

DESTINY TASK

On Hilma af Klint, Public Programming, and Spirituality inside the White Cube



'Self-love Wedding Ceremony', from 'Wellness Weekend', City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 2022. Image by Mark Tantrum, courtesy of City Gallery Wellington.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMMING bears a hefty weight in art galleries. It picks up a lot of the slack that a rarefied air of quiet contemplation can leave behind. Programming is expected to get people through the door, contextualise specific artworks and artists, all while introducing elements of education and fun to the gallery experience. In its most utopian vision, public programming gives galleries scope to appeal to as wide a cross section of their community as possible, helping the arts-going public to make a gallery space their own. This is the vision of programming that exists to 'physically and intellectually democratise' an exhibition. [1].

I don't work in the arts, and to me this seems like a tall, sometimes contradictory order. I'm curious about where it comes from. It can feel like public programming is how galleries internalise and reconcile a lingering anxiety that their spaces and services are inherently elitist. Why would you need to democratise anything that was already physically and intellectually available to everyone? Public institutions, with their funding derived from citizens' rates and taxes, must feel this anxiety even more acutely, with the added expectation of serving broad and diverse communities.

Statements from City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, my closest council-run gallery, suggest they take the perceived breadth of their audience seriously:

We work collaboratively with artists, galleries, collectors, and an extensive range of organisations and business partners to present exhibitions and events that are relevant to our lives today, test art's boundaries, and challenge us.[2]

Meanwhile, in Te Awakairangi Lower Hutt, the Dowse Art Museum recognises 'that as a museum we contribute to society by helping create a sense of place,' while the institution aims to 'strengthen its relationship with its communities'[3].

These statements illuminate a possible tension in public programming. They contain broad appeals to universal values and groups—*us, our lives, society, communities*—that can only ever be effectively approached through specificity. Particular events occur on particular days. Each must pick and choose what and who they address. How do art galleries navigate this tension? How does it serve a given exhibition?

In the spirit of specificity, I should add that I am not a curator, art historian, or artist. I mostly feel at ease inside art galleries because I work in archives—but I'm always haunted by that sense of never being sure that I've interpreted artworks *correctly*. I have never really written about art until now. I am a thirty-five-year-old Pākehā woman who went to the Hilma af Klint exhibition twice and then got married to herself.



Hilma af Klint hoardings posted outside Te Matapihi Ki Te Ao Nui Wellington Central Library, 2022. Image by Mark Tantrum, courtesy of City Gallery Wellington.

HILMA AF KLINT: THE SECRET PAINTINGS was undeniably a blockbuster exhibition. I can't think of another recent show that received such promotional largesse. Giant posters, pasted all over the city, thrust af Klint into the modernist canon with succinct zeal. *Before Malevich, before Kandinsky, before Mondrian, there was Hilma.* They appeared to translate af Klint for arts-curious Zoomers and Millennials. *An influencer who didn't care for likes.* And they lured everyone else with enigmatic teasers. *Don't miss seeing the spirit world in full colour.*

The posters, with their Internet sensibility, seemed intended to reach a wide audience, to meet people where they were—a broad appeal for potential visitors that hit on the key themes of the show. Reading about af Klint later, I wondered if this campaign had simplified her so much as to misrepresent the real staggering significance of her work. The posters seemed to be intended to reach distinct audiences: people who are interested in a painter that could be easily placed in a lineage of abstraction, and people who are interested in the last decade's rapid rise in Western spirituality. Come for Hilma the modernist or Hilma the spiritualist.

What I learned though, is that Hilma wasn't really engaged in the discourse around abstraction in the early twentieth-century. Her spiritual practice, too, was embedded in *her* time and place, so can't

be easily parsed through a lens of twenty-first century Western spirituality. In a [Stuff review of the exhibition](#), Thomasin Sleight points out:

There is a danger, I think, in reducing her to the tagline of the ‘first abstract painter’—that this will reinscribe the plodding Western modernist agenda of being the first, the “major innovator”. How boring. What of Klint’s spiralling, striving, and questioning paintings propose is that there are multiple and overlapping versions of abstraction, of knowledge, and ways to lead a collaborative creative life. [4]

Whatever other people thought, the publicity campaign was effective. Most of my friends saw the exhibition. ‘Have you seen Hilma yet?’ someone asked me in the work kitchenette while we loaded the dishwasher. We all refer to af Klint by her first name—Elvis, Madonna, Zendaya...Hilma. For four months, she felt like a part of Wellington’s ambient texture. Poster-Hilma loomed around every corner, and despite loving the show itself, I still don’t know how I feel about *her*.

Come for Hilma the modernist or Hilma the spiritualist.

The public programme also felt super-sized. On City Gallery’s website I counted more than thirty events held over its duration. Movie nights followed choir performances. Writers, sonic artists, and painters responded to af Klint’s work. During the day, children learned about automatic drawing and water colours. For galleries with the means, running this scale of events might be one way to address the tension between the universal and the specific.

Perhaps the boldest programming move of all was February’s [Wellness Weekend](#)—two days of public programmes framed as an opportunity for taking unusual or unexpected pathways into the exhibition:

Across this weekend, we invite our audience to enjoy different experiential approaches to the spiritual worlds evoked in *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings*. Our wellness focused events include a guided meditation, a tour about colour, symbol and spirituality, and a panel discussion exploring the link between art and spirituality. City Gallery Wellington's Wellness Weekend ends on a spiritual high – don a wedding gown, veil or ceremonial frock get married TO YOURSELF [5].

In [an interview on RadioActive.FM](#) the gallery's then Public Programmes Manager, Megan Dunn, explained how she was interested in 'opening up new ways of talking about art that are very much out there in the community'[6]. Conversations, her statement implies, that might be ordinarily excluded from art galleries.

In the same interview, Dunn also said, 'I feel like I'm cruising for a bruising calling something a Wellness Weekend at the moment' [7]. I appreciated her confession. That week the whole country started preparing for an Omicron wave—fearing the collapse of an overwhelmed health system—while hundreds of anti-vax protestors radicalised by *health* misinformation had entrenched themselves on Parliament lawn. In February 2022, health had extremely high stakes, and *wellness* a potentially offensive edge.



Mark Geard talks during 'Wellness Weekend', City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 2022. Image by Elias Rodriguez, courtesy of City Gallery Wellington.

ON THE SATURDAY MORNING I went to ‘Colour, Symbol, and Spirituality’, an exhibition tour run by Mark Geard, an art therapist, and Emily Fletcher, an artist and life coach. Immediately, the pair’s meditation-app austerity jarred against the baroque energy I associate with spiritualism and the occult. Where were the stuffed peacocks? The chandeliers? Mark wore statement glasses, a clipped white beard and a pale blue linen shirt. Emily dressed in structured Kowtow, a baby pink t-shirt and jewel green skirt. They held the air of an architecture firm: competent, warm, but primarily chic and uncompromising.

Still, they wielded a mystic’s vocabulary. Mark explained that Hilma saw colour as created by the spirit world, but existing in the physical world. It was through colour, and esoteric symbols, that Hilma made work that ‘sits on the threshold of this world and the next.’

‘It’s occult communication,’ said Emily, ‘and when you approach the threshold you have to do so in a hygienic way.’

‘And as you do your own observation,’ Mark chimed in, ‘Hilma wants you to experience what the human being can be at our *peak* potential.’

Did Hilma want that? I thought, now uncomfortable. For me, the spirit world should stop short of offering optimisation rhetoric. I noticed later, browsing their website, that Emily and Mark are photographed in the same clothes they wore leading the tour. I wanted to ask them why they chose each outfit twice: the spiritual threshold where the colours led? Or brand consistency?

Despite my doubts, Mark and Emily did render af Klint’s work more legible.

‘It’s important to remember that this is not visual art as we think we know it,’ Mark had said. ‘This is *spiritual research* driven through the medium of art.’

Here, af Klint arrived in precise focus, I suddenly knew exactly, from the inside, a slice of the *feeling* she searched for when she painted. We all have our own spiritual quests, however small.

Mark later explained that the ‘spiritual research’ component of af Klint’s work remains overlooked by scholars, with recent art historical analyses not acknowledging her mystical side at all. I learned something useful in this programme: that spirituality can remain taboo, that it still might not be considered a sufficiently rigorous line of inquiry in a fine art context.

‘Hilma died poor and didn’t sign any of her work. She wasn’t driven by ego, but by her destiny task,’ said Emily. ‘This challenges the viewer to ask what *their* destiny task is.’

The phrase *destiny task* doesn’t seem useful to me—a little too ‘peak potential’—but I agreed with what could have been Emily’s broader point, that af Klint’s work poses personal questions.

Finally, I decided that buried within their obscure language, Emily and Mark were encouraging people to be as mellow as we wanted in an art gallery. It’s a stance I find strangely empowering given how I fret about interpretation in these spaces.

‘What’s the spiritual experience of a cube?’ Mark said, shrugging. ‘It doesn’t matter if we can’t say, because with this work we leave “thinking” behind and step into the cognitive feeling realm. When you’re viewing these works, they’re just meditations.’

Easy. Will do.

*Despite my resistance to them, Mark and Emily
did render af Klint’s work more legible.*

ON THE SUNDAY night—standing alongside forty-nine others—I married myself in a ‘Self-Love Wedding Ceremony’. Looking around the atrium, I noticed many other cis Pākehā women, many wearing meringue-shaped gowns and veils.

A cosmic guardian called SHE-HONK (artist Bek Coogan aka Oona Verse) led the ceremony, Zooming in ‘from her office upstairs’ onto a large TV used as an altar. When SHE-HONK materialised, her heavy metal energy engulfed the flat screen, as well as the kitchenette she seemed to be Zooming from. Naked, except for a big pair of white satin knickers, a macramé necklace and a veil, she was awesome in the most romantic sense of the word. A hush fell over the crowd.

‘We begin by offering ourselves and each other radical love, radical kindness, and radical patience,’ intoned SHE-HONK.

If Mark and Emily lacked baroque sauce, the wedding ceremony was drenched in it. For the next hour, a potpourri of religious and spiritual practices unfurled from SHE-HONK's hands: we bowed to the compass points, ohmed together, and met our Celestial Self during a guided meditation.

'Warm yourself by the fire of your celestial soul!' boomed SHE-HONK. Everyone's Celestial Self passed them a mug filled with 'more of what you need.' I drank deeply of serenity and acceptance.

I found this experience baffling, and generally in a good way. I didn't know what I was participating in and wasn't sure that mattered. SHE-HONK only mentioned af Klint once ('Jesus is here! Hilma is here! They say it's ALL GOOD!') so I assumed this wasn't about education. Besides, as Dunn herself said 'sometimes we run events that knit very close to the work or art history. At other times we'll do things out on a tangent.' [8]

Finally, SHE-HONK asked if everyone was ready to take themselves as a life partner.

'YES!' we shouted in unison, before the Pet Shop Boys' 'You Were Always on my Mind' erupted through the room. I felt like I should high-five someone but couldn't make any eye contact.

'Don't worry about the old testament!' bellowed SHE-HONK. 'Keep it fresh! Keep it wild!'

Waiting for an Uber home and fossicking in my bag, I probed my soul. Had the ceremony provided the 'spiritual high' promised on the website? Disappointed, I conceded that I didn't feel any different. While it committed to capital-r Ritual, the wedding lacked the core components of what I associate with transformative spiritual moments: genuine community and earnestness. In my experience, this happens in grubbier places where no one's trying to put on a show. Community centres, church halls, AA meetings.

While I'd found the overblown rituals delightful, the deep—near bottomless—satire made it felt like nothing was at stake. Someone could participate completely ironically and we'd never know. Whatever else I felt about Mark and Emily, I was sure they had sincere skin in the game. If I had answered the question, 'What's the spiritual experience of a cube?' Mark would have listened to my answer, nodding.

I also came home with a broader question in mind. When programming takes a fully irreverent turn, do we risk missing out on genuine connection with the art these events are supposed to serve? I'm still not sure.

Maybe surface-level silliness itself is motivation enough. It did feel empowering to act like a doofus inside an art gallery, in the same way it felt good when Mark and Emily encouraged us to be meditative rather than analytical. We were being invited to behave differently around art.

I can also see how the wedding met City Gallery's own stated aims for public programming. 'Our activities are designed to nurture curiosity in the ideas explored within contemporary art,' their website reads [9]. Sleight noted that spooky women are having a moment. She cited the exhibition as one example of how 'witches and witchcraft have been taken up by contemporary feminism as symbols of female power and knowledge, and as figures who operate outside of, and disrupt, patriarchal structures and systems' [10]. SHE-HONK, in her big knickers, was a token of the same theme, shredding.



'Panel Discussion: Art and Spirituality', with Belle Basin, Jen Bowmast, Carl Mika, Katy B Plummer, and Leafā Wilson, from Wellness Weekend', City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 2022. Image by Elias Rodriguez, courtesy of City Gallery Wellington.

ON THEIR OWN, and despite containing compelling moments, neither the tour nor the wedding succeeded as convincing spiritual or artistic exercises for me. It was the weekend's most traditional event that knitted the programme into a meaningful, textured experience.

Panel talks, I've been told, are the staple diet of public programming. They're like Weet-Bix: good for you, but a little dry on their own. Wellness Weekend's panel talk introduced the broad topic of 'Art and Spirituality'.

'Just because this is about spirituality doesn't mean this is going to be dull,' Leafā Wilson said, the artist and curator leading the panel. She spoke with Pākehā artists Jen Bowmast, Katy B Plummer, and Belle Basin, as well as Carl Mika, a Tuhourangi, Ngati Whanaunga academic and philosopher.

'And let's start this right,' Leafā added, 'with a minute of silence.'

The discussion roamed widely. Each panellist discussed how their relationship to spirituality informed their work. They unpacked how af Klint's ideas resonated with their own. Most usefully for City Gallery's programme, and for myself, they politicised spirituality.

Scepticism is what drives a wedge between artists, spirituality, and the contemporary art scene. And scepticism, Belle explained, has been a driving force in art for decades.

'But in a spiritual context or community, you put one sceptical person in the room and nothing can grow,' she said. 'Sincerity is new to contemporary art.' A recurring motif was how these distinctions are created and enforced by Pākehā communities and Pākehā art practices.

'I don't distinguish between 'spiritual' and 'non-spiritual,' Carl said. 'I spent time with my Māori elders when I was a teenager. They accepted the spirit world and so do I. But neglecting spirituality in western philosophy is *itself* a spiritual issue.'

The *spiritual* doesn't exist in opposition to the *intellectual* or *conceptual*. It's an outmoded distinction. Art has a naturally spiritual component that can be thought about in conceptual terms. And if this was the main idea I took home over the three events, it's a great one.

In the inherited Pākehā obsession with categorisation and separation, the spirit world is divorced from the material world. The panel described the 'spiritual wound' of Pākehā disconnected to land-

based and ancestor-based spiritual practices. They explained how fetishization and appropriation become the blunt tools we use to address that wound. ‘The urge to *fill* is a very, very white response.’

One question hovering behind the panel, that wasn’t necessarily answered, was whether af Klint was to be held up as an artist to whom other white artists could look for guidance instead. I also wondered whether Wellness Weekend itself was providing a genuine instance of rebuilding spirituality from the ground up, or just another chance to *fill*?

In exploring these themes the panel opened Wellness Weekend up to important questions, and the other events became grounded in something meaningful. I could, for example, now sketch clear lines around my discomfort on the tour. I’d been given a key to critique it, and a vocabulary to probe my own values around participating in it. When does Pākehā spirituality cross a threshold from nourishing into something dangerous, an empty and appropriative aesthetic?

Personally, I seek comfort in the unknowable—the impartial warmth of the universe—so I try to remain open-minded. (If your crystal gets you through the day, then your crystal gets you through the day). But can many new-age practices *genuinely* be considered ‘letting the wound air out?’ as Katy described it. The mindfulness industry—when stripped of meditation’s historical and cultural context, appropriated by white people, co-opted by capitalism—reinforces inequality. Depoliticised, it lets us think the problem is inside us, not in a system we perpetuate and can be acting to change. We’re distracted by seeking self-discipline in deep breaths.

We’re a long way from Hilma here, but the themes raised by the panel offer an interesting parallel to my experience of Wellness Weekend itself and the wider questions of programming for large institutions. Beyond provoking missed connections to artworks, might irreverent programming risk us getting the wrong impression all together, replacing thoughtful and respectful engagement with something surface level, even insincere? I do think that’s a real danger and, sometimes, Wellness Weekend felt like it could stray into that territory. But it never fully crossed that line because the three events informed and contextualised each other. It’s not that we must only eat Weet-Bix—there’s definitely room for Coco Pops and the occasional bowl of Fruit Loops—but we can’t just have the latter. Maybe traditional programming can be dry, but it’s what grounds the rest in something thoughtful and real.

And so I forgave the Self-Love Wedding Ceremony its armour of heavy irony.

Katy had explained that alongside her interest in ‘heavy ancestral stuff’ she wanted to ‘unlock special and surprising places.’ Sincerity may be a necessary condition for spiritual experiences but it doesn’t have to ride solo. Maybe it is possible to *begin* a serious quest with humour.

I started to see the wedding's irony not as hostile to genuine transformation, but as a method of putting people at ease. For many people humour is a safe way to step into ritual, to start making eye contact with yourself. If Pākehā want to begin again with spirituality—without harming indigenous people—then we’re making a lot up from scratch. Of course our spiritual practices are going to look bogus and feel reverse-engineered, silly. Art galleries, with their histories of performance and spectacle, might be fine places to try this out.

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could provide a genuine instance of rebuilding spirituality
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IF I HAD TO slice it one way only, I’d say *Hilma af Klint: The Secret Paintings* was well served by Wellness Weekend. It managed to be silly yet educational, draw a crowd, and under a vapid name it posed interesting, big questions. My doubts linger around its success set against the wider ambitions of public programming.

I wonder if maximalist programming distracts from the real question of how to make fine art an everyday thing for most people. A gallery is, to some extent, always providing a values-laden, mediated experience with art. It’s a big stone building, filled with quiet rooms and clean white walls. You can’t take the artwork home to discuss over dinner. You must not let your toddler touch anything with her jammy hands. This tells you who and how you must be inside a gallery.

But I’m not sure adding ever-more complicated layers of activity on top solves the problem. If you’ve made it inside, irreverence doesn’t make a group activity inherently more democratic than

standing in front of a painting alone. People leading activities or providing commentary bring even more mediation and even more values, and galleries are responsible for scrutinising those values, not just letting them advertise at face value. I resisted Mark and Emily because I thought they represented an inherently Pākehā wellness industry that's dangerous, extractive, and fraught with issues. Even if this industry has a large market, should galleries flirt so closely with indulging it?

Maybe I'm just arguing for the worth of traditional or simple public programming. Above all, I just want to hear conversations between different specialists, to have the cool and complicated questions art poses answered by people who don't talk down to you. From an under-resourced and over-worked arts sector, I ask for time with artwork and for a wide array of informed, interesting people to have platforms for sharing their wisdom.

I wonder too, how many people experienced the same Wellness Weekend as me. I didn't notice anyone else at all three events, and given that I'm arguing its significance lay in experiencing the entire programme, has it failed if most people only saw bits? Is this an approach that could hinder its own goals of democratisation? A necessarily busy public could easily only see pieces of a picture that requires a full experience to become truly meaningful. What kind of achievement is it when a public programme, steeped in ideas of accessibility and reach, provides (once again) a suite of activities perfect for one Pākehā woman?

I spoke with a friend about it all a few days later and explained how the weekend surprised me by resolving into something genuinely engaging.

'That's really cool,' he said. 'Did you see many of the same people at each event?'

I paused. 'I...don't think so?'

He raised his eyebrows. 'So City Gallery crushed it? For an audience of one?'

'I guess so.' I said, laughing. 'Perfect programming. For an audience of one.'

Footnotes

- 1: Chiara O'Reilly and Anna Lawrenson, 'Democratising audience experience: making space for families in blockbuster exhibitions,' *Museum Management and Curatorship* 36, no. 2 (2021)136-153, 137.
- 2: 'About', City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, <https://citygallery.org.nz/about/>.
- 3: 'Vision', The Dowse Art Museum, <https://dowse.org.nz/about/vision/>.
- 4: Thomasin Sleigh, 'Te Hikōi Toi: Hauntings revealing female agency,' *Stuff*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/arts/300469385/te-hiki-toi-hauntings-revealing-female-agency>.
- 5: 'Wellness Weekend,' City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, <https://citygallery.org.nz/events/wellness-weekend/>.
- 6: Megan Dunn, 'Wellness Weekend at City Gallery,' interview by Maggie Tweedie, *Breakfast, RadioActive.FM*, February 8, 2022, audio, 11:17, <https://www.radioactive.fm/wellness-weekend-at-city-gallery-08-02-2022/>.
- 7: Ibid.
- 8: Ibid.
- 9: 'About', City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi.
- 10: Sleigh, 'Te Hikōi Toi: Hauntings revealing female agency'.

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