

SEEING THROUGH
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DEMANDING of silence, Agnes Martin's canvases clear away language. Horizontal stripes in a luminous field, grids that expand to the ends of vision. Not too far into infinity – the frame imposes a boundary to the space of contemplation, to where we might become absorbed. When words come back to mind they raise only the Great questions, those that you get the chance to ask in writing approximately once, and that I mostly avoid thinking. *What is Art? Why is Life?* See, too shy-making, or too gone-over – too essential.

Every description seems basic. No words as precise as thin grey lines, no page as bright as the not-white gesso. The pale pink dress that I purchased on my way to the gallery burns an embarrassed hole in my bag, loses all desirability before the pure hues. Their reproduction on paper does nothing to capture the depths behind the horizons that they bring forth. It's a gridlocked place to begin.

Though the paintings escape words, the artist writes on green ruled paper, less Great questions than thought-raising statements. Not complete enough to be formed by a question mark, they await a long, frequency-less response. That of the canvas. What status do her texts hold in relation to her paintings which, even in the usually verbose exhibition rooms of Tate Modern, command quiet? In her writing, just as in her drawing of pencil across paint, Agnes is unequivocal. She lays it down: *There are no valid thoughts about art.* To write instead about blankness of mind.

When the mind is untroubled, she wrote. This is the state for making art. Somewhere behind the front of the mind, that is all anxiety, obligations and everyday interruptions, there is a pure state, smooth, and always there. You just have to reach it, she writes, for here lies *the clean slate of the idea*.

The idea as an unrippled horizon: this seems contrary to both the image of inspiration as vertical lightning flash, and the common conception that chaos, distress and disruption can be productive forces for creation. Agnes had her own in-world distresses, her own tumults of the mind, but her art was her turning her back; her art was the site of their clearing.

Agnes Martin's canvases clear space in which the mind can dwell. *Raum*, the German word for space, comes from *räumen*, to clear-away. (Heidegger pointed this out, in his philosophy of dwelling, and later essay 'Art and Space', but she would scold me for daring to quote such a philosopher. *Don't talk to me about ideas*, she might say, and, *I repeat: there are no valid thoughts about art.*)



Martin suggested to gallerist and friend Arne Glimcher that her work aims to be 'expansive' and to have 'deep space'. The plane of the painting is a boundary between self and world, where the boundary – again as Heidegger wrote – is set not as a limit but a horizon. The end point of vision and form, beyond which space continues to unfold. She also called her paintings *formless* – an impossibility for the art object. Squares or almost squares are ploughed by pencil lines awash in India ink. Plots without plot; space times time.

Walter Benjamin wrote that someone who 'concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it.' They *enter into* it. How far do Martin's works allow us to enter into them? As far as we submit to them, or as much attention as we give. *There are two parts of mind*, wrote Agnes. *The*

outer mind that records facts, and the inner mind that says 'yes' and 'no.' Concentrating upon a work of art gives access to an inner part of mind, that clear zone away from anxiety.

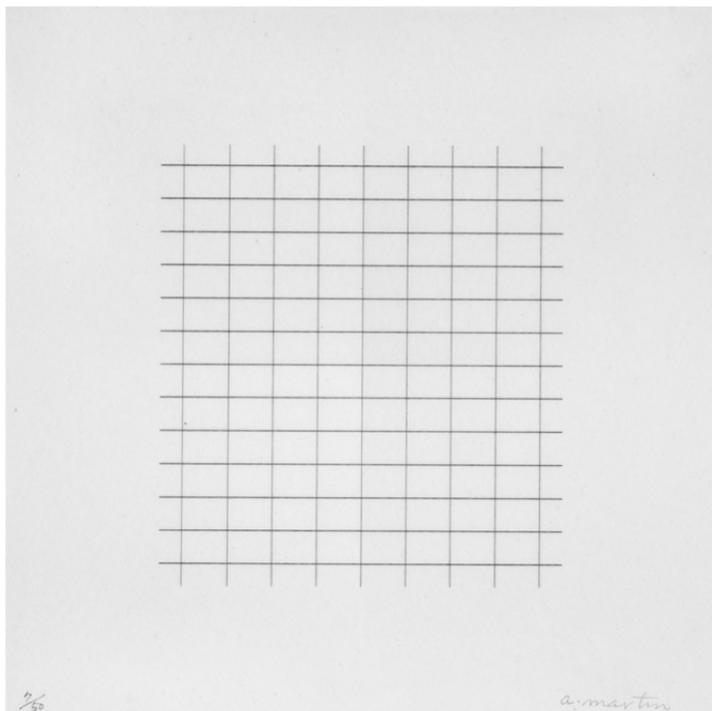
In her 1950s palette of middle greys, beige and cream, a slate-coloured border concentrates the gaze on the paler rectangles within. The divisions between shapes, often just the matter of one shade's difference, are soft rather than clear-cut, with brushstrokes faintly apparent. I see these partings of the canvas as windows, frames that crystallise thought. The defining characteristics of the window: a geometric division, a view out, a border between outside and in. The Japanese word for window *mado* combines space and interval, while the latin *specularia* focuses on looking. Light-doors, cool drafts, 'the interior eye and the outside wind.' A place for the gaze to linger, a place for the eyes to think.

Leon Battista Alberti wrote of the frame of the painting as an open window, 'through which I see what I paint.' His metaphor of the frame as viewing portal enabled him to establish single-point perspective; perspective which itself means 'seeing through' (as Dürer and Panofsky both noted). Martin's works are in one sense far from Alberti's clear pictorial perspectives – their sense of depth and distance is variable, their subject is non-representational – but she did call one of her works *Window* (1957): four rectangles – two buff, two blue-grey – in an off-white frame. Through this window it looks like dusk outside.

Martin said she did not want her work to be rooted in the world, or to be associated with a romantic viewpoint, which the window's lineage in painting is. In Romantic painting, the view outside the window is bounded by its frame. The world beyond seems measurable, a landscape relative to subjective perception, with a play between interior scene and faraway view. In such compositions, there is often a figure at the window, and she has her back to the world.

In the history of art, the trope of the open window is characterised by its dual transparency and opacity. The frame alludes to a window, permeable to the eye, but the support of the painted surface is solid. Rosalind Krauss describes how, in the case of Symbolism, the window served to figuratively reflect the viewer, like a mirror, as well as to give out onto a view – of sky, sea or fields. In Martin's work, occasional titles evoke such views – *Falling Blue*, *Desert Rain*, *Wheat*, *Night Sea* – in spite of her statements against real-world grounding.

Krauss brings these windows through the paradigms of art history to the abstract grid. The grid is 'an introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work.' The grid, she writes, is a form



that 'freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being.' The repetition of Martin's grids could perform this multiplication of subject, inside the canvas. But unlike a window, the gaze cannot pass through the painting, it is held there. The canvas is an exterior zone of expression for the painter, and a surface in which the viewer is not so much reflected, as absorbed.

The grid's interlocked axes act as a support for the viewer's contemplation. Writes Agnes, of *On A Clear Day*, the thirty grids screen-printed on Japan paper that ended her several-year absence from art-making in 1971: *they are a rest – they tranquillise me*. The therapeutic quality of small variations on a theme – tight grids, open grids, ruled like a page or checkered as graph paper – the regularity of lines that may be

controlled, is materialised in the calming display. The blank cells, without emotion, and out-of-world, take us to stillness.

Krauss wrote that the grid leaves 'no place of refuge' (for the legacies of nineteenth-century painting to hide), but the grid's 'will to silence' does present another kind of shelter – away from language, away from the outside. In Ancient Greek, *limen*, from which our 'liminality', or in-between, signifies a haven or refuge, in the sense of entering in. In Latin, *limen* refers to a threshold as a point just out of reach, while for Heidegger, the threshold is the area beyond which 'something *begins its presencing*.'

Stepping into the installation of *The Islands* (1979), a series of twelve radiant squares brought together in one dizzying room, is an eyes-wide absorption in a white that is not quite white but the colour of everything around it. The relative effects of different barely-there colours – a hint of yellow, green or bluish-grey – combine in a vision of brightness. Between canvas and consciousness, all borders are transgressed.

Is this the /cloud/ that Krauss identified with Agnes Martin, via Kasha Linville's precise phenomenological reading, which describes an 'impermeable mist' that 'feels like, rather than looks like atmosphere'? Linville divides up a gradation of viewing experience before Martin's work, which Krauss parses. Close-up, we see the materiality of the brushstrokes, shadows and marks of the hand; in the middle ground, details blur and depth opens up into an encompassing atmosphere; and in the longer distance view, the bands of the painting become fixed planes, as though closed-off. The middle ground is where one can become lost in stripes that seem to quiver, where a light energy stops the composition from being still, while calling for a state of engaged suspension in the viewer. Detaching from the canvases' details, one loses the grounding of material support. There is the feeling of having passed through a transparency, then drawing away, the lines become in Linville's words, 'immovable', the background 'opaque'.

Linville's analysis of distances suggests a series of transitions in viewing these canvases – a set of thresholds to cross, or be caught in. The sense of entrance into the painting, of *seeing through* before meeting solid colour, recalls the dynamic of openness and opacity associated with the painting as window, bringing the at first boundless /cloud/ back to the defined frame, and subsequently to the qualities of the grid, which Krauss considers a 'connection of matter on the one hand or spirit on the other.' The effects of a physical system – the interrelation of the lines' heights from one work to the next, the mixed gesso applied to

collect and reflect light – produce the immaterial effects of experience. Like a window, the canvas is an inter-face and in-between, letting light into the interior.

Upon exiting, I wished I had someone with me, to shift back into the pace of the city, to un-turn my back from the world. Outside there are more grids – office blocks, slotted together warehouses; more greys – a silver Thames, sterling towers; and more windows, viewed from the raised perspective of the overground. The window is a threshold between interior life and exterior world – I wrote then in my notebook – and this threshold is at the edge of each viewing experience of art.

TEXTS REFERENCED

All quotes in italics are from Agnes Martin's writings, in particular *I want to talk to you about the work and What is real*, published in Arne Glimcher, Agnes Martin, *Paintings, Writings, Remembrances*.

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