

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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## The thing about feelings: The radical notions of Annie Besant

Lori Waxman

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"Intention to Know: The Thought Forms of Annie Besant" at the Stony Island Arts Bank through March 1 includes Mysterious Object at Noon, a sculpture by Cauleen Smith. (Habib Bolat photo)

What does explosive anger look like? It isn't hard to picture a narrative scene that corresponds, perhaps a burly man in a traffic jam screaming while pumping his fist out an open car window. But that's a person and a situation, not a feeling. More ambitious, if stranger, would be the attempt to illustrate anger itself. At the turn of the 19th century, a British woman named Annie Besant gave visual form to an array of emotions, among them high ambition, vague sympathy, self-renunciation, definite affection, helpful thoughts and the appreciation of a picture.

To see how Besant envisioned them, pick up a copy of "Thought Forms," a book she co-wrote in 1905. Better yet, visit the Stony Island Arts Bank, where the formidable curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has assembled an unusual exhibition devoted to Besant's ideas, writings and influence among contemporary artists.

Christov-Bakargiev, who in January became the director of a museum consortium in Turin, Italy, after organizing the 14th Istanbul Biennial and dOCUMENTA (13), two of the most prestigious art festivals in the world, has found a suitable temporary home for Besant. Born in London in 1847, Besant defied every norm in pursuit of that which she believed to be true. In 1873 she separated from her clergyman husband when their religious and political views diverged. In 1877 she was jailed for publishing a book about birth control. In the 1880s she was a leading speaker and columnist for socialist, union and Marxist causes, and a supporter of Irish home rule. In 1888 she was elected to the London School Board at a time when women had no right to vote. The second half of her life was devoted to Theosophy, a universal spiritual movement with the motto: There is no religion higher than truth. Theosophy led her to India, where she became president of the Theosophical Society, campaigned against British rule and in 1917 led the Indian National Congress. She died at the age of 85. A neighborhood in Chennai, the capital city of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is named in her honor.

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It is humbling to encounter an extraordinary figure from the past about whom one has known nothing until that very moment.

There Besant hovers, in a sunlit room at the top of the Arts Bank, a building filled with the library of John H. Johnson, founder of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines; 60,000 glass lantern slides retired from the University of Chicago's art history department; the vinyl archive of Frankie Knuckles, godfather of House music; a complete set of every *Artforum* published to date; and African-American history books deaccessioned from DuSable High School. With most of these collections displayed on open stacks searchable by the public, the building is a beacon for anyone who wants to know more. "Intention to Know," the title of the Besant show, is borrowed from her writings, but it could equally name the purpose of everyone and everything on the Arts Bank's three floors.

So what does explosive anger look like? Besant, or rather the artists she commissioned to illustrate her ideas, envisioned it as a burst of orange and yellow shards erupting from a central black void. High ambition emerges orange and yellow too, but grasping forward from a dense orb. Vague sympathy manifests as a greenish blob. Helpful thoughts pop up as sparkly little blue crosses and green triangles.

If this all sounds like hocus-pocus, it both is and isn't. One of the central purposes of art has always been to give shape to that which is felt and believed but cannot be otherwise perceived: the halo round a saint's head in devotional images; the pleasure of fear in a stormy Turner; the relativity of time in Dali's bendy clocks. "Sometimes all we can do is think in pictures," types Erin Hayden, a young artist whose book of poems and abstractions, as eloquent as it is ludic, appears here. "Think in postures," she continues. "Think in postage colors."

Besant believed that thoughts were things, things that affect life. Contemporary medical research on the placebo effect bears this out: if a patient with Parkinson's takes a fake pill that they think is their prescription medicine, dopamine floods the brain, just as with the real drug. The quirk of Besant's visualizations of the invisible may be their abstractness, their materialization as color and form, but that is also their significance. Christov-Bakargiev claims Besant as the first theorist of modern abstract art. She may well be: Many of the pioneers of abstract painting, among them Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Hilma Af Klint, were adherents of Theosophy and likely to have been familiar with Besant's book. The last images in "Thought Forms" represent music emanating from church towers: the one for Charles Gounod, a French composer best known for his *Ave Maria*, would be derivative of Kandinsky, except that Kandinsky developed his brilliantly colored lyrical forms nearly a decade later.

Christov-Bakargiev is known for her provocative juxtapositions of old and new artworks, artifacts and research materials, and even in so modest a setting as this she does not disappoint. On view are offset color prints of the gouaches that appeared in Besant's 1905 book, hung in sync with watercolor copies, handmade last year by the Danish artist Lea Porsager. Looking at them together on the gallery wall is like walking through a book that took more than a century to complete. Nearby are photographs taken of 21 of the original gouaches, newly discovered this past October in India and currently under restoration. A first edition of the book, bound in forest green with gold lettering, remains mysteriously closed. Comparisons abound between the originals, the offsets and the watercolors — which differ in sharpness, orientation and tone — and seem to test the formal limits of Besant's system.

A choice selection of the dozens of books written by Besant and photographs from throughout her life are displayed in old wooden bureaus. With some drawers pulled out and glass topped and others left closed, the feeling is of poking around in someone's things, not salaciously but out of pure curiosity. Discoveries include Besant's easy transition from the Victorian dress of her youth to the saris of her later years. Bookplates reveal the Theosophical Society in America to be based just down the road in Wheaton. A tattered volume of Besant's 1901 "Thought Power: Its Control and Culture," heavily annotated by the experimental jazz musician and cosmic philosopher Sun Ra, bespeaks her influence along the cultural fringe.

The Sun Ra copy also acts as a bridge between Besant and the lone sculpture in the exhibition. *Mysterious Object at Noon*, a contraption built by the contemporary artist and Sun Ra acolyte Cauleen Smith, links together bicycle wheels, feathers, metal balls, chains and a small houseplant. It looks like it might do something astonishing, and maybe it will. Perhaps, invisible to the unprimed eye, it already does.