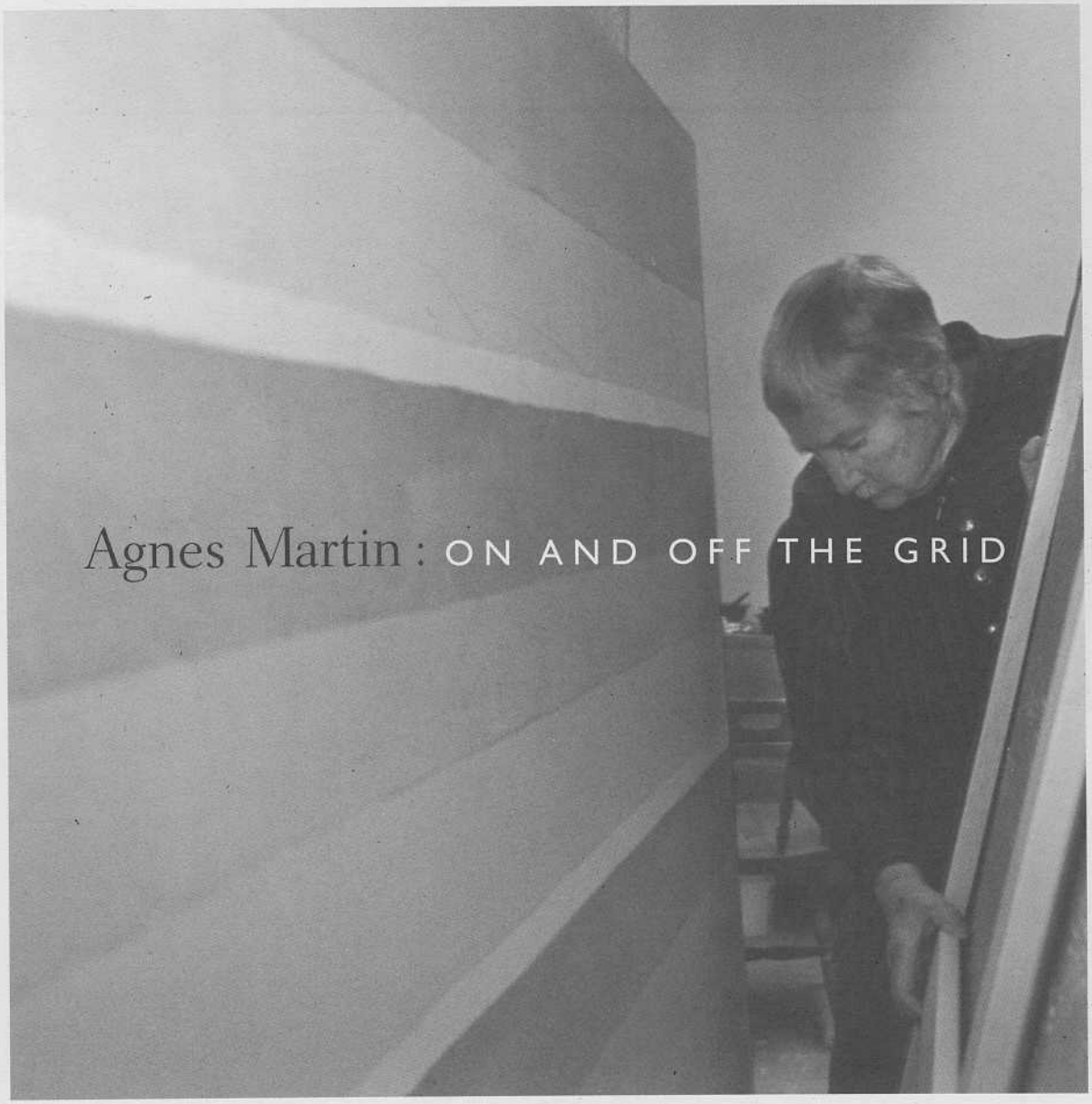
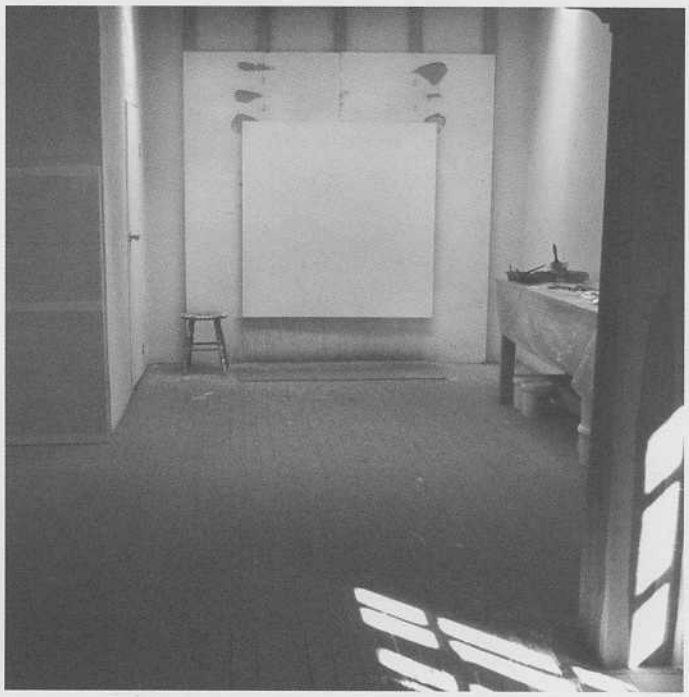


Agnes Martin : ON AND OFF THE GRID



Agnes Martin was born in rural Saskatchewan in 1912, the same year as Jackson Pollock and almost due North of his Wyoming birthplace. Whereas the art that Pollock eventually came to make flirted notoriously with chaos, Martin's canonical paintings would be rigorously ordered, with patterns as simply repetitive as the rows of wheat grown by her homesteader parents. More readily, Martin's paintings might evoke plain, ruled paper—graph paper, notebook paper, blank music paper—while Pollock's might evoke wild writing. But commonalities exist: in their use of "all-over" compositional structures; in a reliance on line, as opposed to shape, and a concomitant refusal of the figure-ground paradigm normally underpinning picture-making; and in a predilection for black, white, and shades thereof, together with a downplaying of hue. Though the arc of Pollock's career would be complete before Martin had even her first solo show—whereas she continues to work today—she all along identified herself with the Abstract Expressionist generation that he spearheaded and which she extolled as among the greatest generations ever. Martin arrived at her "signature style"—six-foot-square canvases covered with thinly lined grids (composed purposely, unlike graph paper, of rectangles and not squares)—around 1963, more than a decade after the breakthroughs achieved by Abstract Expressionism's founders, a fact that precludes her from being grouped with them in textbook narratives. (No matter that Barnett Newman helped install Martin's early solo shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery, where he and fellow Abstract Expressionist painters Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko had all been affiliated, or that she became close to Ad Reinhardt, a fellow adept of the grid.) The austere geometry of Martin's art caused her at times to be classified with the Minimalist group, which matured artistically around the same time she did. But like the Abstract Expressionists and unlike, say, Minimalist Sol LeWitt, Martin invariably rendered her grids by hand; and even as she drew her graphite lines as straight as possible, she valued the hand's insinuation, however subtle, of the self into the work.

Also like the Abstract Expressionists, Agnes Martin became intent on making art that was abstract, yet that entailed subjects or "themes," and she saw no contradiction between those aims. Further, Martin imbued a kind of spiritual moment in her work—as did Newman, Rothko, and Reinhardt, the last of whom shared her interest in combining Eastern with Western spiritual thinking—though she would talk in complex, and at times contradictory, terms about this aspect of her art. As high-minded but less dark or eschatological than those of her male peers, the themes that Martin claimed for her work include innocence, happiness, beauty, and exaltation. Those states she saw as inextricably linked with experiences of nature, and her titles often feature natural images, as in *The Islands*, or *Night Sea*, *Leaves*, and

Lemon Tree. As to how Martin found her "vision," she explained: "When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then this grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do."[1]

Some critics have taken license from Martin's words to frame her art as abstracted landscapes of a kind, though she finally discourages such notions, noting that she arrived at the grid format while in New York City, and that there are no straight lines in nature. In Canada as in the US, however, the Great Plains area is organized largely by orthogonal grids of roads and cultivated fields. Not only agricultural production but cloth production, too, is anciently underpinned by the grid, and Martin's work has also often been likened to textiles—another metaphor she refuses, as her ambitions are those of the high, not the craft, artist. In the history of Western painting, the grid underpins especially Renaissance perspective, which tacitly lives on, even monopolizing the contemporary visual regime, through the monocular device of the camera. The grid also structures the modern urban world, of course, as a basis of building, industry, computers, and so forth. When Martin made New York City her home, however, between 1957 and 1967, she lived off the grid—not in the orderly midtown blocks (where the elderly Mondrian had resided so happily) but in an erratically configured, derelict downtown area. And when Martin moved back West, she elected to live still farther off the grid—without running water or electricity—in structures she built herself atop a remote New Mexican mesa. Typically, those opting to live "off the grid" are deeply alienated or at large from conventional society, such as hippies, say, or anti-government fanatics. Though she by no means fits such descriptions (and she did eventually rejoin society, by degrees), I mean to suggest that the grid that came to be indelibly identified with Martin operated as a kind of screen—that is, as an emblem of normality, or at once modern and modernist conventionality. The grid, as Martin insistently implemented it, served in a sense to screen her deeply non-conventional life.

Biographical accounts of Martin tend to some sketchiness ("certain aspects of and events in Martin's life would not be discussed," states the prelude to an official Archives of American Art interview, explaining the ground rules).[2] But such accounts invariably stress her lifelong solitariness, sometimes deploying a vocabulary of abstinence, Puritanism, and repression—terms that are likewise routinely attached to her art (an "art nun," one interlocutor dubbed her).[3] Martin's acceptability within a New York art community that, especially in the late 1950s and '60s, validated few other women, arguably hinged not merely on the persuasiveness of her achievement, then, but also on the widespread perception that art and

artist both conformed to an unthreatening model of a "good woman": self-abnegating, modest, plain, passive, immaculate, controlled, and spiritually minded (all descriptors readily found in the typically approbatory critical literature on Martin).

Agnes Martin's paintings have always demanded a committed viewer: her grids and bands are so faintly etched on canvases so nearly blank in their whiteness or paleness that the paintings seem to hover on the brink of invisibility. So too did Martin, who fled the New York art world in 1967 at a peak of success, forgoing art-making to wander through the far West. What goes unsaid, however, is that making one's self invisible was practically a reflexive strategy for a lesbian of Martin's generation. Observes Laura Cottingham (the first to name Martin's sexuality in print): "Before the second half of this [twentieth] century, full-time lesbianism was a prerogative available only to the extremely rich or the extremely secretive." Indeed, until the feminist movement of the 1970s bore its full fruit, "the possibility and the actuality of a lesbian life were inconceivable for the overwhelming majority of women."[4] Women were widely expelled from the workplace and impelled to assume the housewife's role in the post-World War II United States. And in the McCarthy era and its aftermath, "even extremely closeted homosexuals and lesbians were barred or dismissed from federal jobs and the military; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began broad surveillance of homophile organizations and gay gathering places; and urban police heightened their harassment of homosexual citizens... In every public art, lesbianism was invisible."[5] It bears underlining, then, that Martin's fixation on "innocence" assumes other overtones in the context of a society that systematically pathologized and criminalized her sexual orientation.

The innocuous reasons Martin has given for leaving New York—such as that urban renewal initiatives spelled the demise of her studio—are not incredible. But there are also suggestions that she was fleeing a love affair gone wrong. With the abstinent life she seems to have chosen after returning West, Martin would come to deride "passion" and "lust" as "not real," and as unworthy because "exhaustible" emotions[6]; "Real love is when you're not making love but you still love each other. Innocent love is what I paint about."[7] In 1973, Martin reportedly remarked that "she never met anybody who wasn't searching for love. she thinks this is a great mistake. she described a time of her own enslavement in this respect and how she became definitively done with it."[8] From this vantage point, Martin's grids might be seen as comprising a screen for personal feelings, or an "art that is as much a stay against personal chaos as it is a paean to spiritual optimism."[9] For Freud, remember, the screen had to do with displacement, as the "screen memory"

serves to front or cover for repressed sexual experiences or fantasies. In Lacan's lexicon, further, the screen correlates with that "external representation" that the subject "relies [upon] for his or her visual identity." Lacan's screen "does not merely 'open'...onto what it obstructs, but rather substitutes itself for the latter," explains Kaja Silverman; as such it may be deployed "for purposes of...camouflage, and travesty."[10] Note that Martin's grids may seem transparent, as if flooded by light; but nothing is ever glimpsed through those grid/screens and, as such, they finally appear opaque.

As the daughter of a widowed mother who rehabilitated houses for a living—in Vancouver, where she spent most of her school-age years—Agnes was an exceptionally strong girl who went on to become something of a home (and studio) builder herself, at ease with a chainsaw and a pickup truck. Photographic portraits of the artist typically reveal a substantial woman, free of feminine embellishments, with hair pulled back or severely cropped, in masculine or androgynous clothing—though with eyes almost heartbreakingly full of feeling, a gaze (to my eyes) that prevents any mistake as to her gender. Since descriptions of her art tend to evoke a delicate being, first-time visitors sometimes admit to being startled by Martin's mannish physicality: "'Didn't you see those formidable forearms? This had to be someone else'"; "the denim overalls she lives in and paints in are from Sears... Her practice is more or less like the morning shift down at the GM truck assembly plant."[11] With respect to the "objects/signs of lesbian desire," Teresa de Lauretis observes, "by far the most common in modern Western cultures... is some form of what is coded as masculinity... [I]n a cultural tradition pervasively homophobic, masculinity alone carries a strong connotation of sexual desire for the female body."[12] Judith Butler tells, however, of the lesbian femme who "likes her boys to be girls," such that in the "butch" identity (which Martin fits), "masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible 'female body'... In other words, the object (and clearly, there is not just one) of lesbian-femme desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay."[13]

I will hazard that something like this instability and interplay may be discerned in Martin's art, which apparently is, yet ineluctably isn't, mannish. Some feminists have cuttingly insinuated that Martin's work effectively "passes" as mainstream (read: masculinist) modernism. But by the extreme strictness of her adherence to the grid, Martin effectively outdid the orthodoxies of certain codes of modernist painting, which explicitly or tacitly entailed a reliance on geometry. An excess of conformity may amount to a form of non-conformity; and by their extraordinary

spareness and reticence, Martin's grids might be seen to work in subtly counter-orthodox ways, quietly inscribing a form of feminine and lesbian identity willfully aligned with, yet willfully apart from, masculine norms. Whereas Martin herself was incurably abnormal by the standards of her era, the grid, as an instrument, stands for, charts, and indeed implements the normal: outlining a universe of strict binaries, of horizontals versus verticals (or feminine versus masculine trajectories, as Mondrian and others classified them). It is precisely through normativity, including ideas of normal psychosexual development, that the repressive effects of power often manifest. Once she left the city, with its painful romantic entanglements and its pervasive risk of surveillance, Martin increasingly dispensed with the grid; in fact, her works since 1974 (after a protracted hiatus from painting) often consist only of horizontal bands, as in *The Islands* series. No horizontal versus vertical meant no absolute binary (such as woman eternally and inevitably versus man). Indeed, living in solitude Martin reportedly equated with "not having any verticals."[14]

Martin's paintings are clearly no more figurative than they are landscapes, and yet the body and the landscape both distantly haunt her compositions (as they do Pollock's and Rothko's). Martin says she chose her standard 6' x 6' canvas size because it was "the full size of the human body."[15] And, she poetically explained, "I painted those rectangles / From Isaiah, about inspiration / 'Surely the people is grass'... / All the people were like those rectangles / they are just like grass."[16] Elsewhere I have discussed Martin's work in relation to the trope of the blank page, as it stands for an innocent girl—such as the "beautiful daughter" Martin adduced in her flowery writings—who successfully eludes the phallic pen, eludes inscription. (Apropos here is an Isak Dinesen tale concerning the archaic practice of publicly displaying the blood-stained bed sheets of newly deflowered princesses as testimony to "their acquiescence as objects of exchange," in Susan Gubar's words—in which context the appearance of an unstained or blank sheet emerges as a "potent act of resistance" or subversion.)[17] Plainly, there are no easy answers to the question: 'What does a lesbian painting look like?', the more so when abstract art is at issue. But what if we were to think of Martin's cherished emblem, her "beautiful daughter," as not or not only pre-sexual or asexual, but as differently sexual too, endowed with sexuality from off the grid? I do not imagine that we might thereby arrive at a sufficient reading of Martin's work, but I do imagine the possibility for a newly, engagingly layered reading.

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NOTES TO THE ESSAY

1 Suzan Campbell, "Interview with Agnes Martin," May 15, 1989, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 10-11.

2 Ibid, n.p.

3 Julie L. Belcove, "The Age of Agnes," *W* 32, no. 7 (July 2003), 99.

4 Laura Cottingham, *Lesbians are So Chic*... (London: Cassell, 1996), 4.

5 Yvonne Keller, "Pulp Politics," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

6 Kate Horsfield, "On Art and Artists: Agnes Martin," *Profile* 1, no.2 (March 1981), 6.

7 Belcove, 102.

8 Jill Johnston, "Agnes Martin: Surrender and Solitude," *Village Voice*, Sept. 13, 1973, 33 (orthography as in original).

9 Holland Cotter, "Agnes Martin," *Art Journal* 57, no.3 (Fall 1998), 80.

10 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 18, 134.

11 Rosamond Bernier, "Drawing the Line," *Vogue*, Nov. 1992, 306; John Bentley Mays, "Agnes Martin Demystified," *Canadian Art* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1992), 46-7.

12 Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 243.

13 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 123.

14 Johnston, 33.

15 Campbell, 17.

16 Agnes Martin, "The Untroubled Mind," in *Agnes Martin*, ed. Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 16.

17 See Anna C. Chave, "Agnes Martin: 'Humility, the Beautiful Daughter...," in ibid., 139, and passim.

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