

## Charmion von Wiegand and Abstract Painting<sup>1</sup>

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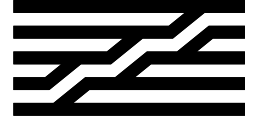
Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

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Around 1950, Charmion von Wiegand (Chicago, IL 1896 - New York, NY 1983) became recognized as an artist expanding neo-plasticism's conventions with a combination of modernist geometric abstraction and aesthetic codifications that echoed Eastern imagery. At that point, she was relatively new to abstract painting, though far from new to the New York scene. An active part of 1920s literary circles and a reporter based in post-revolutionary Moscow around 1930, she had established herself as an art critic with a point of view that embraced socialist ideas as well as abstract art. Even though she had been exploring painting since 1927, she was initially known as a writer. It was in this role that she approached Piet Mondrian, who had just gone into exile in New York. Whether as a painter, an art critic, a curator or as president of the *American Abstract Artists*, von Wiegand repeatedly concerned herself with the history, meaning, and transformation of abstraction. In addition to publishing on the Dutch painter's work paradigms, her intense study of neo-plastic ideas became the impetus for von Wiegand's own life-long investigation of geometric abstraction. While being represented in major collections of mostly U.S. museums, her work is today virtually unknown. The challenge of a visual language that, looking back at twentieth-century art, defies any obvious categorization was to be a constant companion in the engagement with von Wiegand and her artistic and intellectual legacy, as was the appendage "Mondrian."

With this paper we wish to emphasize that Charmion von Wiegand was an active agent in the establishing of abstract art in the U.S. during the 1930s and 40s and deserves to be acknowledged as such. Furthermore, it is our aim to show that her artistic explorations of abstraction are multi-faceted, and are spanning from neo-plasticism to Buddhist mandalas, from automatic drawings to color field painting. Both her painterly oeuvre and her writing must be understood as a constant negotiation of what abstraction actually is. Finally, it is to be said that von Wiegand is largely absent from the canon of abstract art because of her multi-faceted understanding of abstraction, and especially because she conceived her later work as representations of a specific religious 'dogma', thus entering a field that lies traditionally outside of Western art historiography. From a contemporary perspective, the latter isn't to her disadvantage.



## Charmion von Wiegand's formation as agent in the history of abstract art in the U.S.

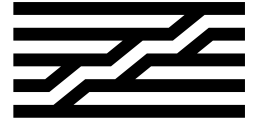
von Wiegand was initially active as a writer, and having arrived in Moscow in 1929, she became the only female correspondent in the Soviet capital to work for a U.S. news agency. What interested von Wiegand about the USSR was not so much the progressive art by the likes of Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova as the immediate impact of the Revolution on the everyday lives of the people there, as well as the art of socialist propaganda.

On returning to the U.S. in 1930, she took part as a journalist in the debates about the social status of artists and the social relevance of art, all against the backdrop of the Great Depression, during which time periodicals such as *Art Front* and *New Masses*, weighed the advantages of figurative art against those of abstract art. The artist and filmmaker Hans Richter and the scenographer Frederick Kiesler became friends and discussion partners; together with the artist Carl Holty she worked on a manuscript of a *History of Abstract Art*.

After reviewing the pamphlet *Five on Revolutionary Art* in which Herbert Read hails Piet Mondrian as a "true revolutionary artist," she decided to meet the latter, who had just moved to New York from London. The conversation that evolved between von Wiegand and Mondrian between their first encounter in April 1941 and his death on February 1, 1944, was consequential for both of them.<sup>2</sup> The engagement with the mature artist's working methods and his theoretical concepts were fundamental for von Wiegand as they introduced her to a convincing artistic solution for a form of geometric abstraction with socially relevant content.<sup>3</sup>

She would henceforth edit and translate many of Mondrian's writings and become a member of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), which she would later preside. von Wiegand wrote "The Meaning of Mondrian," the first comprehensive article on the Dutch artist to be written from a U.S. perspective, published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1943.<sup>4</sup> Already in 1942, von Wiegand and Stephan C. Lions co-curated *Masters of Abstract Art*, a benefit show for the Red Cross held at Helena Rubinstein's New Art Center in New York with works by Stuart Davis, Miro, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Richter, a.o. After Mondrian's death, she organized several exhibitions for Rose Fried's Pinacotheca Gallery in New York, among them *The White Plane*, for which she a.o. assembled works by Mondrian and Kandinsky as well as together with Katherine Dreier and Naum Gabo an exhibition of works by Kurt Schwitters.

While von Wiegand is known to have engaged in dialogue with artists such as Joseph Stella as early as the 1920s, and she began drawing and painting in a figurative manner around the same time, the first works that make up what is now considered her artistic oeuvre all date from the early 1940s. The graphic compositions of her works from the mid-1940s however, and even more so their titles leave us in no doubt that, contrary to the oft-repeated assertion of her indebtedness to Mondrian, von Wiegand developed her first body of work against the backdrop of "biomorphism" and its omnipresence in artistic and intellectual



life of New York in the 1940s. The graphic compositions of these works and even more so their titles leave us in no doubt that, contrary to the oft-repeated assertion of her indebtedness to Mondrian, von Wiegand developed her first body of work in dialogue with Richter and Kiesler. It seems likely that the latter's staging of Peggy Guggenheim's collection at her gallery *Art of This Century* was instrumental in shaping von Wiegand's development as an artist in her own right.

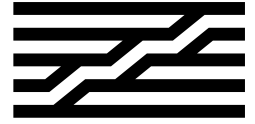
## Charmion von Wiegand's Painterly Exploration of Abstraction

The question of what abstraction actually means in the oeuvre of Charmion von Wiegand is complicated, inasmuch as her visual logic, aesthetic methods, and aims vary from work to work, and while they all warrant the epithet "abstract," they are in essence all but congruent. The same can be said about her writing about abstract art that ranges from the rejection of non-objective painting as supposedly detached from all worldly points of reference in an early review in *Art Front* to an interest in Far Eastern painting, from a formalist analysis of Piet Mondrian works to the idea of abstract art as "the basis for a world concept of art".<sup>5</sup>

Let us first consider some of her works: An example for von Wiegand's early painterly practice are automatic drawings, which she often used as source material for paintings. One example is her notebook from around 1942 and a mixed-media collage of around the same year. Another example would be the oil painting *Forms No. 6., Disparate Forms* as representation of von Wiegand's "biomorphic phase". Organic forms, reminiscent of Joan Miró, originating from automatic drawings, are integrated in a grid that is not yet the Mondrian grid. In this body of work, abstraction is the product of von Wiegand's interest in psychoanalysis and surrealism or an attempt to generate non-representational images from the unconscious. These works also testify to her involvement in the circles of Kiesler, Richter, and Peggy Guggenheim's *Art of This Century* gallery.

While paintings such as *City Lights* (1947) can certainly be viewed as imitations of Piet Mondrian, they – like other works belonging to this phase – can also be understood as a literal *refiguration* of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. After all, we read them not as geometric forms without external referents, but rather as the abstraction of an urban environment. What is meant by "refiguration of Neo-Plasticism" becomes obvious in a direct confrontation. While in Mondrian any external referent is eliminated, Charmion von Wiegand undogmatically uses Mondrian's grid structure, but introduces elements that must be understood as representational. In that sense, Charmion von Wiegand stands out from Mondrian's Neo-Plasticist circle of Fritz Glarner, Burgoyne Diller and the likes.

Created just two years later, the work *Radiating Plane* (1949) is yet very different and reminiscent of a contemporary fashion in color field painting. It must be regarded as part of a phase characterized by von Wiegand's adoption of a non-representational idiom that managed entirely without any external points of reference at all. Other paintings, especially those belonging to her late phase, further complicate the



relationship between the abstract and the non-representational, as well as that between means and ends. One good example of this is *Ascent to Mt. Meru* (1962). A Western reading of this painting would interpret it as the geometric abstraction of a mountain depicted from different angles simultaneously—assuming there were any (external) points of reference at all. At the same time, the painting is bound by a traditional Tibetan style of representation in which showing an object at once from above and from the side is entirely normal. In this sense, *Ascent to Mt. Meru* is a mandala, which inevitably raises the question of whether it perhaps functions more as an invitation to meditation, the abstraction being a deliberate means to an end. Haema Sivanesan argues that this phase in Charmion von Wiegand’s oeuvre represents the beginning of her work towards a visual language for a transcultural, modern Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

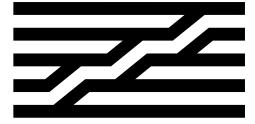
The argument that all those examples, covering a period of roughly only two decades, seem disparate and incongruent, can only be supported, if we apply the standard of the alleged necessity of a coherent oeuvre, or at least of an oeuvre that is explicable in art historical terms of a progressive and logical development. Charmion von Wiegand herself was aware of this: in an interview from 1968 she went on record saying that when she first began studying Buddhist art, she saw an “aesthetic conflict”<sup>7</sup> with the ideals of Neo-Plasticism, but that this problem soon lost all relevance for her.

Having seen how Charmion von Wiegand grappled with the abstract and the non-representational in her own artistic output, it comes as no surprise to discover that by the 1950s and 1960s, the fusion of different traditions of abstraction was informing not just her painting, but also her writing. Her essay “The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art,” published in 1957, was premised on the assumption that the establishment of abstract art in the West would bring it closer to the image-making traditions of the Far East. The consequences of this would be far-reaching:

During and after the first world war, the pioneers of abstract art formulated a new plastic language in which local, particular and national differences were gradually absorbed into a universal expression [...] But today everything vitally creative in art takes place, for the most part, in the abstract domain; all the esthetic arguments are conducted on this level.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, von Wiegand was also concerned with the equivalence – even the equation – of completely different pictorial traditions: here the autonomy of modern art in Europe and North America, there the religious-spiritual art of Asia. By implication, spirituality is thus upheld as a legitimate criterion for abstract art in the first place. von Wiegand even saw the triumph of Abstract Expressionism as but further progress toward the putative leveling of local cultural traditions and peculiarities:

Whatever beautiful works of art the abstract expressionists are creating, the movement as a whole has been one further step in the disintegration of the Western tradition. In this crisis Western art can either move backward into its own past, turn in on itself and [...] mechanically repeat its formulas; or it can move forward and seek a new level on the basis of a world concept of art.<sup>9</sup>

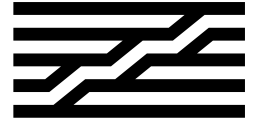


Her idea of a “world concept of art” was ultimately an attempt to describe nothing less than the consolidation of abstract art, which is historically and temporally broadened in order to lend it legitimacy – on the grounds that it has always existed all over the globe. Such a notion rests on an understanding of art as autonomous and of its forms as detached from their local and historical context. Aesthetic methods, spiritual and religious ends, political demands, and local traditions are thus reduced to a single common denominator defined solely by a superficial similarity. This places von Wiegand in the company of contemporary authors like Werner Haftmann, who in his 1954 book, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, developed the idea of “abstraction as a world language,” with which he sought to explain the worldwide dominance of abstract art after 1945 in an ahistorical, formalistic, and decontextualized fashion.<sup>10</sup> Behind this, as with von Wiegand, lay the endeavor to establish an absolute equivalence for which cultural and historical differences were of negligible importance. Such a view is not unproblematic, since from today’s perspective, certain tendencies would be understood as “cultural appropriation.” The argument becomes more understandable, though not necessarily less in need of further explanation when the historical context is thrown into the equation and the specific understanding of the meaning of abstraction interpreted historically. Writing in the early 1950s, Haftmann’s primary concern was the rehabilitation of so-called “degenerate art” and the aspiration that West Germany, firmly anchored within the bounds of Western liberalism, could reconnect with the international art scene.<sup>11</sup> von Wiegand’s art criticism and paintings from the 1950s onward, by contrast, must be understood within the (cultural-)political context of McCarthyism, that is to say, the persecution of those on the left, which certainly included the artist herself, who wrote articles for various left-wing publications, and others in her circle.

## Reasons for Charmion von Wiegand’s absence in the Canon

As Nancy J. Troy points out in her recent article on von Wiegand, that even as the story of her engagement with Mondrian today counts as a valuable art historical resource for those interested in Mondrian’s work, aspects of von Wiegand’s relationship to Mondrian went unacknowledged while the stylistic debt was consistently reconfirmed by journalists and critics, thereby shaping von Wiegand’s profile and locking her into a subordinate position in the art historical record.<sup>12</sup> Troy lays out how von Wiegand remained, an outsider to the predominantly male group of Mondrian-affiliated artists and how she continuously received credit neither for the effort of having translated as well as edited many of Mondrian’s essays nor for her article on Mondrian which she published as early as 1943.<sup>13</sup> But the lack of an artistic ‘signature style’ isn’t the only reason, for von Wiegand’s absence in art history until now. Furthermore, Charmion von Wiegand’s artistic position and work elude any easy categorization using the selection criteria common to the twentieth century – criteria such as identifiable style or artistic innovation – Lee Krasner suffered a similar fate.<sup>14</sup>

In awareness of von Wiegand’s paintings which unarguably depict the city of New York we wonder, from a contemporary point of view, why von Wiegand for example was not included in *American Artists Paint the City*,

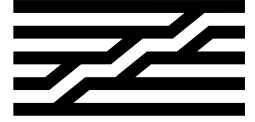


the 1956 group exhibit showcasing that very same tradition that Katharine Kuh curated at the American pavilion of the Venice Biennale. The answer probably has to do with Kuh's agenda, which was focused firmly on North America. Artists like von Wiegand who had a socialist past and who were not only open to, but actively interested in Europe's artistic tradition must therefore have been seen as insufficiently representative. But von Wiegand herself had no interest in debates with nationalistic overtones. As pointed out above, by then, she believed the future to lie in the influence of East Asian art: "Today it is the arts of the Far East that are pervading the artistic atmosphere and whose influence we may expect to see growing."<sup>15</sup>

As of the mid-1950s, von Wiegand comes close to breaking altogether with what, since 1800, has been one of the paradigms of Western autonomous art, namely its detachment from a religious context. This is also the paradigm underlying those various traditions, which the curator Maurice Tuchman brought together at the L.A. County Museum of Art in 1986 for the exhibition *The Spiritual in Abstract Art*. The catalogue contains an essay by Donald Kuspit that gives us an inkling of why von Wiegand's work was not included in that exhibition. Spiritually powerful contemporary art, Kuspit writes, "is not the vehicle of communication of religious dogma but of a certain kind of irreducible, nondiscursive experience."<sup>16</sup> According to curator and scholar Haema Sivanesan, von Wiegand's true contribution to the history of twentieth-century art, taking the *classical* Modernist criterion of artistic innovation as a benchmark of quality, was her work to "produce an image of 'modern Buddhism' – that is, an image of Buddhism as a trans-cultural phenomena."<sup>17</sup>

A reviewer writing about an exhibition of von Wiegand's works in Hartford, Connecticut, in the early 1990s asked the following question: "So why just 10 years after her death isn't she a better known figure?"<sup>18</sup> Any answer to that question would almost certainly include mention her works position both within the Western tradition of autonomous, abstract art and in relation to a field that lies outside the purview of Western art historiography.<sup>19</sup> Future projects regarding von Wiegand should aim to connect her work not just to geometric, abstract art, but also to artists such as George Brecht, Robert Filliou, or Ray Johnson, artists to whom von Wiegand might well have had contact, given their shared interest in Buddhist practice. She is certainly known to have had contact with Mail Art pioneer Ray Johnson, with whom she had a joint exhibition at the Sid Deutsch Gallery in New York in 1977.

Then there is her work as a curator, journalist, and organizer, and her careful cultivation of her own biography and attempts to correlate it to her artistic output, all of which are factors that only now show off von Wiegand's role within the American art scene from the 1940s to the 1970s.



## Notes

1. Parts of this paper have previously been published in two articles: Felix Vogel, "Autonomy – Spirituality – Universalism: The Meaning of Abstraction", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, Maja Wismer, ed., London, Prestel, 2021, 117–128 and Maja Wismer, "The Paradox of Transformation", in *ibid.*, 12-30. Our research is based on the exhibition project *Charmion von Wiegand: Expanding Modernism* which was originally to be presented at Kunstmuseum Basel in Fall of 2020, and is now scheduled for 2023. Much of this paper's content was conceived and discussed with students of the Institute of Art History of the University of Basel as well as in the framework of a study day with international colleagues which took place at the Kunstmuseum Basel in the fall of 2019.
2. Herbert Read, *Five on Revolutionary Art*, Betty Rea, ed. (London: Wishart, 1935). For more on the correspondence between von Wiegand and Mondrian see Martin Brauen, "You are a writer and I don't want to know about your painting", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, op. cit., 41-60 as well as Martin Brauen, *A Sameness Between Us. The Friendship of Charmion von Wiegand and Piet Mondrian in Letters and Memoirs* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art, 2021).
3. For more on this see the essay by Nancy J. Troy, "'Mondrian was my Guru': Charmion von Wiegand and Piet Mondrian in the 1940s and 1950s", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, op. cit., 67-90.
4. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Meaning of Mondrian", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Autumn 1943), 62-70.
5. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art," in *The World of Abstract Art*, American Abstract Artists, ed. (New York: George Wittenborn, 1957), 55–67 (here 55).
6. See Haema Sivanesan, "Charmion von Wiegand's Vision of Modern Buddhism", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, op. cit., 91-116
7. Oral history interview with Charmion von Wiegand by Paul Cummings, October 9 and November 3, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 22.
8. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art", in *The World of Abstract Art*, op. Cit., 56.
9. *Ibid.*, 62.
10. Werner Haftmann, *Die Malerei im 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Prestel, 1954), translated as *Painting in the Twentieth Century* by R. Manheim (New York: Praeger, 1960).
11. This claim is even more problematic on a different level. It has recently been brought to wider attention that Haftmann was a member of the Nazi Party and that he took part in executing and torturing partisans in Italy during WWII. His position as an important apologist of modern art in postwar Germany – not least due to his important role in the early iterations of *documenta* – appears in a different light. A reassessment of his writings against this background is yet to be undertaken.
12. Nancy J. Troy, "'Mondrian was my Guru': Charmion von Wiegand and Piet Mondrian in the 1940s and 1950s", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, 67-90.
13. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Meaning of Mondrian", op. cit.
14. See Suzanne Hudson, "Present Conditional", in *Lee Krasner. Living Colour* (London : Thames & Hudson, 2019), 42.
15. Charmion von Wiegand, "The Oriental Tradition and Abstract Art," in *The World of Abstract Art*, op. cit., 55.
16. Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," in *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 319
17. Haema Sivanesan, "Charmion von Wiegand's Vision of Modern Buddhism", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, op. cit., 115.
18. Owen McNally, "A Mondrian Influence, but Wiegand an Original", *Hartford Courant*, November 21, 1993, quoted in Nancy J. Troy, "'Mondrian was my Guru': Charmion von Wiegand and Piet Mondrian in the 1940s and 1950s", in *Charmion von Wiegand. Expanding Modernism*, op. cit., 89.
19. See Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art." in *The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, op. cit.