

Painting as Communication with the Deceased and Other Non-Human Beings

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The article examines painting as a practice of relating to the dead and other non-human beings in contemporary and historical contexts. Drawing on vernacular religion, it approaches these relationships not as fixed beliefs system but as experiences emerging through bodily perception, learning, and artistic practice. The article focuses on ethnographic research with a contemporary Slovenian painter, Ana, whose painting develops through sensitivity to presence rather than trance or mediumistic possession. Her practice is compared with the spiritualist painting of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, where artistic creation relied on passive mediumship and the subordination of the artist's body to spiritual agencies. The comparison reveals a shift from hierarchical models of revelation toward relational forms of creation, in which painting functions both as a liminal object and relational process through which connections between the living and the dead acquire temporary stability.

KEYWORDS: vernacular religion, spiritualism, mediumship, embodiment, perception, painting

Članek obravnava slikanje kot prakso vzpostavljanja odnosov z mrtvimi in drugimi nečloveškimi bitji v sodobnem in zgodovinskem kontekstu. Izhaja iz perspektive vernakularne religije, ki teh odnosov ne razume kot del zaprtih verovanjskih sistemov, temveč kot izkustva, ki nastajajo skozi telesno zaznavo, učenje in umetniško prakso. Članek temelji na etnografski raziskavi sodobne slovenske slikarke Ane, katere slikanje se razvija skozi občutek za prisotnost mrtvih in ne skozi stanje transa ali izgubo telesne avtonomije zaradi vpliva duhovnih sil. Njena praksa je primerjana s spiritualističnim slikarstvom Georgiane Houghton in Hilme af Klint, pri katerih je umetniško ustvarjanje temeljilo na pasivnem medijstvu in podreditvi umetničinega telesa duhovnim silam. Primerjava pokaže premik od hierarhičnih modelov razodetja k relacijskim oblikam ustvarjanja, pri katerih slika deluje hkrati kot liminalni objekt, slikanje pa kot relacijski proces, skozi katerega se med živimi in mrtvimi vzpostavljajo začasno stabilne povezave.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: vernakularna religija, spiritualizem, medijstvo, utelešanje, percepcija, slikanje

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, discussions about religion, belief and related experiences have moved away from questions of doctrine and institutional forms. They have focused on analysing practices as people actually live, perform and interpret them in their everyday lives.

In this context, the concept of vernacular religion has emerged, which does not refer to a specific type of religion, but rather to an analytical approach to understanding diverse religious practices, their processual nature and often also their internal contradictions (Primiano, 1995; Bowman, Valk, 2012: 1–8). Vernacular religion reminds us that beliefs, practices and narratives are always embedded in specific life circumstances, local histories and personal contexts, and that they cannot be reduced to coherent, institutionalised and unambiguous systems of rules or beliefs.

As Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk point out, the vernacular perspective rejects normative divisions between “official” and “unofficial”, rational and irrational, and instead focuses on the ways in which people develop meanings, establish relationships and creatively co-shape religious imaginaries in practice (Bowman, Valk, 2012: 3–10). This approach highlights one of the key characteristics of vernacular religious practices, namely that, in contrast to institutionalised and “prescribed” interpretations of religious truths, they are often ambiguous, incoherent and shift between different principles and interpretations. This is an integral part of religious life, which recognises the central role of bodily practices in shaping religious experience, which is also of key importance for this article.

In this context, relationships with the deceased, ancestors and other non-human beings become understandable as part of everyday religious practices, rather than as anomalies or residual elements of past religious systems. The vernacular perspective draws attention to the fact that the meanings of such relationships are not given in advance, but are established through concrete situations and actions, often in connection with (family) memories, local moral economies, and personal experiences, rather than through abstract theological debates (Bowman, Valk, 2012: 12–15; Primiano, 2012: 385–389).

For the purposes of this article, this point is crucial, as it allows relationships with the deceased to be approached not as fixed beliefs that precede practice, but as relational experiences that emerge through specific embodied activities. This perspective makes it possible to analyse painting not as an illustration of pre-existing religious ideas or images, but as a practice through which relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings¹ are actively formed, negotiated and made meaningful in concrete situations.

This understanding also enables a rethinking of spiritualism that is crucial for the analytical framework of this article. Historical research has shown that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualism did not operate as a unified religious system with a

¹ The “deceased and (other) non-human beings” discussed in this article can also be understood as “invisible beings” in the sense proposed by Thomas G. Plante and others. The term has been analytically developed to refer to relational spiritual actors rather than to abstract systems of belief. In this perspective, invisibility does not imply the absence of agency or perception, but rather the absence of material physicality, while presence is confirmed through experience, relationships and observable effects on individuals and social situations (Plante et al., 2023).

At the same time, the concept of non-human beings is not without problems. It can be misleading, as it does not clearly distinguish between embodied beings, such as animals, and immaterial beings, such as ghosts or the dead. Nevertheless, I retain the term (other) non-human beings in a deliberately narrow and limited sense, referring exclusively to immaterial or non-human beings encountered in the religious and spiritual practices discussed in this article. In this sense, the term does not denote a homogeneous or fixed category, but serves as an analytical marker for beings that do not belong to the human category, while at the same time clearly distinguishing themselves from biologically embodied life and abstract conceptual entities.

stable doctrine, but as a heterogeneous and internally contested field of practices situated at the intersection of popular religion, experimental science and emerging theories of perception. In the British context, Alex Owen demonstrates that spiritualist and occult practices formed part of a broader cultural effort to renegotiate “enchantment” under modern conditions, in which invisible worlds were approached through concrete techniques, disciplined experimentation and embodied practices rather than through fixed theological propositions (Owen, 2004: 4–8, 17–23).

This historiographical insight is important for the present article because it allows spiritualist painting to be approached historically not as the visual expression of a coherent belief system, but as one of the practices through which relationships with the deceased were actively constituted and stabilised. Brower’s analysis of psychical research in France further shows that practices such as mediumship, automatic writing and drawing functioned as techniques operating in a space of uncertainty, where the meaning of spiritual phenomena was continuously negotiated between competing scientific, religious and experiential interpretations (Brower, 2010: 16–18). Seen in this way, painting can be analysed as a historically specific practice of communication with the dead, in which meaning did not precede practice but emerged through embodied engagement and situational interpretation.

Viewed through the prism of vernacular religion, spiritualism can therefore be understood as a field in which relationships between the living and the dead are constituted through everyday practices, more or less established technologies of communication, and personal narratives (Primiano, 1995: 44–46; Bowman, Valk, 2012: 1–8). This conceptual move provides the analytical foundation for the article as a whole: it allows for a comparative examination of historical and contemporary painting practices without presupposing an identical belief system, and instead focuses on how relationships with the dead are produced, experienced and stabilised through specific practices of painting.

The starting point for the research is ethnographic work, which forms one of the central pillars of the article, and is based on fieldwork with the contemporary Slovenian painter Ana.² Her painting takes place in constant dialogue with the deceased or other non-human beings. These are not always understood as part of existing and fixed imaginaries, but their meaning is revealed in their experience. In the cases discussed, it is a presence that manifests itself through bodily perception, and is later translated into colour, composition, etc.

The historical examples of painters Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint discussed in the article provide a comparative insight into different configurations of these relationships. In their practices, relationships with non-human beings were part of relatively clearly articulated religious frameworks that defined hierarchies between the living and the dead and the role of the artist as a medium (Oberter, 2006).

The central research question of the article is therefore: how, in specific historical and contemporary circumstances, are relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings established and understood through everyday religious practices,

² The name is fictitious.

not as predetermined beliefs, but as experiences that are shaped through specific practices of painting? In this context, the question also arises as to how painting functions as one of the places where relationships between the artists in question, the deceased and other non-human beings are perceived, interpreted and acquire social relevance.

The article is based on a combination of ethnographic and historical-comparative research. The empirical section is based on in-depth conversations with the contemporary Slovenian painter Ana, whose painting process I observed on several occasions in the summer of 2025. Fieldwork was conducted over several weeks and included repeated visits to Ana at her home, spontaneous encounters within shared social networks, occasional telephone conversations, and one meeting in Ljubljana. Some conversations were audio-recorded with her consent, while a substantial part of the material derives from detailed fieldnotes written after the encounters.

The historical part of the article is based on an analysis of primary sources and existing literature on spiritualism, with an emphasis on the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint. The methodological approach allows for a comparison of different configurations of the relationship between artwork, body and non-human actors in contemporary and historical contexts.

THE PAINTER ANA AND THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Ana is a fifty-year-old academically trained painter who also makes her living from painting. She lives in a family house with some land in a rural area of southern Slovenia. In her work, she creates in dialogue with the deceased and other non-human beings. I first met her a few years ago at one of my lectures and we later became somewhat better acquainted. She confided in me about her way of painting and was also willing to participate in the research.

Ana primarily grew up in a broader Roman Catholic social environment, although her family – while embedded in it – did not practise Roman Catholicism and its associated rituals, except on rare occasions. Through her own experiences, independent study, the use of literature and, above all, meditative practices, she gradually developed her own distinctive belief system. The formation of this belief system, which also includes elements of Catholicism, was a gradual process of transformation. As she recalls, she felt the presence of different beings even as a child, but at the time she was unable to articulate this clearly, so several years of research and learning followed. She described the transition from a child's understanding of the "liveliness" of nature to her high-school art experiments as follows:

As a child, I liked to be alone. I used to create things out of clay by the stream. For me, it was so alive back then. The water was alive. The trees were alive. When I started high school, I immersed myself in this world. Especially through art history and Slovenian language classes. All the feelings that had pulsed within me as a child came back to life. Specifically,

it was the artist Michelangelo Buonarroti who transformed me. I saw one of his works. One drawing. In it, there was a door that made me understand that the world is multidimensional. (TP 2022025)

Today, her belief system differs in many ways from Roman Catholic dogma and takes the form of a vernacular religious practice based on personal experiences of communication with the deceased and non-human beings.

Nature plays a key role in defining her spiritual world.

Nature is a land inhabited by various forms of life. Some are embodied, like trees, air ... Others are less embodied. These are what contemporary cultures call invisible. They are less densely embodied. (TP 25062025)

Her painting tools and aids, all derived from nature, play an important role in both her painting process and the placement of her work within the natural world: *“The brush, for example, is made of wood. Yes, these are trees. Pigments are the mineral world /.../ The canvas is plants”* (TP 26062025). The tools are thus not merely instruments; they carry a deeper spiritual significance embedded in the cosmic order, facilitating her connection with different levels of the cosmos and to the creative process itself.

For Ana, *nature* is an intertwining of various material and immaterial parts of the cosmos that complement each other. *“For me, this [the immaterial world, note by T. S.] is not another world; for me, it is part of this [material, note by T. S.] world”* (TP 25062025). In her opinion, matter is created through the cooperation of spiritual beings. *“Matter has different dimensions, and different beings cooperate in each dimension. For example, before atoms and their condensation occur, these beings cooperate”* (TP 25062025). In this context, it is easier to understand what she has often pointed out in conversation: for her, the deceased and spiritual beings do not represent a homogeneous group. They include humans, plants and animals – essentially any embodied beings – while also retaining a spiritual dimension. In addition, she includes other non-human and immaterial beings in her representations, such as nature spirits and other non-human beings whose identity is often not clearly specified. She depicts them on equal visual footing with human figures. Regardless of their identity and embodiment, they can also have human-like characteristics. A careful reading of the fieldwork material reveals how Ana mentions that these beings can be troublesome when it comes to communication and painting: *“Even if they come unhappy or grumpy ... I still invite them.”* They carry trauma: *“I don’t paint traumatised ones.”* Similarly: *“They are not ideal beings. They have their own history. Some are very wounded.”* They can be confused: *“Some don’t know what to do with themselves”* (TP 26062025). It is also true that non-human beings can bring various symbolic gifts and the like.

This understanding of nature, (im)materiality, visible and invisible beings shows that Ana’s spiritual world is not based on a distinction between human and non-human, material and immaterial, but on an ontological continuum in which different forms of existence interact and co-create the cosmos. It is precisely the emphasis on shared inner qualities,

relationships and cooperation between beings that opens up the possibility of analytically placing Ana's ideas within the framework of animistic understandings of the world. When asked how she herself sees her belief system, Ana replied that it is closest to animism. Her position thus approximates the animistic ideas defined by Philippe Descola in his work *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2015). In animism, humans and non-humans originate from a similar *interiority*, but have different physicalities or exteriors. In Ana's case, this is the so-called "*drop of life*" or "*essence of life*", which "*comes from the primordial sea of life*" and is supposed to be common to all materially embodied and spiritual beings.

By explaining this, we can come closer to the concept of her beliefs through the relational definition of animism proposed by Graham Harvey. He understands animism not as a belief in specific entities, but as a way of being in the world in which "persons" are those with whom relationships are established. This does not refer only to humans, but also to non-human (spiritual) persons (Harvey, 2010). In this context, selfhood is not a given characteristic, but is established through the possibility of relationship, response and communication between humans and spiritual beings.

THE BEGINNING, LEARNING ABOUT FEELINGS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

The beginnings of Ana's painting practice are not framed as a revelation or a sudden breakthrough, but as the gradual emergence of sensory perception that initially had no clear interpretation. As she herself points out, the primary trigger for her to start painting was a physically perceived feeling of presence, which was not yet connected to specific images of the deceased or other beings: "*the trigger for starting to paint is a strong feeling of presence*" (TP 25062025). At first, this presence was not understood as communication with the dead, but as a general state of openness and intense perception that was established through working with the body, breathing and "*connecting with nature*". Ana therefore points out that before painting she does not use meditation in the classical sense, but tries to attune her body or connect it with the environment: "*No, I don't meditate. I try to breathe with the earth. /.../ I try to transfer it into myself, to transfer its harmony into myself. And then my vibration changes.*"

Ana emphasises that this perception does not come automatically, but that she had to learn it gradually. This learning took place primarily as a recognition of different "worlds" or levels of presence. When I ask her how she summons the dead or their "worlds", she replies that it is not a technique of calling in the narrow sense of the word, but a learning process through which one comes to recognise their presence:

When I encountered these beings thirty or forty years ago, I learned to recognise their vibration. And now I don't use any particular technique, now I just remember the vibration of this world [of the dead, note by T. S.].
(TP 30042025)

This indicates that the spiritual world is constantly present, it just needs to be perceived and connected with. Anne Kalvig notes that contemporary spiritualist practices often frame relationships with the dead in terms of ongoing presence and relational engagement rather than discrete ritual acts of summoning (Kalgig, 2016).

For Ana, learning to perceive has developed as an open and unfinished process. At its core is the gradual formation of an internal reference point that harmonises or “vibrates” with different worlds. In this sense, learning also means differentiating sensations: only when a certain vibration is recognised can one understand and judge whether its source belongs to the inner flow of perceptions or to the presence of someone or something outside. Ana explicitly emphasises that learning perception does not mean a departure from reason or a loss of reflection, but rather their simultaneous functioning: *“This does not mean that my logic dies, it all works the same way. It helps me understand sensation”* (TP 30042025). The interpretation of sensations thus takes place simultaneously on the perceptual and rational levels.

This distinction between “mine” and “not-mine” is also related to Ana’s understanding of the different “layers” of space. She explains that she is very concerned with the *“identity of different layers of space”* and that she can therefore *“knock on the doors of different temples”*, where “temple” means *“one level of existence, for example the space of ancestors or the space of water beings ...”* (TP 30042025). Distinguishing between sensations therefore also means distinguishing between contexts: it is not enough to feel something, but one must orient oneself in relation to the level or “space” from which the sensation originates. It is only through this orientation that her sensations acquire meaning. Learning perception thus means learning to exist on the porous border between the inner and outer worlds, which Susan Greenwood describes as the experience of “being in two worlds at once” (Greenwood, 2000: 14).

It is important that Ana also describes this process as a former inability to recognise perceptions, which changed over time. When talking about her experience with the presence of her ancestor (her “aunt”), she explicitly states that at that time she did not yet possess the language and orientation for what was happening to her: *“At that time, I didn’t ... I didn’t know”* and: *“At that time, I was not very aware of this space of ancestors ... I didn’t know that it was ... a space, that it was full of them”* (TP 26062025). According to Susan Greenwood, who studied learning in the context of magic, such perception is not innate, but the result of long-term learning and training of attention: *“The essence of a magical training is to open up the magician’s awareness to these forces”* (Greenwood, 2000: 23).

The fieldwork data shows that Ana does not understand her experiences in terms of control or the clear identification of beings, but as a form of communication involving mutual invitations to meet. It is also important that she herself often emphasises that, in the process of painting, it is not always clear who exactly is entering into the relationship: *“Sometimes I don’t even know who is coming. I just feel that someone is there”* (TP 30042025). Such indeterminacy is not understood as a problem, but as an integral part of the relationship. Harvey points out that animistic relationships are often characterised precisely by an ambiguity of identity and the gradual revelation of the self through interaction, not through prior categorisation (Harvey, 2010: 17–19).

FROM PERCEPTION TO PAINTING LANGUAGE

Understanding Ana's creative process does not stem from a predetermined institutional or otherwise prescribed system of beliefs, but from practices that are formed through everyday behaviour and relationships. As Primiano emphasises, religion is "religion as it is lived", that is, a set of practices, meanings and relationships that people actually live and establish in their lives (Primiano, 1995: 44–46; also Kalvig, 2016: 18–22). In this context, painting does not function as an illustration of existing ideas, but as a process in which meaning is gradually formed.

Ana describes this process very directly: "*First comes the sensation. Then I have to translate it into logical language*" (TP 26062025). In this sequence, perception does not appear as an already formed message, but as a bodily sensation that requires further interpretation. Tehri Utriainen comes to a similar conclusion in his study of communication with angels, where he shows how individuals learn to understand their own thoughts or somatic perceptions as "the message or touch of an angel" (Utriainen, 2014: 248). The key point is that in both cases, perception precedes interpretation. Only through a further process is this bodily sensation gradually translated into a pictorial composition, colour and figuration, with the author actively shaping the final image through her collaboration.

The painting process begins with bodily attention. D'Angelo defines such attention as "creative attention" precisely because it does not stem from existing meanings, but rather establishes them in the very act of perception (D'Angelo, 2018: 100–102, 112–116). According to D'Angelo, in perception before attention, we do not have already formed objects or units of meaning, but rather an undifferentiated, still open field of perception. It is only attention that makes something in this field stand out as relevant, meaningful, worthy of response. He therefore writes that attention is creative because it "constitutes the meaning of our experience" (D'Angelo, 2018: 100–103). Such attention does not function as a spotlight directed at existing objects that have meaning, but as a process that first establishes a field within which perceptible units can emerge and, through this, construct units of meaning. In other words, attention merely establishes the condition for meaning to be created (*ibid.*).

In this sense, the focus of analysis shifts from the question of *what* is perceived to the question of *how* perception acts through the body and thus *how* meaning is created. D'Angelo emphasises that it is precisely this pre-reflective, bodily attention that opens up the horizon of expectation, thus enabling perception to gradually articulate itself into more stable forms of meaning (D'Angelo, 2018: 104–105). If we connect the insights from the previous chapters, we see that Ana first had to learn to focus her attention on bodily sensations. This enabled her to transfer this attentiveness into the subsequent painting process. Painting thus functions as a space in which perception is not only expressed, but also constituted as a meaningful whole through creative attention. Only by paying attention to her bodily sensations does she create the conditions in which their meaning can take shape and be transferred onto the canvas. To use Ana's own words:

First, I am always in a kind of sensation ... as if [she pauses to reflect, note T. S.] ... very gentle waves ... a kind of vibration that comes [she pauses to reflect, note T. S.] ... and becomes denser and denser ... first an image, then a sound ... and then I can translate it into logical language. (TP 26062025)

According to Ana, this language of “logic” is the language of the painter’s world that we humans understand – the language of artistic rules of painting, composition, colours, etc.

This role of the body is consistent with research into the sensory and material dimensions of religion, which emphasises that relationships with invisible actors are often realised through sensory experience and material practices. Birgit Meyer points out that this is not an automatic transfer from inner feeling to aesthetic form, but a process that can only stabilise in a concrete social situation (Meyer, 2006: 23–44). For Ana, too, meaning does not arise at the moment of perception, but gradually takes shape in the creative process itself, in which bodily sensation is given visual and figural articulation. D’Angelo speaks of this in terms of the subject’s placement in the environment (D’Angelo, 2018: 113–115), which coincides with the social component of the creative process also highlighted by Birgit Meyer.

In the ethnographic material, this is also evident in Ana’s emphasis on bodily perception, which she understands as distinctly individual, while at the same time emphasising that in the process of painting she gives this perception a form that can be very different and socially conditioned. She points out that anyone could paint a different image of these beings, but she consciously decides to depict the deceased and other non-human beings in ways that are closer to human figures, as this enables easier or more intense interaction between people and non-people (TP 26062025). In this context, perception is not understood as an internal, private experience, but as a process in which meaning is formed through creative attention and only stabilises as a form of communication in the social space. In this sense, Ana’s painting process can be understood as a concrete example of the kind of creative attention which, according to D’Angelo, not only perceives the world but also co-creates its meaning in the very act of perception (D’Angelo, 2018: 114–115).

PAINTING AS A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEAD

In conversations, Ana often emphasises that she does not see herself as a mediator who controls or directs communication, but rather as someone who responds in her own way to a perceived presence. This is clearly evident in her formulation:

They somehow made themselves known and let me know they were there. Then I invite them. Come and tell me. Aha, that’s actually very human. It’s like someone saying to you, “I’d like to come and visit”. And you say, “Come, let’s talk”. (TP 26062025)

In Ana's practice, relational egalitarianism occurs: the artist and the non-human being collaborate in the process of creating a work of art. This is an ontologically horizontal relationship that corresponds to the paradigm of ontological pluralism as proposed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019: 298), where different entities co-create the world from their own perspectives, without any necessary hierarchy. It is essential that in such a relationship Ana does not lose her autonomy over her body or the creative process. The perceived presence does not take over her body, but enters her world as a relational interlocutor to whom the author consciously responds and whom she equally creates. She retains control over her body, which functions as an active site of perception, differentiation and translation, not as a passive channel. When asked whether spiritual beings take control of the process or her body during the painting process, she replied:

No! I want to establish a dialogue. I want to understand them. We are equal in terms of existence. They may be big and I may feel small, but we are in dialogue. I am constantly learning to establish dialogue. (TP 2022025)

It is also important that Ana does not enter into relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings merely as a response to their presence, but can also consciously initiate contact herself. In conversations, she emphasises that she does not wait for a spontaneous perception of presence, but decides to enter into a relationship herself: *"I am not made to wait for the muses.³ I have decided not to wait for them because they are always here"* (TP 30042025). This active attitude, in which Ana herself calls upon the beings, is described in the literature on contemporary spiritualism as characteristic of practices in which individuals themselves create the conditions for communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Importantly, however, they do not take control of the process. This distinguishes them from the classical spiritualist models of mediumship in the 19th century, in which communication took place through clearly defined roles and techniques. In these, the medium's body was completely subordinate to spiritual beings. They used it as a passive tool for translating their messages (Gutierrez, 2014: 197–206; Hammer, 2014b: 372–381). Instead, contemporary spiritual practices often emphasise openness in relationships, which is not based on the classical human subordination to a spiritual being or god. Classical views of religion emphasise the importance of worshipping deities, recognising the power of such beings, and seeking their help (Harvey, 2017: 361). Contemporary practices often depart from this.

In this context, painting functions as a way of temporarily placing this indeterminate perception into the process of creating a material artefact – a painting. It is important that the painting is not understood as a representation of a specific being or message, but as a space in which the painting takes shape and in which the relationship can be maintained. This understanding of creative practice is consistent with scholarly analyses of occult practice, which show that material artefacts function as sites of manifestation,

³ In this context, muses are conceived as beings that bring inspiration, but also, in a broader sense, as spiritual beings that enter into a process of communication, the product of which is a painting.

mediation, or encounter rather than as symbolic representations in the classical aesthetic sense (Bogdan, 2014a: 298–299; 2014b: 325–327; also Brower, 2010: 112–148). These studies emphasise that the meaning of a work of art is not predetermined, but is established through use, practice and the relationship in which the work is embedded.

From the perspective of material culture, painting can also be understood as a process in which a material artefact not only reflects a relationship, but actively co-creates it. Miller and Parrot point out that objects are not passive carriers of meaning, but participate in shaping the social and symbolic relationships in which they are created (Miller, Parrot, 2009; see also Knoefl, 2007). In this sense, painting in Ana's practice does not represent the conclusion of the creative process, but rather a kind of stabilisation of the relationship, as the material form allows this relationship – established through the practice of painting – to be further preserved. Ana emphasises that this is in fact the purpose of the painting: through the subsequent viewing of the work, the relationship between humans and spiritual beings can be reactivated. Her paintings also have a reciprocal effect on those who view them. As she herself says: “... *we do not create the painting ourselves, but the painting also influences us ...*” (TP 26062025). The painting is thus not merely the result of a process, but also a factor that can transform the viewer's perception, inner state and relationship to the world.

An analysis of contemporary painting practice thus raises the question of how the relationships between artwork, inspiration and the deceased were understood and organised in other historical contexts. In order to shed light on this relationship in a comparative manner, the following chapter focuses on the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, in which communication with the beyond was embedded in different religious, social and epistemological frameworks.

PAINTING AS A HISTORICAL PRACTICE OF RELATING TO THE INVISIBLE: SPIRITUALISM, SPIRITISM AND ESOTERIC CONTEXTS

In the 19th century, spiritualism and broader spiritualist practices developed in Europe and around the world as a heterogeneous and dynamic field of religious practices, representations, experiences and discourses that cannot be understood as a coherent religious system with a unified doctrine. Historical studies emphasise that ideas about communication with the deceased, the role of mediums and the nature of the spiritual world developed in constant dialogue with scientific theories, Protestant and other religious traditions, and everyday ideas about the body, perception and nature (Owen, 2004: 1–22; Gutierrez, 2014: 198). Spiritualism thus functioned as an open field of experimentation in which religious, scientific and experiential languages overlapped and transformed each other.

Mediumship played a central role in these practices. Séances, automatic writing, drawing, playing instruments and other techniques of expression were understood not only as ways of communicating with the beyond, but also as forms of access to different levels of knowledge. The medium was often conceived as a body-instrument through which spiritual beings operated, whereby the individual authority of the medium was

consciously relativised. In this mode of communication, humans were subordinate to non-human actors (Gutierrez, 2014: 200).

Spiritualist practices did not exist in isolation, but were intertwined with other occult and esoteric currents. Theosophy also played an important role, offering more systematic cosmologies, hierarchies of spiritual beings, and concepts of spiritual development. Olav Hammer emphasises that theosophy does not represent a unified belief system, but rather a hybrid field of ideas that combines elements of Western esoteric tradition, Eastern religions, evolutionary theories, and contemporary scientific language, with these elements often being selectively and situationally transferred in practice (Hammer, 2014a: 250–272).

Mesmerism was also a precursor to spiritualism. Adam Crabtree shows that mesmerism was not merely a proto-scientific theory of animal magnetism, but above all a practical framework for exploring altered states of consciousness, bodily sensibility, and relational forms of action. It was precisely mesmeric practices that contributed to the understanding of trance as a state in which perception changes, which had a long-term influence on the spiritualist techniques of mediumship, automatic writing, painting and the like (Crabtree, 2015: 188–205). Katy Gutierrez and Angela Voss also write about changes in the perceptual regime in the context of Western esotericism, emphasising that in these practices trance does not mean a departure from perception, but rather its redirection. It is a shift in the way of perceiving the world, where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial are temporarily rearranged, and perception becomes open to different forms of presence and action of forces (Gutierrez, 2014: 200–202; Voss, 2014: 582–583). Such changes in the perceptual regime are not understood as exceptional, but as culturally and practically grounded techniques that can be developed through repetition and discipline.

Mediumistic séances and trances played a key role in the development of spiritualism. With their help, spiritualism also established itself distinctly in the visual domain. In addition to painting, new techniques of photography – and later film – made it possible to perceive the dead, who were captured in photographs or on film, whereas previously they could not be perceived by the human eye alone. In this respect, photographs did not function merely as representations, but as material traces or evidence of the presence of non-human beings (Bauduin, 2014: 433–434). A similar development took place in the practice of painting. With the help of mediumistic séances and automatic painting, the messages of the dead and other non-human beings began to be transferred directly into paintings. In this context, artistic practices were inextricably linked to religious activities and perceptual techniques. Mediumistic séances and automatic painting were also specifically based on gender. Although this article does not focus on the question of the significance of gender in past or contemporary practices, it is important to at least partially highlight it. Gender does not appear as a separate topic in the material and historical discussions, but rather as a recurring feature of practices and their practitioners. According to the logic of the time, women were believed to possess qualities that enabled them to communicate with the deceased. They were thought to be more unstable, to carry a negative electrical charge, to have less stable nerves, and so on. As Gutierrez points out,

this role of women was made possible by specific ideas about the female body and its perception as more susceptible to spiritual influences. Spiritualism thus enabled women to be visible and active, while at the same time often framing their authorship as mediation rather than autonomous creation (Gutierrez, 2014: 201–203). This ambivalence is a key starting point for understanding the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, which will be discussed below.

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON AND “SPIRITUAL DRAWING”

The painting practice of Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) represents one of the clearest examples of how, in the 19th century, automatic painting was linked to mediumistic practices and understood as a direct form of communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Houghton worked in the London spiritualist milieu of the second half of the 19th century, where séances and mediumship were established practices, and painting gradually became established as one of the legitimate techniques of spiritual communication.

Her work was not based on aesthetic autonomy or personal expression, but on the logic of spiritualism. In accordance with spiritualist logic, the artist saw herself as a channel through which the dead and other non-human beings operated. Houghton herself did not understand her drawings and paintings as her own creations, but as the result of the work of spirits, angels and deceased persons who guided her hand. As Rachel Oberster shows, Houghton labelled her drawings as *spiritual drawings* and accompanied them with extensive notes explaining their genesis, the symbolic meaning of colours and lines, and the identity of the beings who were supposed to have participated in their creation (Oberster, 2006). These notes are not mere additions, but an integral part of her painting practice, as they reveal her understanding of painting as a process in which human authorship gives way to spiritual guidance.

A key element of Houghton's practice was the idea of the body as an instrument. In line with broader spiritualist ideas, the artist was understood in the creative process as a medium who had to renounce her own will and control. Simon Grand and Marco Pasi point out that this attitude was closely linked to the understanding of artistic creativity as something that does not originate from the individual, but from an external, invisible source connected to the spiritual world (Grand, Pasi, 2016: 12–15). In this context, the loss of control over the body, especially over the hand when painting, was considered a prerequisite for authentic communication with the dead and other non-human beings.

It is important to note that Houghton was not only a painter, but also an interpreter and theorist of her own practice. In her books *Evenings at Home and Spiritual Séance* (1882) and *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings* (1881), she argues that even the great artists of the past were guided by spiritual helpers. In her understanding, artistic creativity is the result of the creator's receptivity and humility, who is able to renounce his own self and surrender to spiritual guidance. The key point here is that the authorship of works of art was attributed to deceased family members, angels or spirits, and often

to the spirits of former painters, especially Renaissance painters (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2016). This is evidenced by Georgiana's text from her book published in 1881:

.../ I believe that most of the painters of olden times who devoted themselves to sacred art were assisted in their labours by invisible friends, and would receive from them intimations as to the true likenesses of those whom they desired to portray, so that the more they could give themselves up to those intuitions, laying aside their own selfhood, the more likely they would be to have the reality granted to them as their ideal of the saint or martyr whom they wished to represent. We know that they prayerfully sought for inspiration, and according to their own true receptivity would be the response yielded. (Houghton, 1881: 238)

Such a conception of artistic creation establishes a clear hierarchy between the human and the non-human: the otherworld or spirits are the bearers of knowledge and creative power, while humans are merely their temporary intermediaries.

Georgiana Houghton's position also raises a broader theoretical question about the relationship between spiritualist and other occult movements (e.g. the mystical order of the Rose Croix, etc.) and the development of modern visual art (see also Safarova, 2007). Tessel M. Bauduin has written more on this subject, drawing attention to the question of the "influence" of spiritualism and related practices on visual art. Bauduin emphasises that defining "influence" in this context is extremely problematic. Although it can be shown that many artists moved in occult circles, were familiar with spiritualist practices or were in contact with specific mediums and theosophical authors, the question remains open as to the extent to which occultism actually played a constitutive role in their art. Even where a connection can be discerned, it is unclear whether it is a matter of intellectual inspiration, iconographic or narrative content, or a direct influence on the formal and stylistic elements of the artwork. Additional complexity is introduced by the pronounced occult eclecticism of many artists, who often drew simultaneously from different, sometimes even contradictory esoteric traditions (Bauduin, 2015: 433–435).

In this sense, Houghton is not merely an example of the "influence" of spiritualism on art, but rather a radically different understanding of her own artistic practice. For her, spiritualism is not an external conceptual framework, but rather the ontological and epistemological foundation of her creation. It is not that spiritualist beliefs shaped her style, but rather that her own interpretation of painting is understood as a form of communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Authorship is thus shifted from the human subject to non-human actors from the outset.

This shift allows us to move on to another example, that of the painter Hilma af Klint, in whose work communication with the dead and non-human beings was organised and documented even more systematically. The transition from Houghton to af Klint is thus not merely a chronological continuation, but an escalation of the logic in which the artwork is understood as a material record of the actions of non-human actors, rather than as an expression of the artist's inner subjectivity. Af Klint herself referred to her painting as "visual dictates".

HILMA AF KLINT: MEDIUMSHIP, PAINTING AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNIST SUBJECTIVITY

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) is today considered one of the earliest pioneers of abstract painting. At the time her works were created, however, they were considered controversial and were not recognised as a contribution to art history or to modernist innovation in painting. Her painting practice stemmed from her intense involvement in spiritualist and theosophical circles. Despite the fact that theosophical, spiritualist and related principles were often mutually exclusive, artists frequently combined elements of both (Bauduin, 2015: 435).

A decisive turning point in her spiritualist painting, similar to that of Georgiana Houghton, was the death of her sister Hermine. After her death, af Klint systematically devoted herself to spiritual practices, theosophy, the works of Helena Blavatsky and, later, to her contacts with Rudolf Steiner. In this context, she established herself as a medium and began to develop related approaches to painting (McNab, 2021).

Af Klint consistently described her own painting experience as a process in which she did not act from her “inner self” but as a mediator of an external, non-human source. Her statement clearly articulates this relationship:

“The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke.” (Müller, Adams, n.d.)

The emphasis on speed, the absence of corrections, and the lack of knowledge about the meaning of the images indicate a conscious suspension of artistic control and intentional decision-making.

This understanding of painting is also confirmed by her diary entries, in which af Klint clearly distinguishes between her own role and that of her spiritual guides. In an entry dated 7 November 1906, she writes: “Amaliel⁴ sketches the outline, then Hilma must paint” (Dichter et al., 2007: 166). Elsewhere, this process is described as a process in which the artist paints automatically in response to instructions from spiritual guides who determine both the form and content of the work (Johnson, 2022). Painting is understood here as a ritualised practice of mediation, in which the human body is an instrument of spiritual actors.

It is precisely this aspect of af Klint’s practice that is at the centre of Branden W. Joseph’s analysis, which shows that her work systematically undermines the fundamental assumptions of modernist art history. As Joseph notes, the modernist canon is based on the ideal of an autonomous, self-reflective and intentional creative subject who produces artistic work consciously, rationally and independently of external forces. Af Klint’s practice, however, is structurally incompatible with this model. Her paintings, which have raised numerous questions due to their early development of abstract painting, were

⁴ Amaliel is the name of one of the angels.

not created as an expression of individual will or aesthetic experimentation, but as works *commissioned* and guided by the invisible world, often understood as part of a spiritual task or mission (Joseph, 2017: 119–120).

This inconsistency also has a clear gender dimension. As a woman in the patriarchal world of painting, she saw herself as someone who surrendered her own intentionality and authorship and transferred it to the spiritual world. In doing so, she gained space for her painting in a male-dominated environment, while at the same time establishing an alternative model of creativity and redefining the world of painting. She did not follow the aesthetic principles of painting, nor did she seek to be included in the broader artistic discourse or aim consciously to contribute to the development of abstract painting. Thus, the painting of both af Klint and Houghton does not follow the logic of control (over the body, the process, etc.), but rather the logic of “obedience”: the artist renounces authorship, control and interpretation and allows knowledge and form to emerge through her, rather than from her. Paradoxically, by renouncing themselves, these painters achieve a redefinition of the world of painting.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of the spiritualist painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint with the contemporary artistic practices of the painter Ana reveals important epistemological and ontological shifts in the understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead as well as in conceptions of artistic creativity. The central differences focus on two analytical dimensions, namely the function of the body and the structure of the relationship between ontological agents.

In spiritualistic practices, as embodied by Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, the artist’s body acts as a passive medium. The body becomes an interface temporarily occupied by spirits, who produce an artistic artefact through its hand. This principle of operation denies the artist autonomy and reduces her to an instrument of spiritual manifestation. The body enters a phase of liminality, where it is emptied of content and subordinated to the spiritual world. This model presupposes a hierarchy in which the spirit is ontologically and epistemologically superior to the living: knowledge, art and inspiration come from the transcendent world, while the living human being is merely a channel for their transmission.

In contrast, in Ana’s contemporary painting practice, the body is no longer a mediator but sensorially analyses and generates perceptions. Through breathing practices and environmental attunement with nature, a state is established in which the artist is not subject to another being but enters into dialogue with it. The body is no longer merely a channel for mediation, but a means for perception, translation and transformation. The key process here is the transformation of subtle perceptions in the form of vibrations, sound, perceptions of condensation and other internal perceptions. These perceptions are then transformed into a visual code that has an artistic form and at the same time functions as a connecting channel between worlds.

From the perspective of the structure of the relationship between the living and the dead and other non-human beings, the spiritualist model is clearly hierarchical: the authorship of the artwork is attributed to a spiritual being, while the human author withdraws from the process. In Ana's contemporary practice, however, there is relational egalitarianism: the artist and the invisible being collaborate in the process of creation. Such a relationship can be understood as ontologically horizontal and can be approximated to the aforementioned paradigm of ontological pluralism in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019), where the world is created through the coexistence and intertwining of the perspectives of different entities, without a necessary hierarchical arrangement.

In this light, the artistic act also takes on a new definition. In the historical spiritualist model, the creative act is derived from a supernatural source and represents a form of revelation. In the contemporary case, however, it is a communicative process, the result of which is not a gift or inspiration, but a translation. A work of art is a product of semiosis that arises at the intersection or transition between two code systems: one that belongs to the dead (or other non-human beings) and one that belongs to human perception and cultural articulation.

On this basis, the painting no longer functions as a fetishistic object, but as a *conduit* – a kind of translation channel (Degh, 2001: 61; also Knoefl, 2007) – through which a liminal space is formed. This space not only enables communication between worlds, but also generates new knowledge. This knowledge is not exclusively independent of either the living or the dead, but arises in their relationship or contact. Painting thus does not come from the other world, but from spaces somewhere in between – that is from the space of contact and transition connecting the living and the dead, or other non-human beings.

A comparative analysis reveals a fundamental shift: from the epistemology of trance found in the historical mediumistic practices of Houghton and af Klint to the epistemology of relationship found in the contemporary case of the painter Ana. This change does not merely signify a different understanding of the artistic process, but signals a possible broader shift in contemporary spiritual practices. This shift is based on a move away from domination and control towards cooperation between actors. More specifically, it is a shift from passive channelling to active translation, and from revelation to interpersonal synthesis.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

This article is based on research data stored in the author's archive and available to others upon reasonable request.

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SLIKANJE KOT SREDSTVO ZA SPORAZUMEVANJE Z MRTVIMI IN DRUGIMI NEČLOVEŠKIMI BITJI

Članek obravnava slikanje kot prakso vzpostavljanja in vzdrževanja odnosov z mrtvimi in drugimi nečloveškimi bitji v sodobnem in zgodovinskem kontekstu. Izhaja iz analitičnega okvira vernakularne religije, ki omogoča razumevanje religioznih izkušenj ne kot zaprtih in normativno določenih verovanjskih sistemov, temveč kot dinamičnih, pogosto protislovnih praks, ki se oblikujejo v konkretnem življenjskem kontekstu. V tem okviru odnosi z mrtvimi niso obravnavani kot vnaprej dane predstave o onstranstvu, temveč kot izkustva, ki se vzpostavljajo skozi telesno zaznavo, učenje in ustvarjalno prakso.

Osrednji del članka temelji na etnografski raziskavi slikarske prakse sodobne slovenske slikarke Ane. Njeno slikanje se razvija kot postopno učenje zaznavanja prisotnosti mrtvih in drugih nečloveških bitij, pri čemer komunikacija ni razumljena kot rezultat posebnih tehnik klicanja ali spremenjenega stanja zavesti, temveč kot proces ugaševanja telesne zaznave in pozornosti. Ana svojih izkušenj ne opisuje v smislu posedenosti ali izgube nadzora nad telesom, temveč kot dialoški odnos z mrtvimi, v katerem ostaja avtorica dejavna in samorefleksivna. Telo v tem procesu deluje kot mesto zaznavanja, razlikovanja in prevajanja telesnih zaznav in občutij v slikarski jezik.

V nadaljevanju je Anina sodobna praksa postavljena v primerjalni odnos z zgodovinskima primeroma slikark Georgiane Houghton in Hilme af Klint. V obeh primerih je slikanje umeščeno v kontekst spiritualističnih in teozofskih praks 19. in začetka 20. stoletja, kjer je umetniško ustvarjanje razumljeno kot oblika pasivne mediacije. Umetniščino telo je v teh praksah pojmovano kot instrument, ki izgubi kontrolo in skozi katerega delujejo duhovna bitja. Avtorstvo in nadzor nad ustvarjalnim procesom sta pripisana mrtvim in/ali drugim duhovnim bitjem. Takšno razumevanje slikanja vzpostavlja jasno hierarhičen odnos med živimi in mrtvimi ter temelji na modelu razodetja in telesne podrejenosti.

Primerjalna analiza pokaže pomemben premik v razumevanju odnosa med umetniško prakso, telesom in duhovnimi bitji. Medtem ko so v spiritualističnih modelih prevladovali hierarhični odnosi in pasivna vloga umetnika, Anina sodobna

praksa kaže na relacijski, dialoški in bolj egalitaren način vzpostavljanja stika. Slikanje v tem kontekstu ni sredstvo prenosa sporočil iz onstranstva, temveč prostor, v katerem se odnos med živimi in mrtvimi šele oblikuje, interpretira in začasno stabilizira.

Primerjava zgodovinskih in sodobnih praks pokaže tudi premik v razumevanju liminalnosti. V klasičnih spiritualističnih praksah 19. stoletja je bila faza liminalnosti vezana predvsem na telo medija, ki je v stanju transa ali posedovanosti začasno izgubilo avtonomijo ter delovalo kot vmesni »prostor« med svetovi. V sodobni slikarski praksi, kakršno predstavlja Ana, pa telo ne vstopa več v stanje telesne podrejenosti ali izpraznjenosti, temveč ohranja nadzor in refleksivnost. Liminalno funkcijo v tem primeru prevzame slikarsko delo samo: slika deluje kot prostor prehoda, v katerem se odnos med živimi in mrtvimi lahko vzpostavi, ohrani in celo kasneje ponovno aktualizira. Liminalnost se tako premakne s telesa na materializirano umetniško delo, ki postane nosilec odnosa in mesto njegove začasne stabilizacije.

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