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From Surrealism to Séances: The Art World's Spiritual Turn

Massimiliano Gioni's "Fata Morgana," the Seoul Mediacity Biennale and a growing wave of esoteric exhibitions suggest that spiritual, occult and psychic frameworks are no longer fringe but actively reshaping how institutions approach both art history and contemporary practice.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 01/12/26 1:37pm





As museums and biennials revisit Surrealism, outsider practices and Indigenous cosmologies, a pattern emerges that suggests a renewed turn toward spirituality, mysticism and alternative knowledge systems as tools for meaning-making in a moment of political, technological and ecological crisis. Courtesy Archivio Chiara Fumai

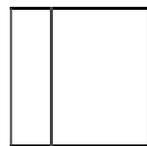
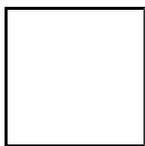
Riding the continued momentum of 2022's [The Milk of Dreams](#) and the [movement's 100th anniversary in 2024](#), Surrealism—and particularly [its long-neglected female visionary lineage](#)—continues to gain traction through auction records and major international exhibitions. But this renewed focus on Surrealism and surrealists is not merely a matter of canon recalibration or market-driven revival. What is unfolding appears to exceed the constraints of the “surrealist” label altogether, which is too narrow, perhaps, to contain the breadth of what’s emerging. Rather than a passing aesthetic trend, this is a broader cultural shift that engages not only with the irrational but also with the symbolic, the psychic and the visionary as frameworks for both artistic practice and historical reinterpretation.



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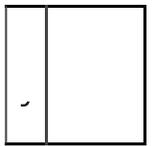
Seen alongside the parallel reevaluation of Indigenous practices—most visibly foregrounded by Adriano Pedrosa’s 2024 Biennale, *Foreigners Everywhere*—and the slower but increasingly visible resurgence of outsider art, there is a clear renewed interest in and rediscovery of spirituality and alternative forms of knowledge involving magic and mysticism. One recent exhibition in Milan, organized by Fondazione Nicola Trussardi and curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Daniel Birnbaum and Marta Papini, offered a particularly thought-provoking cross-historical curatorial framework for considering what is becoming a broader shift in how curators are interpreting and framing recent art history.

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“Fata Morgana: Memories from the Invisible” brought together the work of more than 70 figures—from writers and philosophers to mediums, mystics and clairvoyants—in a show that unfolded within the spiritually charged setting of Palazzo Morando, once home to Countess Lydia Caprara Morando Attendolo Bolognini, a figure at the margins of European spiritual modernism whose life blended aristocratic privilege with esoteric pursuit.

The exhibition placed overlooked historical visionaries in dialogue with contemporary artists through practices shaped by mediumship, ecstatic states and imaginative automatism—not to affirm supernatural claims but to retrace how belief systems outside dominant rationalist narratives have historically expanded definitions of art and belief while quietly reshaping social, gender and political imaginaries. Here, the surreal, the mystical and the magical emerge not as escapism





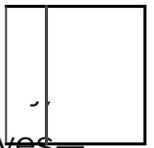
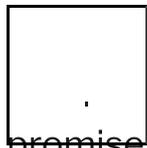
artists are already attempting today, when read through these lenses.



Exhibitions like “Fata Morgana” are exploring today the fertile intersections between visual art and mysticism, paranormal phenomena, spiritualism, esotericism, Theosophy and symbolic practices. Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Trussardi. Ph Marco De Scalzi

What emerges is a shared symbolic lexicon and narrative framework that seeks to reactivate art’s most ancestral, primordial ritual function—using it both as a portal and a metaphorical code to access non-material realms of consciousness: dimensions invisible to ordinary perception but reachable through altered states of mind. For these artists, past and present, art becomes a tool for recovering meaning before and beyond the ideological and extractive logics imposed by late capitalism, reopening access to a deeper spiritual essence long obscured by both instrumental rationalism and the incessant noise of mass media and social media spectacle.

Most importantly, this kind of transhistorical journey reveals how different periods of crisis have historically produced similar and recurring revivals of esoteric and



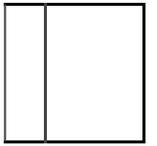
promise of linear progress—along with official canons and dominant narratives—begins to fracture.

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In this context, the phenomenon can also be read as a response to technophobia: a rejection of the uneasy entanglements—already visible at the start of the twentieth century and newly intensified today—between emerging technologies, para-scientific belief systems, disinformation and paranoia that increasingly call into question shared notions of truth.

This openness toward this mediumistic dimension of art appears today to be driven by a broader cultural and psychological attempt to reengage with the spiritual and psychic aspects of existence—realms that resist the purely functionalist and materialist narratives that have shaped society since the Industrial Revolution and its technological aftermath. Even if these works appear as mirages or hallucinations shaped by artists, self-taught creators and visionaries—“beacons in the night of meaning,” as André Breton once described them—they nonetheless offer glimpses into alternative ways of seeing and signifying reality at a time when prevailing frameworks have already begun to falter. They are not proposing solutions so much as different modes of perception—symbolic and often symbiotic—through which the reality of the cosmos, and our existence within it, might be reinterpreted and reimagined.

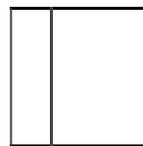
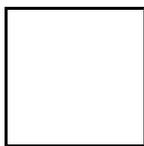
Beyond the now widely known, record-setting figure of Leonora Carrington and looking instead to artists such as Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini, we see that their work was fueled not merely by fascination with the mystical, but by profound



As foregrounded in the exhibition, for even earlier visionary pioneers of the still-uncharted paths of symbolic abstraction (e.g., Hilma af Klint, Georgiana Houghton and Wilhelmine Assmann) art was first and foremost about developing a symbolic lexicon capable of translating, often through deeply individual and transcendent states, the interconnected reality of all things. Their works give form to “thought-forms” that are both abstract and rooted in universal structures recurring in nature, offering what feels like a secret entry point into the collective unconscious. Notably, many of these artists worked on an epic scale, producing expansive symbolic narratives that flowed directly from their imagination, not unlike prophets—or at the very least, mediums—of cosmic messages.

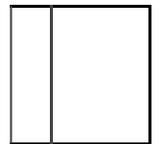
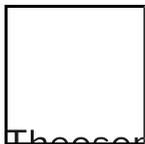
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Hilma af Klint developed her abstract visual language through spiritualist practices, conceiving painting as a means of channeling higher knowledge beyond the material world. Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation Photo: The Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

Operating under the guidance of spirits and other supernatural presences, Hilma af Klint was among the earliest artists to develop a radically original form of abstraction—even before Der Blaue Reiter. By her explicit wish, however, this work remained hidden for decades: she forbade its public unveiling until twenty years after her death, convinced that her contemporaries were not yet ready to receive its message. As Julia Voss notes in the catalogue, these works conceived as originating in the astral realm required time to be understood in the material world. In her series *Primordial Chaos* from 1906–1907—the first chapter of *The Paintings for the Temple*, presented in her groundbreaking first U.S. retrospective at the Guggenheim



Theosophical thought as much as in pure mystical illumination.

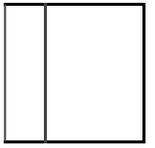
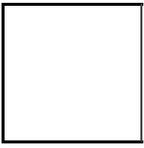
Around the same period, Emma Kunz developed a similarly charged form of abstraction, drawing on ancestral decorative systems used across cultures to connect with the divine. Working as a healer, telepath and artist, Kunz entered trance states to produce complex geometric drawings intended to reveal hidden energies and restorative forces. As Swiss curator Harald Szeemann observed, these works seek to reestablish a universal connection: through repetition and symmetry, Kunz created enclosed visual systems capable of momentarily channeling entropy into order.

Between 1926 and 1934, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn produced some two hundred hypnotic images marked by Art Deco refinement and infused with sacred geometry, spirals, pyramidal forms and references to the third eye. These were accompanied by evocative titles such as *The Portal of Initiation* (1930) and *Yoga and Meditation in East and West* (1933). A comparable generative force animates the work of Madge Gill—recently spotlighted by the Gallery of Everything at Frieze Masters—whose obsessively intricate spiral motifs teem with feminine figures and spirits. Like af Klint, Gill rarely exhibited her work during her lifetime, insisting it did not belong to her.

In this lineage, the work of Emma Jung (1882–1955) is equally significant. Long overshadowed by her husband, Carl Gustav Jung, she was nonetheless a vital intellectual force within analytical psychology, particularly through her writings on the archetypes of Anima and Animus. Her recently rediscovered drawings and diagrams—several rare examples were in the exhibition—translate dream imagery and psychic processes into symbolic visual models of both individual and collective unconscious structures, imbued with a distinctly feminine sensibility.

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From these and other works emerge the mirages and hallucinations of artists, self-taught creators and visionaries—“beacons in the night of meaning,” as Breton wrote. Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Trussardi. Ph Marco De Scalzi

However, even as early as the 1860s, Georgiana Houghton was already producing her “spirit drawings” under what she described as the guidance of angels and saints. In these “sacred testimonies,” dense layers of looping lines and radiant color form intricate compositions untethered from the visible world, anticipating later developments in abstraction through wholly otherworldly means.

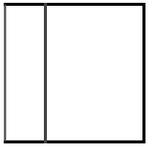
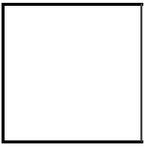




largely intuitive symbolic lexicons developed by women artists across centuries: the concept of “central core imagery.” This gynocentric iconography fused anatomical references with a spiritual charge drawn from history and myth, ranging from primordial goddesses and matriarchal heroines to visionary saints and ruthless queens. For Chicago, this archetypal feminine symbolic language could be traced as far back as the Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen—the German writer, composer, philosopher, mystic and visionary whose music and imagery emerged from similarly clairvoyant, intuitive patterns rooted in visionary experience. Hildegard described receiving her visions while fully awake, with her “soul open to heaven,” through what she called the “reflection of the Living Light.”

Still, the most compelling aspect of the exhibition lay in its distinctly cross-temporal perspective, which paired historical visionaries with contemporary artists such as Kari Upson, Andra Ursuța, Goshka Macuga, Rosemarie Trockel and Kiki Smith, among others—all sharing an unsettling, often disturbing exploration of the human condition rooted in the tension between body and psyche, here reframed through a psychic and mystical lens that invites readings rarely contemplated in their work. The exhibition also proposed new, revealing interpretations of certain postwar artists, underscoring how—even beyond any imposed minimalist framework—Louise Nevelson herself described her practice not as formal reduction but as an effort to impose order on cosmic chaos.

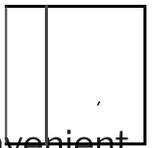




Eusapia Palladino was a central figure of late-19th-century spiritualism, whose séances blurred the boundaries between performance, belief and early scientific inquiry into the paranormal. Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Trussardi.

Moving like lights in the night of meaning and truth, all these artists share a courageous venture into spirituality, magic and imagination—not as escapist residues of a pre-modern world, but as sites of political struggle actively suppressed by capitalism through its systematic disciplining of bodies, time, reproduction and knowledge. Within this curatorial framework, that attitude also extends to artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, among others. Seen through this more spiritualist lens, even Surrealist automatism can be reinterpreted less as a psychological technique than as a practice of listening to spiritual or unconscious agencies as they “throw open the floodgates” of the mind. Likewise, the long-



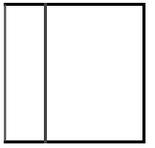
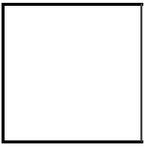


enabling free experimentation with color and form—begins to feel like a convenient rationalization after seeing the show. When viewed through the practices gathered here, it becomes clear that many early pioneers, including Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, were instead propelled first and foremost by explicitly spiritual drives.

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The exhibition ultimately left me with an unsettling reflection: that a significant portion of art history may demand reevaluation through a renewed and more revealing psychological and spiritual urgency, beyond any conceptually sanitized or purely materialist and formalist reading focused on the final object.

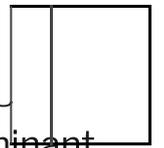




Installation view: “SMB13 Séance: Technology of the Spirit” at Seoul Museum of Art in 2025 Photo: Hong Cheolki

Since the pandemic, museums across borders have begun actively rethinking and reframing art history—both by revisiting the past and reassessing contemporary production through these same lenses. Last fall, the 13th Seoul Mediacity Biennale offered an especially clear, curatorial and philosophically illuminating example. Held earlier under the title *Séance: Technology of the Spirit*, the exhibition explored the role spiritual experience has played in the development of modern and contemporary art, while also shaping many of the technologies humans have created.





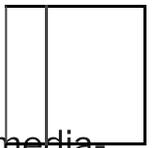
aesthetic practices as imaginative technologies capable of challenging dominant rational-capitalist frameworks. Moving fluidly between nineteenth-century mediums and contemporary artists engaging with shamanic, psychic and ancestral registers, the biennale staged an idiosyncratic exploration of how cinema, sound and performance have long served as rituals to empower collective perception and imagination—inviting audiences into altered, more spiritually attuned modes of awareness. Notably, the list of artists at times overlapped with the Milan show.

What struck me most when I visited during the noise and overexposure of Seoul Art Week was how seamlessly the exhibition treated the supernatural as part of everyday life—likely reflecting a more fluid worldview within many Asian cultural frameworks, where science, transcendence and spirituality have never been considered fully separate. In this context, spiritualism—understood as a renewed form of animism—has simply accompanied accelerated technological development, and in many cases has been amplified by the fluidity and dematerialization of digital space.

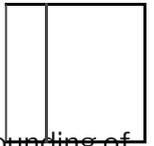
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Across the exhibition, spirituality was repeatedly reframed as technology and through technology, rather than in opposition to it. New media were often used as tools for reconnection between mind, body and soul: magnetism, vibration, frequencies and energetic fields recurred as physical metaphors, suggesting that what is often dismissed as hallucination or superstition might also be understood as a different way of perceiving the world—one attuned to realms beyond ordinary sensory experience.





worlds or dimensions—machines for attunement. Even the work of Korean media-art pioneer Nam June Paik, in this context, was read through this lens. These works functioned as instruments of mediation and ritual, deliberately blurring distinctions between science and myth, measurement and mysticism. What emerges are practical cosmologies and technological rituals: architectures, healing systems, sound environments, choreographies and image-making practices that remind us how consciousness can extend beyond the narrow bandwidth of everyday experience.



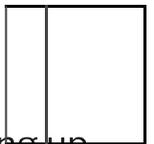
In its attempt to question and reframe our relationship with technology—two decades after the founding of this historic biennale dedicated to media art—the show was ultimately anchored in the ancient meaning of

We can trace similarly mystically attuned curatorial approaches—presented with varying degrees of explicitness—across multiple exhibitions and biennials globally. The Kunstmuseum Basel, for example, is currently staging “Ghosts: Visualising the Supernatural” (through Mar 8, 2026), an exhibition exploring Western fascination with ghosts over more than 250 years. Ranging from 19th-century spirit photography to contemporary art, the show examines how specters have been imagined culturally, psychologically, technologically and artistically.

Even the tribute currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art to the mysteric and symbolically dense universe of Wilfredo Lam—shaped by Surrealism as well as Santería, Vodou and Afro-Caribbean cosmologies—can be seen as part of this broader trend. Likewise, the Jewish Museum’s spotlight on the early works of Anish Kapoor allows, for one of the first times, his now-iconic practice to be read in relation to his return to India and a renewed engagement with symbolic and energetic dimensions of color, as the pure pigments he uses become a means of accessing and channeling spiritual realms rather than simply a formal or material concern. And the list could go on.

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Taken together, these 2025 exhibitions signal a wider institutional interest not only in art that engages spiritual, mystical or occult frameworks, but also in rereading both historical and contemporary art through more psychic and spiritually charged lenses. This shift should not be understood as a romantic throwback to a more



relationship between imagination, technology and the physical world, opening up legitimate domains of artistic inquiry as well as timely cultural and existential reflection.

Filed Under: Arts, Art Market, Wilhelmine Assmann, Emma Kunz, Fröbe-Kapteyn, Emma Jung, Kari Upton, Palazzo Morando, Seoul Mediacity Biennale, Georgiana Houghton, Carl Gustav Jung, Hildegard Of Bingen, Julia Voss, Madge Gill, Goshka Macuga, Kunstmuseum Basel, Harald Szeemann, Andra Ursuta, Wilfredo Lam, Rosemarie Trockel, Leonor Fini, Hilma Af Klint, Adriano Pedrosa, Remedios Varo, Louise Nevelson, Spirituality, André Breton, Seoul, Massimiliano Gioni, Korea, Judy Chicago, Paul Klee, Leonora Carrington, Man Ray, Kiki Smith, Wassily Kandinsky, Surrealism, Milan, Marcel Duchamp, Asia, Italy, Europe, International

