of Białystok

In my paper, I want to focus on two highly influential occult actors in late socialist and post-socialist Poland: Lech. E. Stefański and Lucyna Winnicka, and the role of aesthetics and senses in their esoteric practices. Stefański, an actor, theatre director, and writer, was among the first people to organize public performances and trainings in skin vision, clairvoyance, as well as meditation techniques. He undertook such activities as early as the mid-1970s. Later, he wrote and staged plays inspired by occult topics (in which he played a starring part), and commented on the relationship between mystic experiences and art. Furthermore, there are strong visual and sensory components in the rituals of the Native Slavic Church—a new religious movement co-founded by him in the 1990s whose origins can be traced back to his activities during the communist period. Winnicka was a celebrated actress and journalist who gave up her film career in order to advocate Far Eastern spiritualities, anthroposophical ideas, and Rebirthing combined with “Touch for Health.” At the Life Academy she founded, breath, touch, and emotions played a crucial role. The bodily actions she promoted sometimes lead to what was described by participants as profound and radical transformations.

I will argue, first, that the success of Stefański and Winnicka was closely linked to their artistic education and their deep awareness of emotions, senses, and body. Second, I will argue that the group activities offered by my protagonists had particular resonance in a socialist country where, on the one hand, individualism, conversations about spiritual experiences and self-development were not compatible with the state’s ideology; yet, on the other hand, the official culture accommodated some elements of the New Age-inspired practices and discourses.

“Seeing is Transforming: Aesthetic Approaches to the Manipulation of the Natural World in the Premodern Islamic Tradition,” Beatrice Bottomley, University of Bologna

In the premodern Islamic tradition, the faculties of imagination and estimation were perceived to be the key interface between aesthetic forms perceived by the senses and their internal representations produced by the mind. This paper interrogates how the visualisation of forms, both on the page and in the mind, was considered to offer a means not only of producing knowledge about the hidden realities of the natural world, but also manipulating them. In order to do this, this paper employs a diagram from Ibn ‘Arabī’s magnum opus *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, “The Meccan Openings,” as a case study. Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240 CE) was a prolific scholar and poet. His work not only integrates questions and techniques from Sufism, philosophy, and the natural sciences, among other disciplines, but also approaches from the western and eastern regions of the premodern Islamic world. In *The Meccan Openings*, Ibn ‘Arabī describes three varieties of letters that possess hidden properties (*khawāṣṣ*), which can be used to manipulate the natural world: written, spoken, and evoked (*mustahḍar*). He defines ‘evoked’ letters as those which “the human evokes in their faculty of estimation or imagination and visualises.” In order for the practitioner to effectively undertake an action using written or spoken letters, they must evoke the letter in their faculty of imagination. Diagrams, such as the one discussed in this paper, can provide an aid for mental visualization and are thus imbued with operative potential. Through this diagram, this paper examines Ibn ‘Arabī’s theorisation and practice of aesthetics as a tool not only for the production and transmission of knowledge about the natural world, but also the manipulation of its hidden realities.

By contextualising Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory and practice within wider approaches to aesthetics in the premodern Islamic world, this paper will shed light on how the senses and imagination were perceived to play a vital role in both how we can know the world and transform it.

**“The Exhibition as Medium,” Veronica Caciolli, Academy of Fine Arts of Ravenna,
Independent Curator**

My paper focuses on the phenomenon, at once material, performative and sensory, of spiritually-oriented contemporary art exhibitions. I would like first to offer a brief overview of exhibitions based on the encroachments between esotericism, spirituality and mysticism since the 1980s. Secondly, I would like to reflect on their cultural and social implications. I will argue that this phenomenon manifests itself through at least six agencies: first, the role played by curators as creators. Second, a change of attitude in art historiography, which in previous periods had been mostly uninterested in esoteric and spiritual themes. Third, the type of artists involved: not only living artists, but rediscovered figures from the 19th and the 20th centuries, often ignored in their lifetime. Fourth, the influence exerted by the exhibition spaces. Fifth, the perceived ability of the selected works to represent the invisible and the unspeakable. And finally, the reception by the public.

**“Fragrances Fit for a Prophet: a Nineteenth-Century Islamicate Treatise on Perfumes between
Craftsmanship, Therapy, and Esotericism,” Alessandro Cancian, The Institute of Ismaili Studies**

Reports on the virtues of making, buying, circulating, and using perfumes abound within the authoritative literature of early Islam. This is even more true if one extends the survey to the inclusion of the sayings attributed to the quasi-divine guides of Shi‘i Islam: Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the Imams descending from them.

The centrality of this immense corpus of sayings varies within the different denominations and schools of thought of Islam. One in which it has particular significance is the Shaykhi school, which flourished within Twelver Shi‘ism in Iraq and Iran in the 18th and 19th centuries. The school’s primary focus on the esoteric aspects of this corpus has been widely studied, and the reports on perfumes and their potential for spiritual growth make no exception to this trend. The influential founder of the Kermanī branch of the Shaykhi school of theosophy, Karīm Khān Kermanī (d. 1871) was a prodigiously prolific author and charismatic spiritual master, whose interests range from mystical eschatology to agronomy, astronomy, medicine, and occult sciences. In his work on perfumery, allusively entitled *Mijmara* (“Censer”, also the Arabic name of the southernmost constellation described by Ptolemy, *Thymiaterion*, and connected to the use of incense in ritual of astral magic), the master draws on a variety of sources (from Indic perfumery literature to the sayings of the Imams, from Ibn Sina to Paracelsus) to discuss elements of physio-spiritual aromatherapy, and produces numerous recipes for fragrant concoctions of different natures, as well as instructions on methods for extracting essences from raw materials, in the context of an articulate discussion of the saying of the Imams on the spirituality of perfumes. By studying the *Mijmara*, its context and the practice of its author, I aim to contribute to the understanding of the much-understudied history, practice, and performance of early modern Islamicate perfumery and its hybrid nature in the context of Islamic esotericism. In addition to the study, drawing on my experience as a perfumer, I will recreate some of the recipes reported in the *Mijmara* and illustrate them in light of Karīm Khān’s remarks.

**“Esoteric Music: Bauls, Fakirs, and the Cultivation of Inner Natures (bhāva),”
Keith Edward Cantú, CSWR, Harvard Divinity School**

This performance-based contribution examines the impact of generating musical sensations as an esoteric practice, for convenience called “Esoteric Music,” also accounting for materiality in the form of physical musical instruments and the vocal cords of singers as well as the expression of these together in performance. The specific case focused on is the music of Bauls and Fakirs of the two Bengals (Bangladesh and West Bengal, India) as based on the author’s scholar-practitioner field work and close textual study of these performative contexts for over a decade. While several previous studies have closely examined Baul and Fakiri music in their Bengali-specific Hindu or Islamic cultural contexts, this contribution instead takes the explicitly universal human-worship (mānuṣ-bhakti) of the Bauls and Fakirs as an open invitation to explore how their cultivation of inner natures (bhāvas) functions more broadly as a method to communicate esoteric knowledge of the microcosmic self and macrocosmic universe.

To this end the contribution shows how Baul and Fakiri aesthetic musical sensations in the form of lyrical and instrumental tone-based songs (gān) and rhythms (tāl) are generated by acoustic

instruments (yantra) and voices (galā) in the context of informal practice or ritualized performance (anuṣṭhān), with or without the assistance of intoxicating herbal blends, in order to make music esoteric. Throughout the presentation a few samples of songs will be given along with annotated translations provided, as well as demonstration of a few material instruments commonly used (e.g., one-stringed lyre or ektāra, lute or dotāra, miniature tabla drum or ḍuggi, hand percussion like jurī and prem jurī, and others). These are then examined in the context of the inner natures that they are intended to create: the music after all is called bhāva-saṅgit, or music for joining oneself to inner, affective natures that transform both the musician and the world around them.

**“As Spirits Ride Their Mounts: Sensing, Materiality and Intimacy in Bori Ritual Practices,”
Conerly Casey, Rochester Institute of Technology**

In the Bori ritual of *girka*, spirits mount their human hosts, and, in a carnal equestrian language, they ride them, to alter their hosts' expressions, gestures, actions and voices. Bori healers draw a horsetail and aromatic plant over the host, from head to toes, to entice spirits to mount. Musicians play each spirit's song, calling them one by one, so they may talk through the host's mouth. Numbering in the thousands, Bori spirits of animals, human ancestors and foreigners have their own names and personalities, and unique aesthetic tastes for songs and music, plants, incense, food, cloth, and blood sacrifices. These ecologically infused aesthetics and sensitivities kindle relations of spirits with humans that are meaningful not only in northern Nigeria, where my research took place (1991-2017), but also in the Bori practices of Niger, the Gnawa of Morocco, Tunisian Stambeli, and in the Bori-Zar complex across East Africa and the Middle East. In this talk, I consider the ways Bori spirits mount, ride and fully possess a person, altering consciousness to the point of amnesia, entangling bodily materiality and ephemerality, as sensations run across the skin, life slips in and multiplies, or slips away. I draw on ethnographic research with Sarkin Bori Umar Sanda to consider the effects of sensory stimulation in *girka*, as the sensoria of ritual materials draw attention, correspondences and ruptures with spirits and hosts. In what ways do the material sensoria of *girka* practices—whether the rhythms and pitches of spirit music, or the wafting smell of Bint El Sudan—rewire the informational and energy circuits of the host's life? And how do these sensory relational practices generate sequences and tempos which help hosts find their own rhythms of speaking and moving *with others*? How do such esoteric practices heal?

**“Force the Hand of Chance: the Esoterrorist Aesthetics of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV,”
Marco Castagnetto, University of Turin**

My proposal delves into the captivating interplay between esoteric practice and industrial aesthetics within the musical/performance projects of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV. Emerging from the avant-garde countercultural landscape of the late 1970s and early 1980s, these influential experimental music groups crafted a unique sonic and visual experience that blurred the culturally shaped boundaries between art, mysticism, and technology. Throbbing Gristle, formed in 1975 by Genesis P-Orridge, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Peter Christopherson, and Chris Carter, pioneered the genre of industrial music and challenged conventional notions of art through their abrasive and confrontational performances, drawing inspiration from chaos magic and occulture, alienation, and social decay. Psychic TV, a later project led by P-Orridge, furthered to push the boundaries of sonic experimentation while incorporating elements of psychedelic rock, electronic music, and ritualistic performance. This talk will examine how Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV utilized industrial aesthetics as a vehicle for esoteric exploration and as a totalising dispositif. Through an analysis of their multimedia production, I will explore the ways in which these artists embedded occult aesthetics and technological innovation to create immersive experiences, enacting a vast part of emerging countercultural discourses. Furthermore, this talk will provide a framework for understanding the occultural and philosophical influences that shaped Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV's approach to esotericism and industrial aesthetics. From the influence of Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare to the impact of avant-garde art movements such as Fluxus and Surrealism, I will examine how these artists synthesized diverse sources of inspiration to create a visionary and provocative body of work, setting the roots for the aesthetic and meta-performative concept of esoterrorism – an intentional subversion of cultural norms and expectations through the use of provocative imagery, and alleged magic-driven societal change - questioning the boundaries between provocation and social criticism.

**“The Black Flame of Black Metal: Meta-Esotericism, Aesthetic Noise and Crypto-Fascism,”
Owen Coggins, Brunel University**

Participants in the underground extreme music culture of black metal are heavily preoccupied with sonic, visual, performative and discursive aesthetics of Satanisms, occultism, paganism, anti-Christianity and various kinds of esotericism. While individuals may identify with particular traditions, black metal is unaffiliated with any, instead being fundamentally characterised by a commitment to ambiguity, secrecy and controversy with regard to religion: black metal follows *marginal and oppositional religiosity itself* as a tradition. Black metal becomes a meta-esoteric tradition: it produces aesthetic and discursive representations of esotericism that are themselves esoteric; that invoke guarded access to secret truths about the nature of black metal’s own associations with esoteric traditions. References are frequently made to ‘keeping the black flame’ of the musical culture; assertions are made that authentic ‘true cult’ black metal cannot be described but only sensed; and discussion of esoteric practices is frequently invoked then deferred to secrecy. Black metal’s aesthetic of meta-esotericism hints at esoteric truths cloaked in noise: in the distortion of the music’s sound; illegible logos and typefaces; lo-fidelity recording techniques and media (a ‘necro’ aesthetic of multi-generation monochrome photocopies and cassette demos); masks and ‘corpse paint’ chiaroscuro make-up; indecipherable screaming and baroque contorted modes of written communication.

These aesthetics, investigated in a postdoctoral research project that examined black metal recordings, live performances, online discourse, underground zines, and the production of six issues of an underground black metal zine *Cryptic Murmurings*, are crucial for understanding black metal’s contested relationship with fascist ideology. Contrasting with essentialist and logocentric approaches that seek to unveil the “true” political meaning of black metal behind the distortion, this analysis theorises how black metal’s meta-esotericism and aesthetic noise generate affective intensities that can fuel both fascist and antifascist ideologies and desires.

**“Space, the Senses, and the *Affective* Exhibition in the ‘Museum as Temple’:
a Comparative Study of Hilla Rebay and Galka Scheyer’s Curating as Esoteric Practice,”
Rachel Denniston, The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London**

Noting the necessity of art to respond to the *Zeitgeist* and the exigencies of the modern period which called for spiritual renewal, German-American curators Hilla Rebay (1890-1967) and Galka Scheyer (1889-1945) believed in the power of art to bring forth a new spiritual epoch. Influenced by the occulture of early 20th century Germany, they promoted European modern art created from ‘inner necessity’ and founded avant-garde institutions for its display in the United States. Drawing on affect theory and Rudolf Steiner’s theories on art and the senses, this paper examines Rebay and Scheyer’s individual yet parallel efforts at designing unique, sensorial exhibition environments which sought to renegotiate the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric in their promotion of inner, spiritual knowledge with the aim of transforming modern society and reconstructing a new world.

This paper takes as its focus curating as esoteric practice, examining the *affective* power of exhibition design and the promise of divine revelation inherent in the notion of ‘museum as temple.’ Building on the body of research engaging with esotericism in modern art, it considers the overlooked role of the curator in facilitating this art’s embodied reception in the socially and culturally constructed spaces of the public sphere.

**“Aesthetics, Ritual Efficacy and Ontological Dynamism among Zoroastrians,”
Mariano Errichiello, Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies at SOAS
University of London**

The nīrāngdīn is a Zoroastrian esoteric ceremony that aims to consecrate bull’s urine and water, turning them into ritual implements to be used in many other liturgical activities. It is performed by two priests who, secluded in a fire temple for 19 days, practise several ritual actions in a strict preestablished sequence. The apex of the ceremony occurs on the last night, when priests uninterruptedly recite prayers for seven hours and, at a certain point, throw pebbles into the buckets containing bull’s urine and water, completing their consecration. Based on ethnographic research conducted in India in 2023, this paper offers reflections on how priests use their sensory experience to measure ritual efficacy, and how materiality allows for the exchange of

spiritualised mater across ontological boundaries. While performers report that the prolonged recitation of mantras in the last part of the nirāṅgām takes them into a state of exaltation, they interpret the ‘splash’ of the pebbles thrown into the buckets as a conduit of the divine power that spiritualises mater. These last operations take place in the pāvī, a special section of the fire temple where nobody other than the two performers have access. Only when the successful consecration is verified by smelling the sweetened scent of urine, the two priests fill small bottles with the spiritualised elements and distribute them among laypeople waiting outside the pāvī. While sound and smell serve as markers of ritual efficacy for the priests operating within the pāvī, the exchange of spiritualised matter enables laypeople to experience the divine outside of the pāvī, shedding light on how materiality allows for ontological dynamism across space and actors. This paper, thus, looks at aesthetics as a method to trace both efficacy and dynamism in a ritual context.

“Generative Gnosis: Embodied Encounters with Digital Spirits in Contemporary Art and Magical Practice,” Heather D. Freeman, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Amy Hale, Falmouth University

People have always used tools and technology as ways to contact spirits and enhance the range of their senses and perception: Kirlian photography to detect auras, television or radio static to encourage Electronic Voice Phenomena, or even divination apps for mobile devices. While the use of technology in esoteric and occult practice is not new, advances in virtual technologies, immersive game design, and the growing influence of generative AI have rapidly expanded the potential to cultivate uncanny, supersensual, and mystical experiences. These are characterized by intensively embodied and affective responses, inspiring synesthetic experiences and shifts in perception. This collaborative paper will explore developments in both hardware and software and the ways these are encouraging novel and emergent encounters with deity and spirit, particularly among artist-technologist-practitioners. It will explore the ways these encounters are affectively experienced, the means by which practitioners create environments for interactions with these spirits, and also the ways in which these spirits are encouraged to explore their agency through both design and interface. Finally, digital spirits are often assumed to be virtual, distributed, and non-local, but we will examine how various approaches complicate this understanding, revealing highly localized and regional attributes. Data for this richly illustrated paper will be drawn from both practitioners and artist practitioners. Examples will highlight the revelatory experiences with AI spirits as in the art and practice of Heather Freeman and Alice Bucknell, virtual spaces that encourage initiatory encounters with deities and spirits from Hermetic sources as exemplified by the somatically grounded and immersive art of Barry William Hale, and also the generation and invocation of new AI deities from Silicon Valley explored throughout the installations of Zach Blas.

“Ecstatic Audiation: Three Esoteric Performances/Practices,” Anne Dorothy Harley, Scripps College

Challenging boundaries between the categories ‘musical performance’ and ‘esoteric practice,’ I will lead the audience through three short musical performances of North American contemporary classical vocal music composed during the last 60 years. This exploration and experience of the aesthetics of live music performance will show how developments in American avant garde music create the possibility for music to function as a group esoteric practice in the contemporary classical music concert hall and in other spaces. Borrowing the theatrical categories of actor, spectator, and the transgressive ‘spectator’ (Augusto Boal) and relating them to the traditional categories of composer, performer, and audience, I will then interrogate these musical categories via live musical performances, involving members of the ‘audience’ in a variety of group esoteric practices. The three musical performances will lead the ‘audience’ in three sounding meditations, each progressively more personal and esoterically engaged: 1. Sounds Ineffable (2015) by Bill Alves (voice, percussion, live electronics, 9 minutes): traditional audience reception of a musical performance of contemporary classical vocal chamber music, setting text in Pali from the Therīgāthā from Uppalavana, who was singled out by the historical Buddha for her accomplishment in esoteric practice in a mensuration canon created by live electronic manipulation, 2. Tuning Meditation (1971) by Pauline Oliveros, in which ‘audience’ members are asked to breathe together, to improvise, and create sound clouds together, based on principles of her ‘Deep Listening’ method and philosophy (10 minutes), and 3. Audiation

(2024) by Anne Dorothy Harley, for voice, electronics and ‘audience,’ in which all will be invited to prepare individual sounded responses to questions of an esoteric nature, and then contribute these responses during the live performance guided by the soloist/leader, recreating together the sonority of a reported ecstatic audiation (5 minutes).

“ ‘Knowledge Is a Rumor until It Lives in Your Body’: How The OA’s Magical Dance Inspired Political Activism,” Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, AGH University of Science and Technology

The OA is a supernatural science fiction TV drama about near-death experiences, angels, parallel universes, the alienation of youth, and the magical power of movement. It follows Prairie Johnson (Brit Marling), a blind young woman who, after having been missing for seven years, mysteriously resurfaces not only with her sight but also with the “Movements.”

They constitute a series of five connected phrases resembling a contemporary dance, which the viewers learn can heal the sick, raise the dead, and even open a portal to another dimension. In this talk, I will explore the multilayered meanings of the Movements and their impact on the show’s fans. In the first part, I will focus on the metaphysical dimension of the Movements—seeing them as an esoteric practice that produces an embodied form of divine knowledge, I will account for the supernatural effects they yield within the TV series’ fictional multiverse. This examination will steer me toward the second part of my talk, where I will investigate why the Movements motivated the show’s fans to upload dozens of videos to social media platforms instructing others on how to perform the magical dance. My key case study will be “*The OA* Flashmob” YouTube video by Jessy Grippo, who gathered a group of *The OA*’s fans in front of Donald Trump’s International Hotel NYC in 2017 and performed the Movements with a view to, as she wrote, “protect us all from the darker forces at work in our country and the world.” In the final part, I will account for why this particular show generated a cult following by framing it as an expression of a radical occultal sincerity understood as a response to post-truth politics.

“The Big Ben Silent Minute: Esoteric Listening Practice and the ‘Spiritual Front’ in the Second World War,” James G. Mansell, University of Nottingham

The chimes of Big Ben are a familiar feature of British radio and television. They act as an auditory symbol of the nation, drawing listeners from across the United Kingdom and its wider worlds to London. Less understood are the esoteric origins of Big Ben’s broadcasting history. Nightly radio broadcasting of Big Ben alongside the 9pm news began during the Second World War. But this was not an initiative of the British government nor of the BBC. It was proposed by mystic Wellesley Tudor Pole and his Big Ben Council, a group composed of Christian healers, adherents of new evangelical movements, proponents of British Israelism, and people with ties to Theosophy and the Bahais, many of whom were also Conservative MPs, and all of whom believed that the war must be fought on the ‘spiritual front’ as well as with physical weapons. During the “Big Ben Silent Minute” radio listeners were instructed to hold a minute of silence nightly at 9pm while listening to the chimes of the famous bell. Promotion of the minute made clear that while one option was to think positive or religious thoughts, the real aim of the minute was to achieve a Buddic state of meditative silence and an inward listening for God. Tudor Pole argued that the synchronised effort of millions of people undertaking this kind of listening was the key to fighting the war on the spiritual front. This paper outlines the esoteric aesthetics of silence at work in the Big Ben Minute and situates the movement in wider cultures of esoteric listening in twentieth-century Britain. It argues that belief in the spiritual power of esoteric listening found surprisingly wide support among key figures in Churchill’s government who each personally put pressure on the BBC to adopt the silent minute, despite the organisation’s significant misgivings about what it called Tudor Pole’s “dangerous prayer theology.”

“Eradicating the Three Scourges: a Chinese Cinematic Perspective on *Xiéjiào*,” Davide Marino, CAS-E, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

週處除三害 (*Zhōuchù chū sānhài*, literally “Zhouchu Eradicating the Three Scourges”) is a Taiwanese thriller that, after having achieved both commercial and critical acclaim in Taiwan, also became the most successful box office success in Mainland China during the 2024 Chinese New Year holiday season. Released on Netflix with the international title *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon*,

the movie is centred around a fugitive Taiwanese gangster (Chen Kui-lin) who, diagnosed with incurable cancer, embarks on a journey to eliminate the two most wanted Taiwanese criminals (Hsu “Hongkie” Wei-chiang and Lin “Bullhead” Lu-ho). This mission brings Kui-lin to a commune in the Penghu Islands, where he comes in touch with a new religious movement (新心靈舍 *Xīn xīnlíng shě* “The New Soul Society”) and its charismatic leader. Largely overlooked by the critique, religion plays a central role in the movie. In particular, the film engages with a Chinese phenomenon known as *xiéjiào* 邪教. Often (and incorrectly) translated with “evil cult(s),” *xiéjiào* is a legal term used by governments in the Sinosphere to define unlawful spiritual/esoteric organizations. Despite their political differences, *xiéjiào* is a very pressing problem for both the Socialist People’s Republic and the democratic Republic of China. The very fact that the movie was allowed in the notoriously heavily censored Chinese media market shows how the Taiwanese representation of the fictional “New Soul Society” and its mysterious leader is in line with the anti-*xiéjiào* policies recently implemented by the Chinese Communist Party. By a selection and translation of relevant scenes from the movie, this paper intends to discuss the representation of *xiéjiào* in contemporary Chinese popular culture, highlighting the tension between spiritual (“esoteric”?) grassroots organizations and governmental disciplinary anxieties.

“From the Patrimonialization to the Artification of Whirling Dervishes in France,” Hajar Masbah, EHESS - Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales

The dance of the whirling dervishes, known as *sema*¹, has traditionally been a religious ritual performed during Dhikr sessions by Muslim Sufis as a way to commemorate and connect with God. However, in the late twentieth century, new forms of *sema*¹ began to emerge, extending beyond its religious context. These new expressions of the dance were presented as artistic performances to wider audiences and have gained recognition as a recognized art form. In my anthropology PhD thesis, which focused on artists who draw inspiration from Sufism in France, I conducted field work in both France and Turkey. Through my research, I identified six ideal types that represent different approaches of art in the spiritual Sufi artistic field. These ideal types range from a conservative religious approach, where the dance is performed strictly within the context of religious rituals, to a more liberal artification approach, where the dance is transformed and presented as an artistic expression. These ideal types provide a comprehensive overview of the diverse interpretations and practices of whirling dervishes. Drawing on the theoretical framework of artification, which explores the redefinition of cultural practices as art, this paper aims to analyze how these dancers negotiate the tensions between the artistic and religious aspects of the whirling dervish tradition. Does whirling lose its spiritual meaning when it is performed in art setting? This question has been a subject of debate among scholars and practitioners alike. By analyzing the strategies employed by Sufi dancers and studying the reception and perception of the artified performances, this research aims to shed light on the complex relationship between art and spirituality within the contemporary globalized Sufism.

“‘Look How Beautiful This Magic Work Is!’ On the Esthetic, Performative and Affective Magic Efficacy of Shimmer,” Raquel Romberg, CAS-E, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

Shimmering materials such as gold, silver, silk, mercury, mirrors, sequins, and glitter reflect and deflect light. Their luminosity is spatially performative, moving in and out of visible and invisible worlds, endowing them with ritual agency and affectivity. When they twinkle, flicker, sparkle, and shine they reverberate in space and can reach, with the right spell and intention, visible and invisible beings in close and distant worlds. For this and other reasons shimmering materials are used in the construction of devotional spaces and the making of altars, sacred paraphernalia, and magic works in crosscultural contexts. Examples abound, from the design of sacred spaces of worship such as mosques and chapels, to the making of regal clothes for humans and deities, ritual flags, amulets, and the making of magic works that are aimed to ignite positive energies and deflect negative ones. Based on ethnographic and comparative materials, this paper explores the esthetic, performative, sensorial and affective efficacy of shimmering materials among humans and spirits, especially the ritual agency that can entice, ignite and seduce and at the same time shield and buffer as an apotropaic force that deflects evil forces. A detailed account of the making of magic works in the presence of devotees will illustrate how the sensorial qualities of materials, their situational purpose and assemblage as well as expected effects are spelled out showing the

correspondence and reverberation of the mimetic performative complicity between words, things, effects, and affects. Nudging to one side the textual, cosmological, and theological frameworks that previously held scholars' attention, the focus here shifts to the materialities of ritual objects and spaces not just as symbols in cosmological systems or conduits of spiritual entities but as they are reported and experienced by participants in their very quest for their manifestation or actual presence. In other words, I focus on the potential of such materials to embody, communicate, and negotiate spirit.

“Sensing the Daimon: The Aesthetics of Ancient Demonology,” Charles M. Stang, Harvard Divinity School

According to Plato, Socrates' famous divine double or daimon would communicate with him only through voice. Thus, the philosopher had to learn how to listen for his daimon, including how to interpret the daimon's silence. Subsequent philosophers in the Platonic tradition, however, widened the sensory range of the daimon. Apuleius (c. 2nd c. CE), for example, argued that demons were beings whose bodies were made of air, and thus that they could not only be heard, but also seen (as disturbances in the air), and even felt by touch (as with a breeze on skin). This paper will explore the aesthetics of demonology in ancient Platonism, and ask, “how might demons (daimones) be sensed?” Given that this philosophical tradition believed that cultivating a relationship with one's daimon was important for the pursuit of philosophy, the stakes of the aesthetics of demonology were quite high. In other words, if one wished to cultivate a relationship with one's daimon, one had to know how to sense it, and, just as importantly, how to deepen and widen one's sense(s) of it. If time permits, the paper may contrast ancient Platonic with early Christian demonology. Early Christians, of course, regarded demons as beings to be avoided, and also to be confronted and overcome. In order to do so, however, they had to know how demons might appear to them: what sort of bodies they had, how to perceive them, and how to resist their approaches.

“Objects of Meditation in Béla Hamvas' Esoteric Practice,” Zsófia Johanna Szőke, University of New Mexico

Béla Hamvas (1897–1968) was the first traditionalist philosopher in Hungary in the twentieth century. He was largely influenced by René Guénon, Julius Evola, Jacob Böhme, Franz Baader, and Leopold Ziegler. Hamvas was also profoundly interested in the philosophy of crisis. In the mid-1930s, he collaborated with Eranos lecturer and famous scholar of Greek mythology Károly Kerényi, translating and editing classical works besides publishing his essays. Hamvas is still primarily considered a traditionalist writer. In my paper, I show that he synthesized a rare esoteric practice based on objects of meditation to attain metaphysical realization. I will argue that his praxis involves a triadic system and as such it is deep-rooted in spiritual, archaic and traditionalist foundations. I approach Hamvas' long-neglected esoteric practice through his works entitled *Tabula Smaragdina*, *Magia Sutra*, and *Anthologia Humana* amongst others.

I reveal that for Hamvas, meditation objects are esoteric accumulation points of a higher reality serving the restoration of man from his cataclysmic position into the numinous potentiality of the modern eschaton. Crucially, these objects have an aesthetic significance. For example, one of his persistent meditation tools was the Venus of Willendorf, this small female statuette, a relic of the Upper Paleolithic age. Further, Dürer's *Melencolia I*, Michelangelo's several Prophets and Sybils, Van Gogh's self-portrait, and most of Velázquez's court jesters. His musical esoteric meditation objects included the fate motif of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* and the Dionysian theme of *Symphony No. 9's* scherzo. Thus, his objects of meditation encompass both the material and the sensorial domain. Even so, they achieve their higher esoteric purpose through active imagination in the realm of the “imaginal” in Henry Corbin's terms.

“What Do Practices Do?,” Ann Taves, University of California at Santa Barbara

A variety of experiences, including appearances of immaterial “others” and out-of-body experiences, can occur both spontaneously and in the context of practices that are intended to produce them. How do spontaneous and “practiced” experiences differ? What happens when we practice?

**“Being Perceptive: Some Thoughts on Secrecy, Skepticism and Aesthetic Ways of Knowing,”
Katharina Wilkens, Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen**

When certain knowledge is called into doubt: Who do people believe? What do they criticize? And what kind of perceptual framework is needed to argue for trust, (public) secrecy or skepticism? Whether human bodies harbor immaterial spirits, whether particular materials convey the words of God, or certain stages of ritual performance employ techniques of concealment, all of these examples rely on practices that grant some categories of sensory perception (touch, warmth, movement, satiation, hearing, etc.) more probative force for the efficacy of divine/spiritual intervention in our lives than others. In this perceptual process, aesthetic criteria for beauty, morality and right behavior become intertwined with categories of knowing. Conversely, all these formations can be subjected to skepticism, either within the same aesthetic framework or from the outside—for example, on the basis of the senses of perception favored in rationalist criticism and science. My praxeological approach is based on empirical data from a variety of (mainly non-European) case studies and is situated in the field of aesthetics of religion.