

One-day Conference

**‘Theosophy and Visual Arts’**

Friday 13 January 2023

National Gallery – Alexandros Soutsos Museum, ‘Onassis Foundation’ Auditorium

**PROGRAM**

**10:30 – 11:00**

Arrival

**Morning Program 11.00-13.00**

**Coordination:** Artemis Zervou, curator National Gallery – Alexandros Soutsos Museum

**11:00 – 11:20**

**Syrago Tsiara**, Art Historian, Director of the National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum

**“Theosophy and Visual Arts: The Mapping of a Dynamic Relationship”**

**11:20 – 11:40**

**Maria Tsantsanoglou**, Acting General Director of MOMus, Director of MOMus – Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection

**“Non-objectivity and Fourth Dimension. Russian avant-garde's eclectic affinity or conflict with Theosophism?”**

**11:40 – 12:00**

**Angeliki Charistou**, Curator of Costakis Collection and Archive at MOMus – Museum of Modern Art- Costakis Collection

**“Alternative worldviews in the art of the Russian avant-garde: the case of Nikolai Fedorov”**

**12:00 – 12:40 Keynote Presentation**

**Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos**, Professor of Art History, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete and Collaborating Faculty Member, Institute for Mediterranean Studies (FORTH)

**“The Seduction of Unreason in Greece during the Early 20th Century (1898-1941) and the Notion of ‘Greekness’”**

**12:40 – 13:00**

Discussion

**13:00 – 14:30**

Coffee Break and Short Tour at the exhibition “Konstantinos Parthenis. Painting an Ideal Greece”

**Afternoon Program 14.30-16.10**

**Coordination:** Elpiniki Meintani, curator National Gallery – Alexandros Soutsos Museum

**14:30 – 14:50 (Online Presentation)**

Sokratis Georgiadis, Professor Emeritus of History of Architecture and Design, Department of Architecture, State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart

**“Hyperspace and modern architecture”**

**14:50 – 15:10**

**Spyros Petritakis**, Art Historian, Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Fine Arts of Athens

**“‘The Radiating Center’: Theosophical Echoes in the Symbolist and Neoplastic Work of Piet Mondrian”**

**15:10 – 15:30**

**Victoria Ferentinou**, Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art, School of Fine Arts, University of Ioannina

**“Visualising the immaterial? Abstraction, theosophy and representation in the work of Hilma af Klint”**

**15:30 – 15:50**

**Katia Papandreopoulou**, Art Historian, Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art, School of Fine Arts, University of Ioannina

**“Hilla Rebay, from the Museum of Non-Objective Painting to the Guggenheim: the role of theosophy in the formation of a collection in the early 20th century”**

**15:50 – 16:10**

Discussion

**ABSTRACTS – SHORT BIOS**

**Syrago Tsiara**, Art Historian, Director of the National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum, **“Theosophy and Visual Arts: The Mapping of a Dynamic Relationship”**.

A mixture of occult, religious and social beliefs, theosophy was one of the most influential philosophical currents to emerge in the late 19th century, with continued prominence to the present day. Founded in New York in 1875 with the stated goal of forming the nucleus of a worldwide fraternity consisting of communities of equal members, without any distinctions based on gender, race, colour, or religion, the Theosophical Society soon spread around the United States and Europe. One of the Theosophical Society’s co-founders, the Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky published in 1888 the two-volume treatise *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, in which she set forth the fundamental operating principles of the universe in order to reveal the deeper meaning of human life. Advocating a mixture of elements from Plato, Buddhism and Hinduism, theosophy attempted to oppose the materialistic dictates of the time and counter the Western Christian-centred culture with an eclectic amalgam of beliefs that bridged East and West, turning the gaze towards the inner world in order to liberate the higher psychic and spiritual human powers. Prompted by the fertilising influence that Konstantinos Parthenis received from theosophy, Syrago Tsiara attempts, in the opening address of the conference, to map the dynamics and diversity of the relationship between theosophy and visual arts in the early 20th century. Leading avant-garde artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, František Kupka, as well as the recently discovered forgotten pioneer, Hilma af Klint, adopted the teachings of theosophy for a longer or shorter period, and this experience had a profound influence on the development of their individual style and theoretical formation.

Syrago Tsiara is an art historian and curator; she is the director of the National Gallery - Alexandros Soutsos Museum. She was born in Larissa in 1968. She studied history and archaeology at the Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (1985–1989) and went on to do postgraduate studies in Social History of Art at the University of Leeds, UK. She completed her doctoral thesis on the role of public sculpture in the formation of national memory and received her doctoral degree from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2000. She worked for 22 years in Thessaloniki – first at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, then at the Centre and the Museum of Contemporary Art – as curator and then as director. During the same period, she taught ‘Public Art,’ ‘Introduction to the Theory and Methodology of Art,’ ‘Modernist Movements and Historical Avant-Gardes’ at the Department of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology, University of Thessaly (2003–2006). She has curated more than fifty exhibitions in

Greece and other countries, including the Venice Biennale, the Thessaloniki Biennale and the Beijing Biennale; she has organised and/or participated in conferences, published academic papers and lectured, mainly on the relationship between art and politics, memory, identity, curatorial practices and the interconnection of art with the public sphere.

**Maria Tsantsanoglou**, Acting General Director of MOMus, Director of MOMus – Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection, **“Non-objectivity and Fourth Dimension. Russian avant-garde's eclectic affinity or conflict with Theosophism?”**

Theosophism was very popular in the intellectual and artistic world of Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its influence in the arts lies on the verge of decadence with innovation. It is caused by the contrasting pair of a dialectical reaction to progress and, at the same time, an intended acceleration of the possibilities of progress. Many artists of the Russian avant-garde (Kul'bin, Kandinsky, Skriabin, Kruchenykh, Matiushin, Malevich) challenge the objective perception of the world by seeking to record the invisible. The conflict with the Old World leads to new aesthetic principles that reject comparative theology but not the need to create a new worldview beyond "common sense".

Maria Tsantsanoglou was born in Thessaloniki. She is Acting General Director of MOMus and Director of MOMus – Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection (since 2018). Art historian specializing in the Russian avant-garde. Member of the Greek State Committee for the reception of the Costakis Collection (1998). Scientific Advisor for cultural issues and press attaché at the Greek Embassy in Moscow (1990-2002). She has been teaching Art and Politics of S-E Europe at the University of Macedonia (since 2002). Director of the State Museum of Contemporary Art (2006-2018). Founding Director of the 1st Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art (2007). Her research field mainly concerns the art of Russia and the post-Soviet space, the synthesis of the arts, the relationship between art and politics. She has curated exhibitions in Greece, Russia, Germany, UK, France, Spain, Italy, China, Turkey, the countries of Caucasus and Central Asia. She is the author of two books and has written numerous editorials, publications, translations and contributions in international conferences.

**Angeliki Charistou**, Curator of Costakis Collection and Archive at MOMus – Museum of Modern Art-Costakis Collection, **“Alternative worldviews in the art of the Russian avant-garde: the case of Nikolai Fedorov”**.

In the early 1900s and in the midst of radical political and social changes in Russia, many artists sought new philosophical proposals as factors of the art of the future. Madam Blavatsky's theosophy had gained significant ground within the Russian intelligentsia and Petr Ouspensky developed a dynamic relation with members of the avant-garde artistic groups, working hand in hand towards the formation of new values regarding the role of the artist as a being of augmented consciousness entrusted with the task of deeper perception of the world and the advancement to a new model of man. The theories of the Fourth Dimension and the multi-dimensional universe opened the way to question the traditional approach to understanding the world as well as the place of art in it. Due to the breach with logic and the bonds with academic art, several artists gained the freedom to approach alternative propositions that allowed them the potential to envision the future free rein, and to some extent portray it. One of these propositions was the treatise of Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829-1903), a sui generis philosopher, a unique persona

that is difficult to adhere to a certain school of thought. However, Fedorov was well known among the artistic and literary circles of his time and draw the attention of Dostoevskii, Tolstoi and Tsiolkovskii, while many of his ideas can be traced directly or indirectly in the works of avant-garde artists. Fedorov's "Philosophy of the Commonn Task" was based on the extravagant premise of immortality and the resurrection of all the generations of our ancestors, aiming to the formation of a universal society of brotherhood and kinship. Although emerging directly from the orthodox tradition, Fedorov's doctrine aspires to the complete scientific and technological advancement of human kind, which will ultimately conquer the universe and live peacefully on Earth and the other planets. Fedorov fully elaborated on every aspect of his proposition with suprisingly effective arguments and provided the artists and intellectuals of his time with a fascinating philosophical position, which was hard to ignore.

Angeliki Charistou was born in Thessaloniki and graduated the Department of History and Archaeology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2002. She continued her studies on Russian Avant-Garde on a scholarship from Michelis Foundation at the University of Saint Adrews. During 2005-2006 she worked at Telloglion Foundation of Arts AUTH and since 2007 she is curator of Costakis Collection and Archive at MOMus – Museum of Modern Art- Costakis Collection (formerly Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art until 2018).

**Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos**, Professor of Art History, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete and Collaborating Faculty Member, Institute for Mediterranean Studies (FORTH), **"The Seduction of Unreason in Greece during the Early 20th Century (1898-1941) and the Notion of 'Greekness'"**.

My aim is to trace the impact of Counter-Rationalism and the dissemination of any form of "organized unreason" in the fields of ideas and aesthetics in Greece during the first decades of the 20th century (1898-1941). In particular, my research focuses on the identification and interpretation of the channels which legalized and facilitated these premises to take hold and become the springboard for the ideological resurgence of "Greekness" and "Return to the roots" notions, which dominated the intellectual and creative outcome during that period.

Evgenios D. Matthiopoulos is Professor of Art History at the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Crete, and Collaborating Faculty Member at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies (FORTH). He received his Bachelor of Arts from the A.S.F.A. (1983) and continued his graduate studies in Art History and Philosophy of Art at the Sorbonne, Paris I – Panthéon (1984-1987). In 1996, he completed his Ph.D. in Art History at the Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete. From 1995 to 2001, he worked as scientific consultant and chief editor for the Dictionary of Greek Artists, vol. I-IV Melissa Publishers, Athens (1997-2001). His research interests focus in art history issues of the 19th and 20th century; more specifically, in exploring the role played by the Greek State and other administrative bodies in the arts, as well as the various mechanisms formed for the wider assimilation of Modernist Art in Greece, as they are recorded in the fields of ideology, aesthetic perceptions, art theory and art criticism. He is the author of 8 published books, editor or co-editor of 7 volumes and he has contributed more than 50 essays and articles. He has served as President of the Association of Greek Art Historians (2016-2019).

Sokratis Georgiadis, Professor Emeritus of History of Architecture and Design, Department of Architecture, State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart, **“Hyperspace and modern architecture”**.

The notion of space, so self-evidently considered to be the core principle of architecture of all times, is in fact relatively recent. Theories of space referring to architecture were developed by the science of art (Kunstwissenschaft) only from the mid-19th century onwards, while in the architectural studios the idea of space reached its peak not earlier than the first decades of the 20th century. But the space of Kunstwissenschaft and that of art itself were quite distinct concepts. While the former took conventional three-dimensional space as its point of departure, artistic and architectural imagination were fuelled by the new geometries developed by mathematical science since the beginning of the 19th century, especially non-Euclidean and four- or multidimensional geometries. Remarkably, though, architecture did not borrow any such knowledge directly from mathematics. The new geometries of so-called 'hyperspace' reached architecture through an interpretative reading which presented them as the ultimate proof for the existence of another, extra-empirical reality which was thought superior to the conventional one. This set of ideas drew on a variety of beliefs and tendencies such as esotericism, mysticism, occultism, magic, spiritualism. It was exactly in this context that Theosophy played an important role in giving this multifaceted amalgam a coherent ideological profile. The fascination with the new geometries can be attributed to both the difficulty of their graphic representation, which constituted a major challenge for artists and architects alike and their ability to offer a narrative which endowed plastic artistic experiments with meaning, thus making them part of a new worldview. In its aesthetic application, 'hyperspace' proved particularly fruitful. It could be argued that it gave modern architecture its distinctive formal and spatial characteristics that established it as a special entity in the history of architecture. It seems quite strange, paradoxical perhaps, that the architecture that emerged was seen by later historiography as the quintessence of rationalism.

Sokratis Georgiadis studied architecture at the Technical University of Berlin and received his PhD from the University of Stuttgart. He taught at universities in Europe and lectured extensively in Europe and North America. From 1994 until his retirement in 2018 he was Professor of History of Architecture and Design at the Department of Architecture of the State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart. His research work focuses on issues of history and theory of 19th and 20th century architecture.

**Spyros Petritakis**, Art Historian PhD, Adjunct Lecturer at the School of Fine Arts of Athens, **“The Radiating Center’: Theosophical Echoes in the Symbolist and Neoplastic Work of Piet Mondrian”**

Scholarship has unanimously accepted that Piet Mondrian, around 1900, went through a religious crisis, renounced Calvinism, which his family followed devoutly, and immersed himself in the study of texts that are today described with the blanket term 'esotericism'. Among these, the theosophical writings of Helena Blavatsky were of pivotal importance to Mondrian's ideological and worldview formation. However, although Mondrian scholars have sufficiently traced the theosophical web of ideas that characterizes his early symbolist painting, there is still a discrepancy surrounding the theoretical

presuppositions of his philosophical and aesthetic explorations during the artist's neoplastic period in relation to his more or less systematic engagement with the theosophical movement. This confusion is also exacerbated by the fact that the theosophists rejected the artist's theoretical and artistic work as complex or obscure, a judgment that partly reveals the limits of their own barrier of representational expectations for art. The aim of this article is to delineate the scope of Mondrian's systematic engagement with theosophical beliefs during the artist's symbolist and neoplastic period, taking into account both his theoretical writings and his artistic output.

Spyros Petritakis is teaching Art History and Theory at the Athens School of Fine Arts. He completed his PhD thesis at the University of Crete on "Colour-Music Theories Among Symbolist and Theosophical Artists and Intellectuals, 1880-1914". His research interests and publications focus on issues of intersections between the visual arts, science and music, as well as on the affinities between the field of arts and heterodox religious movements such as theosophy and anthroposophy, with particular emphasis on the symbolist movement in the late 19th century. Most recently, as a postdoctoral researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin, he examined Eva Palmer's role in the diffusion of the Delphic Idea and the formation of the Ashram network in New York.

**Victoria Ferentinou**, Assistant Professor, Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art, School of Fine Arts, University of Ioannina, "**Visualising the immaterial? Abstraction, theosophy and representation in the work of Hilma af Klint**".

Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) has become a legend in the last decade since she is configured as one of the pioneers of twentieth-century abstraction. Af Klint studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm (1882-87) but drawing inspiration from alternative currents, such as spiritualism, theosophy and anthroposophy, she broke free from her academic education, and experimented with variants of organic and geometric abstraction. According to her notebooks, initially af Klint followed the spirits' dictates attempting to give perceptive form to the audiovisual messages she received from the beyond. Later, her objective was to visualise her perception of a higher dimension of reality allied in theosophical discourse with the astral plane. In these works, motifs featuring in contemporary theosophical sources are reproduced idiosyncratically giving form to the artist's visions, such as the series *The Paintings for the Temple* (1905-1908, 1912-1915). Af Klint, like other artists and intellectuals of her era, became a member of the Theosophical Society in Stockholm, was acquainted with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's treatises, and attended lectures delivered by Annie Besant and Rudolph Steiner. Her painting should not however be interpreted as an illustration of theosophical precepts but as a loose translation of theories premised upon an assemblage of occultist and scientific ideas with which she familiarised herself through her personal studies and researches. This paper aims at presenting af Klint's oeuvre for the first time in front of a Greek audience and sketch out the appropriation of theosophical ideas in the shaping of a visual language that weaves together abstraction and stylised figurative themes. In particular, it will centre on af Klint's deployment of the theosophical belief in cosmic polarity, that is perceived as a couple of gendered opposites, and their potential reconciliation in an androgynous, monistic in inspiration, utopia in the context of evolution and the respiritualisation of the world. Her images would be explored in the light of

contemporaneous discourses on modern art's self-referentiality and non-figuration, and the modes of artistic representation put forward by theosophy.

Victoria Ferentinou is Assistant Professor at the University of Ioannina where she teaches art theory and history of art. She was the recipient of a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain (2003-2007) and a CHS-CCS research fellowship from the University of Harvard (2019-2020). Ferentinou is a co-editor of the books *Surrealism, Occultism, and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (2018) and *The Dance of Moon and Sun: Ithell Colquhoun, British Women and Surrealism* (forthcoming 2023). She is the organiser of the international symposium *Visual Ecotopias: History, Theory, Criticism* (1st Biennale of Western Balkans, 2018) and an author of numerous publications on Surrealism, feminist art and theory, alternative epistemologies and modern art, and ecoaesthetics and the visual arts.

**Katia Papandreopoulou**, Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art, School of Fine Arts, University of Ioannina, **“Hilla Rebay, from the Museum of Non-Objective Painting to the Guggenheim: the role of theosophy in the formation of a collection in the early 20th century”**.

Hilla Rebay (Baroness Hilla Rebay von Ehrenwiesen, 1890-1967), artist, artistic consultant, and curator, although overlooked, is a central figure in the circulation and spread of abstract art in America during the first half of the 20th century. Initiated into theosophy during her years of education and residence in Europe, she prematurely formed a wide network of artists and merchants of the European avant-garde that she will vigorously support later in New York, during the process of the formation of the collection of Solomon Guggenheim. In the paper we will explore the influence of theosophy on the shaping of Rebay's collecting, exhibiting and curatorial practices; firstly, with regard to the Museum of Non-Objective Painting that opened in New York in 1939, and then with the construction and configuration of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, of which she was proclaimed first official director.

Katia Papandreopoulou holds a PhD in Art History from Paris 1 - Panthéon, Sorbonne. Her thesis entitled "Camille Maclair (1872-1945) critique et historien de l'art : une leçon de nationalisme pictural", was awarded the Prix du Musée d'Orsay (2017). She has worked as an Assistant Curator and as an Exhibition Consultant in Paris at the Grand Palais and at the Service des musées de France. She specializes in 19th-20th century European art, while her research interests are French art criticism and historiography, nationalisms and art history, as well as the history of art exhibitions. Currently she is an Adjunct Lecturer at the Department of Fine Arts and Sciences of Art, School of Fine Arts, University of Ioannina.