The Meanings of Acts: Agnes Martin and the Making of Americans

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I was standing, a while ago, in the store of the Guggenheim Museum, looking at paintings by Agnes Martin, and looked up from a small work of 1962, *Little Sister* (Fig. 1), as a large canvas painted two years earlier, *White Flower* (Fig. 2), was drawn out from the stack. It was like suddenly coming upon a view: everyone in the room turned to look as it appeared, and someone remarked, in an unforced way, 'what a beautiful thing'. Like Merleau-Ponty standing next to his friend Paul and looking at a landscape, we were all looking at the same thing, not only in merely factual terms but in the sense that what we saw was the same for all of us.

> Suppose that my friend Paul and I are looking at a landscape, What precisely happens? Must it be said that we have both private sensations? ... that ... we are each incarcerated in our separate perspectives[?] ... When I consider my perception itself, before any objectifying reflection, at no moment am I aware of being shut up within my own sensations ... When I think of Paul, I do not think of a flow of private sensations indirectly related to mine through the medium of interposed signs, but of someone who has a living experience of the same world as mine, as well as the same history, and with whom I am in communication through that world and that history.[1]

Of course, there are diverse ways of interpreting this experience, for example through Bourdieu's model of a cultural *habitus*: our common perception is attributable to affinities in background and experience, such as might have brought us severally to be standing in this place at this time.[2] Alternatively, in the view of Gertrude Stein, whose writing Martin admired, what we readily recognize as beautiful has possibly simply become a classic: we are habituated to it.[3] I can only record that it felt different from that, partly due to the element of surprise: the painting brought into view from a stack, rather than seen on a gallery wall, where it might have invited a more rehearsed response. What I want to emphasize however is that in any of these versions – Merleau-Ponty's, Bourdieu's, Stein's – perception, rather than being locked up in the individual, is enmeshed in a world, and a present. Our acts, including our perceptions – and I follow Merleau-Ponty and J.J. Gibson[4] in thinking of perception as integral to the active body, continually orienting itself – our acts, whether genuinely spontaneous or by contrast habitual, carry meanings we do not need to make explicit. The bare utterance, 'what a beautiful thing', unexceptional in itself, was in effect a gesture of pointing which, as such, held the implication that in what we saw lay a commonly recognized meaning.

It is part of my purpose here to show how meanings can indeed be unspoken, even when the form of expression is new, or is to a significant degree unprecedented – as with Agnes Martin's grid paintings of the New York years – and where the muteness is not merely a function of concealment or repression (as there might indeed be legitimate grounds for supposing, in Martin's case[5]). A commonly noted feature of these

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge: London, 1962), p. 405.

[2] '[H]abitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., of language, economy, etc.), to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings.' Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1977), p. 85; quoted by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 'Could there be a Science of Existential Structure and Social Meaning?', in Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma and Moishe Postone (eds), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1993), p. 37. Dreyfus and Rabinow discuss Bourdieu in terms of his debt to the existential ontology of Heidegger and of Merleau-Ponty.

[3] In her lecture 'Composition as Explanation', given to the Oxford and Cambridge literary societies in 1926 (Gertrude Stein, *Writings and Lectures 1911–1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz [Peter Owen: London, 1967], pp. 21–30), Gertrude Stein discusses the process whereby the 'irritating annoying stimulating' properties of a truly contemporary work cease to appear once it undergoes the transition to classic status and becomes, automatically, beautiful: 'The characteristic quality of a classic is that it is beautiful'. Yet in its original irritating moment, 'all quality of beauty is denied to it' – and that is the beauty that matters (pp. 22–3).

[4] James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, MA, 1979).

[5] The issue concerns her lesbianism. See Gavin Butt, 'How New York Queered the Idea of Modern Art', in Paul Wood (ed.), *Varieties of Modernism* (Yale University Press: London, 2004), pp. 315–35. Martin is referred to on p. 323. See also Anna C. Chave, *Agnes Martin: On and Off the Grid* (The University of Michigan Museum of Art: Ann Arbor, MI, 2004). Chave suggests that the grid in Martin's work functions 'as an emblem of normality, of at once modern and modernist conventionality. The grid, as Martin insistently implemented it, served in a

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Fig. 1. Agnes Martin, *Little Sister*, 1962, oil, pencil and nailheads on canvas, mounted on panel, 25.1 × 24.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; gift, Estate of Geraldine Spreckels Fuller, 1999. © 2007 Agnes Martin, DACS.

works, namely the salience in them of the trace of her actions, is relevant here. We see what she has done, and this is because, in Gertrude Stein's circular formulation respecting her own work, she set out to 'make it as it is made'.[6] I will try to show how this particular way of making arose from her involvement in a social and creative world of which she was intimately a part, a world within which she found her direction; on the part of the viewer, too, I will see meaning as a function of orientation. The questions I am posing are: how did the painter address herself to

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sense to screen her deeply non-conventional life.' This is similar to Butt's claim. She goes on to find in Martin's grids an excess of conformity amounting to non-conformity, and an inscribing 'of feminine and lesbian identity wilfully aligned with, yet wilfully apart from, masculine norms'.

[6] 'Composition as Explanation', p. 22. I give the context for this expression below.

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Fig. 2. Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960, oil on canvas, 182.6 × 182.9 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; anonymous gift, 1963. © 2007 Agnes Martin, DACS.

her work? and, how do we, as viewers, stand towards what we see? The terrain on which we stand in considering these questions is that of our embodied and social experience; if tacit meaning belongs in the realm of feeling and intimation, it is not thereby tied, necessarily, to individual psychology.

Martin's repeated disavowal of any specific expressive aims is worth mentioning here: for example, 'The responsibility of the response to art is not with the artist';[7] and, 'Works of art are not purposely conceived. The response depends upon the condition of the observer'.[8] On that basis, how might one claim that her work elicits a specific response? Under what conditions and by what means is a non-arbitrary response to a work possible, when the maker of the work has not aimed to prompt any response? On what legitimate basis might we attribute the meanings we may find in her works to her acts in making them? How, indeed, might meaning accrue to an action, if not through prior intention, formulated independently of that action? How do we mean what we do?[9]

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[7] Dieter Schwarz (ed.), *Agnes Martin: Writings* (Edition Cantz: Kunstmuseum Wintherthur, 1992) p. 32; Agnes Martin, 'Reflections', *Artforum*, vol. 22 no. 8 (April 1973), p. 38.

[8] Schwarz (ed.), *Writings*, p. 18; from notes given by Agnes Martin to the University of Pennsylvania in 1972.

Such questions unavoidably evoke issues of performance and the performative. The shift towards performance as normative for much avant-garde practice certainly was under way in the New York art world at the time Martin was producing her grid paintings, but she herself was on the hither side of what has been punningly called the 'theatrical turn': she did not venture into the expanded field of new art practices, and she was not concerned to suspend the art-life boundary, unlike artists who were drawn to performance, as were Allan Kaprow and Robert Rauschenberg.[10] However, 'performance' has come to be so widely applied a concept in theory and criticism that it is almost necessary to remind ourselves of the simple distinction between performance in its theatrical sense and action that is unstaged. Thus there is an obvious contrast, for example, between Hans Namuth's famous 1950 photographs of Jackson Pollock at work,[11] and Yves Klein's Anthropométrie de l'Epoque Bleue, performed by Klein with paint-covered models and orchestral accompaniment to a Paris audience in 1960 – even if the former set a precedent for the latter. Although the Namuth photographs soon came to be seen as recording Pollock's 'ritual dance', the performance in question clearly was inadvertent, save in so far as it was an artefact of photography; the intentional acts of painting produced (or required) the unintended, if graceful, dance.[12] (I of course do not thereby imply either that we should ignore the evidence the photos give of Pollock's practice as such, or that theorists of performance are wrong in finding them suggestive.) Neither need action be spectacular in order to qualify as a deed: all painting is 'action painting', in the sense acknowledged in the remark Merleau-Ponty famously quoted from Valéry: the painter 'apporte son corps' – literally, brings her body (to the task).

In the case of performance, the question as to how *in principle* acts can have meaning, evoke a response, obviously does not arise. By contrast, the painter's acts are not usually seen, and to see them would not be to see their meaning, if only because one cannot look simultaneously at the work and at the making of it.[13] Of course, as with a performance or indeed any other artistic form, so with painting, if there is to be meaning at all there must be an audience; however, it is inherent in painting, as with most art, that the audience is always yet to arrive, when the work, at some finite moment, is done. The viewer will stand where the painter did, facing the canvas; the viewer, too, 'apporte son corps'. The painter never sees, though, what the viewer will, partly because the acts of painting go towards a work yet to be done, partly because painter and viewer approach the completed work from, in a historical sense, different directions.[14] It is the peculiar property of painting that our engagement with it takes the form of a physical encounter: it faces us, we meet it, and in Martin's case we may apprehend this movement towards the work intensely and to particular effect.

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[9] My echoing of Stanley Cavell is deliberate. Cavell decisively repudiated the view of intention presupposed in W. K. Wimsatt's 'The Intentional Fallacy'; cf. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, KY, 1958). Cavell calls into question Wimsatt's assertion that, to gauge the degree of a poem's success, the critic must go outside it for evidence of (prior) intention. For Cavell, this is to 'appeal to a concept of intention as relevant to art which does not exist elsewhere: in, for example, the case of ordinary conduct, nothing is more *visible* than actions which are not meant'. See 'A Matter of Meaning It' in Cavell, *Must we Mean what we Say?* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1976; reissue of original 1969 publication), pp. 213–37; the quotation is from p. 226.

[10] Michael Fried has wryly observed that the 'theatricality' he denounced in 1967 'went on to flourish spectacularly': Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, IL, 1998) p. 14. Indeed, his essay has become a common point of reference for theorists of the performative: see for example, Gavin Butt's introduction to his edited collection *After Criticism* (Blackwell: Oxford 2005), pp. 9–10.

[11] See Barbara Rose (ed.), *Pollock Painting: Photographs by Hans Namuth, with Essays by Rosalind Krauss, Francis V. O'Connor and Barbara Rose* (Agrinde Publications: New York, 1978). There is a thoughtful memoir by Namuth. The best discussion of the photos is by Pepe Karmel, in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (Tate Gallery: London, 1999), pp. 87–137, 'Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth'.

[12] Karmel argues that Robert Goodnough's article 'Pollock Paints a Picture' (*Artnews*, vol. 50, no. 3, May 1951), pp. 38–41, 60–61 determined the way in which the Namuth photographs were subsequently seen, as showing Pollock 'executing a kind of "ritual dance"'(Karmel, p. 95) – a dance to which, for Allan Kaprow, the paintings were merely incidental. Karmel uses the film and photo evidence to show convincingly that schematic compositional procedures learnt from Thomas Hart Benton govern the first level of work and so influence the whole. However, he needlessly underplays the rhythmicity of action and the internalisation of the schemas. We do not have to prioritize dance over painting in order to see how the former might give rise to the latter, or the latter require the former.

[13] It was in order to overcome this limitation that Namuth suggested Pollock paint on glass and filmed him from beneath the glass. There is an obvious analogy with Clouzot's *Le mystère Picasso* – in which the painter decidedly is a performer.

[14] I discussed this disparity in my article 'Discernment', in the special issue of the *Oxford*

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Only with certain paintings, or kinds of painting, is the sense of encounter particularly accentuated, as it undoubtedly was in the case of abstract expressionism. On her arrival in New York from Taos in 1957, with the grid paintings we now think of as 'classic' still to be made, Martin had already chosen her models and defined her aspiration. Her models lay in the recent work of Pollock, Rothko and Newman, and her ambition – she had been promised exhibitions by Betty Parsons – clearly demanded that she gain a public presence comparable to theirs. Recently, she had submitted a grant application, proposing a new art representative of 'the American People',[15] a project managing to recall the rhetoric of the 1930s even as it declared affiliation to abstract expressionism: the same age as Jackson Pollock, she had reached maturity in the 1930s. Pollock, in an application of his own, had proposed a scale of painting intermediate between mural and easel. Implicit in the choice of such a scale was the constitution of a public space. Yet 'space' in that collective sense was to be evoked through an acute address to individual sensibility, rather than signalled through recognizable common reference. In its manifest materiality, and in virtue of its scale, the abstract expressionist painting stood as something prominently in common view; in its abstractness, it withheld itself and, still more, exacted on the part of the viewer a committed act of attention – a personal commitment. Therefore an abstract painting by Pollock or Newman, while conspicuously a material thing, was not thereby something standing over against oneself, a *Gegenstand*, but rather something meant for and addressed to oneself, whose meaning needed to be elicited. It is as if it stood as a mute interlocutor, affording, too, a new and precarious ground on which to stand.

In remaining true to abstract expressionism, Martin inaugurated a public – even a monumental – mode of pictorial practice that nonetheless entailed intense personal investment. While public scale and presence might seem at odds with the personal, there is in American modernism a Whitmanesque alliance of selfhood with the democratic: 'One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.' (The opening lines of the first poem in *Leaves of Grass*.) Conversely, to make something of and from oneself – a 'Song of Myself' – required a formal means, a vehicle. Between 1957 and 1967, Martin produced the grid paintings that made her reputation and caused her to be included in important group exhibitions. It was not until arriving in New York, she later said, that she produced anything she actually liked.[16] This body of work was therefore declaratory and self-defining, such that she so to speak faced the world with it. Little survives of Martin's earlier production but what does gives no hint of the radicalism of the grid paintings and kindred abstract work, made up to the time her lease ran out, in 1967, and she left New York – in flight, it has been suggested, from a failed love affair, though different reasons have been given for her emotional distress at the time.[17] In its very formality, its abstractness – not obviously attributes of the personal – the New York work constituted a 'song of herself'. It is recognizably the achievement of one capable of steady and prolonged concentration, recalled by friends as able to sit immobile gazing at a desert landscape, rather as the reiterative texts of Gertrude Stein are evidently the work of one who was, in her own words, 'all the time talking'. In finding a form, Agnes Martin was able to do what

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Art Journal on Hubert Damisch (*Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2005, pp. 213–26).

[15] Martin applied for a Helene Wurlitzer Foundation grant in 1954, for a project 'directed towards assisting in the establishment of an American art, distinct and authentic'. See Barbara Haskell, 'Agnes Martin: the Awareness of Perfection', in Haskell (ed.), *Agnes Martin* (Whitney Museum of American Art: New York 1992), n. 17, p. 115.

[16] Interview with Irving Sandler, *Art Monthly*, vol. 169, September 1993, pp. 3–11. See p. 7.

[17] The question of Martin's sexuality and her love affairs has been taken up in the recent literature (see n. 5, above). According to Robert Indiana, her distress was due to the struggle for recognition: see Barbarelee Diamondstein, *Inside New York's Art World* (Rizzoli: New York, 1979), pp. 151–66. Martin herself spoke only of the vexations of life in New York, of a need for solitude.

she meant. Yet to say this is neither to claim that the meaning of the paintings lay in her personality, nor to assume that she determined what they meant. They were, in their very abstractness and generality, offered to whoever might come to see them, and such an encounter necessarily took place on uncertain ground.

Not many years previously, Merleau-Ponty had argued that only on such ground, now, was 'a human world' possible, and for him Cézanne's doubt as to whether the works of his hands would have any meaning for others epitomized an uncertainty essential both for art and for human society. However, this theme, like the notion of a common world articulated tacitly in friendship, belongs to the 1940s: the war years and the preceding decade had been as formative for Merleau-Ponty and his contemporaries as it had been for Americans on the political and cultural left. By the time of the philosopher's death in 1961, changes were already under way that shifted the register of French philosophy and cultural theory, from doubt to suspicion, this being but one aspect of wider transformations in western intellectual culture.[18] One aspect of this broader change was that the critical climate in America became receptive to structuralist theory, reflecting increased attentiveness to institutional and ideological determinants in the reception of art.

The period of Martin's residence in New York saw the beginning of a transformation in artistic and critical attitudes, manifestations of which included minimalism and the debate it prompted. It is easy to see why her New York paintings should have been chosen for inclusion in group exhibitions alongside the minimalists. If, as she later commented, she was not inclined to go as far as they were towards the impersonal, she equally emphasised her aspiration to 'perfection in the mind.' Nevertheless, it is impossible to engage with her work on the same terms as one would with, say, a Sol Le Witt. In the latter case, but not in hers, one's attention is routed through both the ambient space of the gallery and institutional space. Attention is diffused in the one case, summoned in the other. The works of the minimalists and those of Martin implied mutually contrasting conceptions of public space. Martin's paintings, like minimalist constructions and configurations, were, in their abstractness and regularity, manifestly 'impersonal' things in common view; yet only Martin's simultaneously afforded an intimacy of engagement, to engender a space apart.

It is noticeable that, when Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was taken up by American critics and artists during the 1960s, particularly with reference to minimalism, the social dimension of his thought was largely overlooked.[19] His close descriptions of our perceptual engagement in the world were meant to show how we might find in 'primordial perception' the ground of all sociality. It is uncertain ground, prey to doubt, dependent on trust. The 1960s adoption of Merleau-Ponty took little account of his emphasis on doubt, as characterising the posture of the painter facing his work. We might consider it now with respect to Martin, not because this notably resolute person was especially prey to doubt, but because it characterises the tenor of her acts, directed to a perfection that could never be attained.

The thing-in-general, the new work meant for all Americans, must be set up repeatedly in particular – and hence uncertain, imperfect – configurations. Again, I can draw a parallel with Gertrude Stein, whose fictions present language formally and as an abstract structure, that yet is made up from the idioms of particular speech. Her early story 'Melanctha'

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[18] Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Partricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL, 1964), pp. 9–25. *Le doute de Cézanne* was first published in 1945, then in *Sens et non-sens*, 1948. It was Paul Ricoeur who named a 'school of suspicion', meaning Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; the reconsideration of these sources by French philosophers from the early 1960s onward was associated with a critique of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's reference to Freud in 'Cézanne's Doubt' is – appropriately – dubitive. His friend Lacan, on the other hand, devised a hyper-suspicious Freudianism. We might in fact contrast Merleau-Ponty's example of the two friends with Lacan's famous anecdote (in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) of his experience in a fishing boat, and the estrangement he suddenly felt under the 'gaze' of a floating sardine tin pointed out to him, in a ridiculing way, by one of the fishermen (it is hard not to make this sound sublimely daft). It should be added, though, that Merleau-Ponty's later writing approximates to structuralism in significant ways; I discuss this with reference to painting in 'Merleau-Ponty, Realism and Painting: Psychophysical Space and the Space of Exchange', *Art History*, vol. 22, no. 3, September 1999, pp. 364–88.

[19] For a discussion of the reception of Merleau-Ponty by American critics and artists, with particular reference to minimalism, see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (Yale University Press; New Haven, CT, 2000), in particular Chapter 6.

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Fig. 3. Hans Namuth, photograph of roofscape at Coenties Slip, 1957, with (l. to r.) Delphine Seyrig, Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman, Seyrig's and Youngerman's son, Agnes Martin. Copyright Hans Namuth Ltd.

portrays love and friendship under the emotional tension between trust and doubt, yet simultaneously as a rule governed patterning of language, of dialogue.[20]

Friendship, or at least convivial association, is evident in a series of photographs Hans Namuth made in 1957, showing Agnes Martin in the company of fellow artists at Coenties Slip. This series, in its portrayal of a community, is unmatched among Namuth's numerous photographs of artists. An anti-Nazi German and immigrant who had become a photojournalist and had made a photographic study of an indigenous community in Guatemala, Namuth took a documentary approach, very evident here, in staging portraits of artists.[21] In one sequence, he frames the group carefully on the roof of their loft building so as to take in the steep height of the sightless Wall Street skyscrapers behind them (Fig. 3). The marginal status of the group clearly attracts the photographer; they are at the edge of the city, not caught up in its work, and are manifestly happy in their emancipation. Other photos show Martin with Ellsworth

[20] 'Melanctha' is the most famous of the novellas in Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, of 1909, the others being 'The Good Anna' and 'The Gentle Lena'. Melanctha and her lovers and friends are black, and Stein invents for them a highly artificial shared language comprising quasi-operatic arias of repetitive speech.

[21] According to Mildred Glimcher in *Indiana, Kelly, Martin, Rosenquist, Youngerman at Coenties Slip* (Pace Gallery: New York, 1993), Namuth made the pictures for a photo-essay centring on Kelly, who had been selected for inclusion in an exhibition of contemporary art from the United States at the 1958 Brussels World Fair. For Namuth's work in Guatemala, see Hans Namuth, *Los Todos Santeros, a family album of Manu Indians in the village of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Guatamala, C.A., 1947–1987* (Nishan: London, 1989). Of course, given the possible purpose of the photographs (I have not been able to establish any further details), a 'suspicious' reading of them as images exemplifying American freedom would be entirely possible. However, this cannot be established and, in any case, would not in my view cancel what I here take to be their significant qualities.

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Fig. 4. Hans Namuth, photograph of Martin and Kelly in Wall Street, 1957. Copyright Hans Namuth Ltd.

Kelly or Robert Indiana, or all three together, astride bicycles, against the backdrop of a deserted Wall Street (Fig. 4). In a picture taken a year later, Martin and Kelly sit at a table in Kelly's studio – for a period, they regularly had breakfast together.[22] In the 1957 sequence, the whole group shares a meal hosted by Kelly. The ethos of friendship is evoked with striking consistency, and always with attention to setting.

Looking at these pictures, we see Martin's situation, from the distance of our own. She was to make her belated debut in a contemporary art world then in the process of marked expansion and professionalisation. She was living in a kind of anti-family in a loft community in a period of transition during which much formerly commercial space had become vacant, prior to the transformation that took place over subsequent decades, seeing the conversion of lofts into apartments, and the emergence of districts such as SoHo, associated with artists and downtown galleries.[23] At this moment, prior to those developments, manufacturing and commerce had been replaced by something intermediate, which was sufficiently prominent as a way of life to attract attention – including the attention of journalists and photographers. This also held in the case of Rauschenberg, who, like Johns, worked nearby, and later with Warhol – if in rather different terms. The way of life that developed in this setting was for a time newsworthy.[24] Namuth frames Martin and her fellow-artists as the new arrivees they were, and in a setting that invokes ambition.

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[22] For the Coenties Slip group, see Stepahnie Barron, 'Giving Art History the Slip', *Art in America*, vol. 62, March–April 1974, pp. 80–84. Other artists at the Slip included Ann Wilson, the textile artist Lenore Tawney and, from 1960, James Rosenquist.

[23] See Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 1982). Far from being the product of 'market forces', or of spontaneous social developments, Zukin argues, the prototypical phenomenon of SoHo 'was really the creation of the investment climate'. Controlling this were the financial community and the corporate patrician elite. The period 1956–1972 (bracketing Martin's residence) was one of uncertainty in which interested parties floated various plans (p. 16). Zukin remarks that 'Until the late 1960s, loft rents were cheap and stable.' (p. 5). During this interim period, there was diversity and mixed use, combining artists' studios, small manufacturing and business, and cheap unconventional accommodation.

In her earlier New York work, Martin made constructions, using material lying around from the former warehousing or manufacturing activities. In this she was close to Robert Indiana.[25] A trace of that activity survives in The *Little Sister* of 1963 (Fig. 1), by which date the artist had made her standard format the rectangular grid within a square. There is a 'dissonance', as she put it, between square and grid: 'My formats are square, but the grids are never absolutely square ... [there is] a contradiction, a dissonance, though I didn't set out to do it that way ... [it] lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power.'[26] Here the rows between the grid lines are made up by the round heads of (I guess) small upholstery nails, hammered through the canvas onto the wooden backing. What this demonstrates is how readily we can take her works as deeds. They instantiate practical activity in its simplest sense. We see what she has done: hammered nails, drawn lines. Something of this is recurrent generally in modernism, but here the tie to practicality is especially strong. The grid has something to do with this, since it plainly needs to be constituted by regular and workmanlike acts (and also given that the grid is frequently associated with practical tasks of calculation and demarcation and indeed construction).

The early New York works are not invariably grids, but they do often comprise regular and repeated elements, as in *Milk River* (Fig. 5), a large painting of 1963. Typically, as a detail of this painting shows (Fig. 6), they call for careful control and attention, on the parts of painter and viewer respectively. As her friend Richard Tuttle put it, Martin was 'extremely sensitive to the actual event of making a line'.[27] For the viewer, as has been noted more than once in the literature,[28] this level of fine, close work entails a shifting orientation to the canvas, especially evident with her large paintings – 6 feet square, as they most often came to be. Martin favoured this size, she said, for its 'bodily' address[29] and in this she, in common with many others, followed Abstract Expressionist precedent. In the case of *Milk River*, the painting seen from a distance presents a grainy pink square floating inside a border of deeper hue, with a narrow band of brown canvas (which may have darkened) left bare outside that; closer to, it is made up of horizontal red-orange lines, spaced narrowly apart. (Even when lines are as close and fine as this, they remain distinct even at a fair distance, far enough to see the painting as a whole.)

How are we to account for her recourse to this kind of regularity, and in particular to grids? An often revealing way of addressing this kind of question, particularly where abstract art is concerned, entails seeing the work as following some general norm or axiom, as pursuing a certain logic. This tendency in criticism, inherited from Greenbergian formalism, entails the identification of key structural invariants, seen as recurrent in different and even mutually divergent practices: 'all-over composition'; 'the grid'.[30] In Martin's case at least, such an approach would be misleading, rather in the way her inclusion as an exhibitor among the minimalists was misleading. Her grids are not axiomatic structures, rendered with artful imperfection; rather, each line is a constitutive act, and the grid is the array of those

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[24] See Zukin, *Loft Living*, p. 4, n. and pp. 61–5, for references to coverage in *New York Times*, *Life*, *Time* and other publications during the period.

[25] On the affinities between Martin and Indiana, and on the urban and industrial ethos of work at Coenties Slip, see Barron, 'Giving Art History the Slip'; she juxtaposes illustrations showing three-dimensional constructions by Martin and Indiana, from 1961 and 1960–62 respectively. Writing on Ellsworth Kelly, Clare Bell suggests that his 'desire to build rather than depict is tied to the feats of engineering that also inspired the American Precisionists'. Clare Bell, 'At Play with Vision: Ellsworth Kelly's "Line, Form and Colour"', in Diane Waldman (ed.), *Ellsworth Kelly: a Retrospective* (Guggenheim Museum: New York, 1997) pp. 66–80; see p. 77.

[26] Schwarz (ed.), *Writings*, p. 29; from 'Answer to an Inquiry', first published in Lucy Lippard, 'Homage to the Square', *Art in America*, vol. 55, no. 4 (July 1967), p. 55. Regarding *Little Sister*: the lines in *Little Sister*, described as pencil, actually look dark and liquid, ink-like; this is because the canvas has been varnished (by whom?) liquefying the pencil lines and hence distorting the relationships. (I am grateful to the curatorial and conservation staff of the Guggenheim for showing me the painting under a microscope to explain the anomaly.)

[27] 'Agnes's line is extremely sensitive to the actual event of making a line. Agnes's work is sensitive to an ideal sense of humanness. She's saying what a human being is, is something that is free of nature.' Interview with Tuttle on Martin's work, in Michael Auping, *Agnes Martin/Richard Tuttle* (Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1998).

[28] Most notably Kasha Linville, 'Agnes Martin: an Appreciation', *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 10, June 1971, pp. 72–3.

[29] Susan Campbell, 'Interview with Agnes Martin', May 15, 1989, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, p. 17. Cited by Chave, *On and Off the Grid*.

[30] The most celebrated discussion of 'the grid' is of course by Rosalind Krauss, in the title essay of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1985) p. 157ff. In this typically incisive polemic, the grid (Martin and others are mentioned) embodies the modernist myth of originality. In her later essay on Martin and the grid in the Whitney catalogue – 'The /Cloud/', Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, pp. 155–65, the operative binary is tactile/optical, rather than originality/repetition.

Fig. 5. Agnes Martin, *Milk River*, 1963, oil on canvas, 182.8 × 182.8 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. (Photo: Bill Jacobson.) © 2007 Agnes Martin, DACS.

acts – notwithstanding the fact of its being an array measured in advance. I do not mean to deny that in these works she responds to distinctively modernist imperatives, particularly as embodied in paintings by the artists she most respected, Newman and Rothko. I see her, however, as arriving at the grid form not only through modernist precedent but also via the experience of making something closely tied to rudimentary manufacture.[31] She continued to exploit the grid partly for the dissonance it set up – I will have more to say about that – but also because it enabled her to 'make it as it is made', which, as a formulation of Stein's,

[31] Martin told Ann Wilson that it was the practice of making work by hammering nails into boards that led her subsequently to make linear formations, presumably because the clusters of nail heads formed perceptual rows and matrices. Ann Wilson, 'Linear Webs', *Art and Artists*, vol. 1 no. 7 (October 1966), pp. 46–9; see p. 47: 'The lines began as points in space'.

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Fig. 6. *Milk River*, detail. (Photo: Bill Jacobson.) © 2007 Agnes Martin, DACS.

also reflects a modernist imperative, though one of some long standing. One consequence of regarding her work in these terms is that it induces us to consider her as a historical agent, acting in and out of a world her acts themselves helped to constitute. Bearing in mind her remarks about the viewer's response not being the artist's responsibility, we may infer that for her responsibility rested intensely in the making of the work.[32] Her attitude in this respect may be contrasted with those of Cage and Rauschenberg: the latter said of his 'White Paintings', 'It is completely irrelevant that I am making them – *today* is their creator'.[33] Such a statement, perfectly intelligible in its own terms and revealing for much subsequent practice, would have made no sense whatever to Martin.

Rosalind Krauss has offered the most persuasive post-Greenbergian account of Martin's New York paintings. Carefully discussing the way the viewer's apprehension of Martin's work changes according to viewing distance, she develops an argument based on Hubert Damisch's semiotic concept of /cloud/, and on Alois Riegl's schema of the interplay of the optic and haptic in the evolution of Roman art. She discusses viewing distance in terms of structural antitheses: the optical, 'marked as /cloud/, emerges within a system defined by being bracketed by its two materialist and tactile counterterms: the fabric of the grid in the near position and the wall-like stele of the impassive, perfectly square panel in the distant view'.[34] My concern here is to give historical considerations precedence over any such structural ones: in place of the tactile and the optical, acts of painting and looking.

3

Before returning to the question of Martin's character, her agency, I need to say something about the actions of the viewer. Even without our needing to change viewing position, Martin's paintings give us perceptual work to do. Because of their flatness and regularity, and also in virtue of their not being composed of squares, the image or configuration becomes tied in perception to the material ground. The effect of transformation can be particularly striking in the case of works on paper: minor material irregularities, the texture of the paper, sometimes the buckling, all seem to be caught up in the image itself, which, conversely, materializes. The same phenomenon, as has often been noted, applies to the canvases with fine grids or close meshes of lines, where the painted formation becomes tied visually to the warp and weft of the fabric; hence the occasional suggestion, rightly dismissed by Martin, that there is deliberate allusion to weaving. A more defensible view would be that the paintings draw on our intuitive sense of how made things cohere – among them things woven.[35] Martin's stitch- or weave-like configurations also feature where the support is paper rather than canvas. In an untitled drawing of 1963 (Fig. 7), Martin draws, over a dark wash, short straight strokes in white ink that double back, creating irregular columns that might resemble rows of stitches; but the resemblance fundamentally lies in the repetitive character of the operation, the regular pace at which it was evidently done, and the minor irregularities that follow – like a kind of rhythm – from this ordering of acts and the resistance of the materials.

Martin's grid paintings have this much in common with other works one might think of loosely as 'minimalist': they prompt us to attend to ostensibly rudimentary material facts that we might be inclined otherwise to treat as

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[32] Long before the critical fuss about authorship, Henry James (a model for Gertrude Stein's modernism), questioned 'the mere muffled majesty of irresponsible "authorship"', asserting that by contrast in terms of concrete practice 'the painter of the picture or the chanter of the ballad (whatever we may call him) can never be responsible *enough*, and for every inch of his surface and note of his song'. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1975, first published New York, 1904), preface, p. 8. No critique of 'the author' can gainsay this claim of the *writer*.

[33] From a letter to Betty Parsons, written soon after he first painted them, in 1951. Quoted by Helen Molesworth in *Work Ethic*, exhibition catalogue (Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), p. 133. Molesworth's thesis in this exhibition is that, in keeping with the post-war shift from manufacturing to service, 'Many artists . . . no longer felt compelled to offer a discrete object produced by hand. Rather, they explored ways of producing that were analogous to other forms of labour' (p. 18). Of course, as Braque and Picasso had demonstrated, it was possible, in producing works made by hand, to recapitulate other forms of (manual) labour. Martin's lines, too, are workmanlike.

[34] Krauss, 'The /Cloud/', Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, pp. 164–5.

[35] Anna Chave's observations are very apposite here: noting the frequent recognition of 'the attention the paintings called, by the very thinness and fineness of their execution, to the stuff of the fabric they were painted on', she rightly remarks that the association of Martin's work with textiles, while potentially dismissive, also yields insights: 'those labours that have been designated as women's work are characteristically repetitive, manual activities, and so is the work of Agnes Martin': Anna C. Chave, 'Agnes Martin: "Humility, the beautiful daughter . . . all of her ways are empty"', Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, pp. 131–53; see p. 148.

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Fig. 7. Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1963, ink & watercolour on paper; sheet: 30.3 × 30.3 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Stephen Benjamin in memory of Helen W. and Robert M. Benjamin. (Photo: Sheldan C. Collins.) © 2007 Agnes Martin, DACS.

beneath regard. But that is not a sufficient ground for aligning her with, say, Cage, or the Rauschenberg of the ‘White Paintings’, or even Robert Ryman. What might hold in each of these cases, and for Martin too, is that our instinctive focusing of attention, to discern something *in* the thing attended to, is in some way thwarted, or deflected. With Martin, but not the others, there ostensibly is something in which one’s perceptual quest might terminate: the detailed microstructure of drawn or painted lines. Yet if there is no redirection of attention, neither is there resolution, since the focal elements refer back to the whole, and do so in terms of an overall ‘dissonance’; to have been offered a grid of squares would at least have satisfied the onward perceptual impetus in logical or formal terms and would in that sense have resolved it.

There is a way in which Martin’s paintings particularly invoke this perceptual drive, which phenomenology interprets in terms of our fundamental bodily orientation to or in the world. To follow Samuel Todes: there is not in the first place an objective world into which we as perceivers are inserted, but rather,

> [i]nsofar as we actively attempt to make objects appear we generate the spatial and temporal fields in which they first may appear. When we are inert, our front and back may appear merely as two different sides of our object-body, much as two sides of a coffin. But when we are active our front and back generate and acquire a temporal significance. Our front apparently brings into appearance what is *coming* to be because of what we are (forwardly) *going* to do; it thereby produces the (future) field of what lies ahead of us. Our back apparently leaves behind what has appeared and thereby produces the apparent field of what is now *passed* (past), so that the front–back distinction makes possible the *passage* of time.[36]

When we say that we 'face' the world, in the sense of facing reality, we are scarcely, Todes would argue, using a metaphor – or rather the metaphor has force because it evokes the fundamentals of perceptual and bodily experience.

It remains to be shown, though, how this account of everyday perception might apply in the special circumstance of painting – and how, further, it might have any special relevance for the work of Agnes Martin. As it happens, Martin entitled one of her short pieces of writing 'With my back to the world', intending this evidently as a kind of slogan. The phrase of course signifies renunciation, but it also partly describes my physical situation when I look at a painting. Thus if I look at *White Flower* (Fig. 2), a 6 foot square canvas of 1960, I am very aware of those primordial facts Todes reflects on: having a back, facing what is in front of me. The departure from Todes's account lies in the fact that I cannot literally go forward – it is as if I were facing a wall. There are of course many ways in which we might see painting as responding to the perceptual impetus to go forward, find out more, and we are accustomed to the notion of in virtual terms 'going into' a painting as if it were a world to enter; it is in being so directly thwarted in this impulse, I would argue, that the body-world structure Todes writes about is somehow summoned up, in the face of Martin's paintings, rather than being deployed in a virtual sense. It is as if that which subtends our experience becomes the focus of our awareness, in being denied or aggravated. In the case of this painting, there are several ways in which I may become hyper-aware of my orientation to what I see. Obviously there are the factors of scale and flat configuration, so that I indeed stand as if facing a wall, as with, say, Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*. In addition, as has been noted, Martin's paintings engage us in different ways at different distances. My effort to see the whole gives rise to an impression of fragile delicacy, and I feel impelled to look closer and see how the rows are configured.

Looking closely, I see that over the natural dun colour of the canvas she has laid a dark brown wash of oil paint, upon which she has painted the grid lines in thinned white. The intervals across are wider than the intervals vertically; I count 28 compartments across, with two half-width spaces left at either side. In counting, I retrace her steps, following where she had once measured and subdivided. To make a whole reiteratively, like this, rather than cumulatively, like Pollock, a long premeditation would have been necessary: the first step commits the rest – though in this case there was a false start and a change of plan, evident where a few small marks have been over-painted at top right. The subdivisions upward look like half-inch intervals; measuring marks show at the edges, the ruled lines waver slightly. Within alternate horizontal bands, short paired marks like equals signs are brushed outward at a slight distance from each vertical line, though leaving a column and a half unmarked at either side. The over painting at top right shows she had at first thought to put such marks in all the horizontal bands, with marks touching the vertical lines, but this would have made the columns more emphatic, standing like a figure upon a ground, something she was always concerned to avoid.

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[36] Samuel Todes, *Body and World* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 49. In Martin's film, *Gabriel*, a young boy is framed walking towards and through landscapes. Writing on this, Holland Cotter cited relevant remarks of Martin's: 'The essential feature of adventure is that it is a going forward into unknown territory'. 'Our tremendous urge forward has a grip of steel' (Holland Cotter, 'Agnes Martin: all the Way to Heaven', *Art in America*, vol. 81, no. 4, April 1993, p. 91; Schwarz [ed.], *Writings*, pp. 19, 111).

In moving back and forth in this way, between seeing the painting and seeing what the painter has done (even at perceptual extremes, I never completely lose touch with either term), I am gauging the particular quality of the work, its singularity. Yet in all of this I am aware of the dissonance between the containing square and the rectangular configuration of verticals and horizontals. Verticals and horizontals refer me back to my perceptual stance towards the world in everyday terms – one's upright stance, the horizon parallel to the gaze – and the 'dissonance' prompts me to keep re-orienting myself, to keep finding my orientation.[37] The painting, then, has indeed become a world for me, in the sense of being inseparably linked to my active perceptual engagement with it, and it presents that world as a shifting, unstable field, evoked in reciprocation of my constitutional (and constitutive) perceptual doubt.

In everyday usage, the word 'world' tends to denote something having an objective and substantial existence; by 'field', I mean rather to evoke a relational complex in which we ourselves are both productively and responsively engaged: a historical complex. This is of course akin to the phenomenological concept of 'world' that Todes draws on, as it is found in Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: 'Both universality and world lie at the core of individuality and the subject, and this will never be understood as long as the world is made into an ob-ject. It is understood immediately if the world is the *field* of our experience, and if we are nothing but a view of the world . . .'.[38] The perspective I am hereby adopting is essentially a social one, by which I do not however mean that I intend to put Martin in a 'context', any more than I am trying to offer a reading of her work. Instead, I seek to consider her as an agent, acting out of and within a certain historical world (or field). Equally, I am concerned to show how work thus originating in a past world might be available to us now – remembering that it was never the painter's business in the first place to offer anything but the actual paintings themselves, to whoever might see them, rather than communicate anything by means of them.

4

The question of 'now', the historical present, is central to reflection in the phenomenological tradition. From Husserl to Heidegger, from Merleau-Ponty to Foucault and Bourdieu, it is a focus of concern that our inhabiting of the present informs and shapes our acts without the necessity of our conscious awareness. In Merleau-Ponty's example of two friends, this is understood benignly; in Husserl and Heidegger, it is either a neutral factor or one bearing critical implications, while with Foucault it becomes something insidious. Foucault portrays Kant as asking the question 'What's going on now? What's happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living?'[39] From this interpretation of Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' he derives a definitively Foucauldian conclusion: ‘Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are’.

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[37] Martin herself reflected on the interrelationship between symmetry and bodily comportment: 'the problem has roots down into the foundations of our sensuous nature. A state of equilibrium is likely to be symmetric'. Wilson, 'Linear Webs', p. 47.

[38] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 406.

[39] Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, IL, 1983), p. 216.

What is being refused here is something imposed on us, a period personality, so to speak, whereby each individual re-enacts state power. To live in the present, to join and share in the typical pursuits of one’s contemporaries, is to comply with the ruses of power. There is a precedent in Heidegger: the present world we are born into is the world of *das Man* (sometimes translated as ‘the they’). ‘[T]hat which forms everyday being-with-one-another . . . constitutes what we call *the public* in the strict sense of the word’, there being no individuality prior to that.[40]

This touches on the vexed question of reception – the vexation being that it is precisely here that Foucauldian issues arise. It is a truism to observe that modernist artists commonly risked rejection or – to put it theatrically – played to small audiences. Barnett Newman, at the time he was helping Agnes Martin hang her first shows at Betty Parsons, was himself just beginning to exhibit again, in the wake of a badly received solo exhibition.[41] His withdrawal did not, it should be said, imply disdain or a refusal to seek a public, and as I have noted there was a strong democratic impetus in American modernism in all its forms. Rothko in particular was revolted by the prospect of a socially exclusive audience for his work.[42] Martin’s project to make a new American art was by definition public in the widest sense. Her closest New York associates had comparable ambitions. Ellsworth Kelly planned paintings at large, quasi-architectural scale, modelled on architectural formations: a new urban art. Robert Indiana’s early work opened towards popular, colloquial and folk traditions. With Cage, Rauschenberg and Johns, working nearby, the whole aim of experiment was that it should open art to wider reality, including wider public reality.

Ostensibly, the public addressed by new art did not differ in principle from the public as defined by Heidegger and Foucault: those who live in the present without needing to know the present they live in and who are shaped by that present. Indeed, new art as art made expressly from and for the present was bound to offer itself to precisely this public. For Gertrude Stein, however, the aspiration to reach a public in this widest sense did not amount merely to aiming at acceptance. It was a question rather of bringing about a situation whereby ‘all one’s contemporaries could be one’s contemporaries’,[43] meaning that only the new, precisely, could produce contemporaneity. The public in that sense is self-defining, elective, though not thereby necessarily an elite. It is in any case no longer ‘the They’. The ambiguous relation between such self-definition on the one hand and subjection to power on the other is a central Foucauldian theme; it finds unintended illustration in Hans Namuth’s photograph of Martin and her fellow-artists astride their bicycles in Wall Street (Fig. 4), an elective and playful community, contemporaries, overlooked by impersonal power. Namuth himself wrote in 1981, apropos of a visit to Barnett Newman’s Wall Street studio: ‘My brother-in-law was working with a brokerage firm at 40 Wall Street, but no two worlds could have been further apart’.[44] So far and yet so near: it was financial and civic pressure that was to cause the dispersal of the community of which Martin was temporarily a part. Namuth’s 1958 photo of her sitting at a table with Kelly in the latter’s loft, with armchairs and a pet dog and ample, well-lit space presented an image of precisely the kind that, printed in *Life* or the

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[40] Martin Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time*, trans. T.Kisiel (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, 1985) p. 246. See also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell: Oxford 1973), pp. 163–8.

[41] Newman showed at Betty Parsons in 1951, then held retrospectives 1958 at Bennington College and in 1959 at French and Company.

[42] At least, this was Rothko’s stated reason for withdrawing from the Four Seasons Restaurant project. As installed in the Tate, the paintings necessarily lose their original architectural reference and, for me, acquire an unfortunately liturgical air. See, however, Briony Fer’s characteristically perceptive reassessment of these paintings, in her book *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2004), pp. 5–25. In another chapter, Fer offers an equally fresh and closely-argued account of Martin, which anticipates a number of the points I make here. She discusses Martin in terms of the opposition between totality and infinity, akin to my distinction, below, between frame and field; however, the terms I choose are less conceptual in character, more social in implication: differing bearings on the same phenomenon. It was of course Martin herself who first drew attention to the inherent dualism of her work, and subsequent commentators have taken this up in divergent ways.

[43] Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, p. 23.

[44] Hans Namuth, *Artists 1960–81, a Personal View* (Pace Gallery Publications: New York, 1981), n.p.

New York Times magazine, attracted an affluent clientele to loft conversions, as gentrification got under way.[45]

As it did so, it eliminated the mixed urban culture of artists, small manufacturers and others reliant on low rents. At the same time, the growth of consumerism and the shift from production to a service-based economy affected art generally since, as has often been observed, modernism was identified with the era of production. When she took 'making' as a watchword, Gertrude Stein proclaimed her modernism. There was a relationship of interdependence between what one might call the elective present and this bias to productive practice. Stein's injunction to 'make it as it is made' arose in a contrast she remarked between those who were always, as it were, fighting the last war, and those who faced a new situation on fresh terms. The meaning of their acts was implicit in those acts, rather than being known apart from them or encoded in them; they would be explicitly understood and defined only retrospectively, just as innovative works of art become classics only subsequently, once their elective moment is past.

I have a reason for making so much reference to Stein. Martin was evidently a keen reader of her work at the time she arrived in New York, and she had a quotation from Stein printed on the card for one of her exhibitions at Betty Parsons's gallery.[46] This interest was not of course exclusive to Martin and indeed it was common currency in this section of the New York avant-garde: her friend Robert Indiana, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg were all readers of Stein. For Martin, as a lesbian, there may have been some sense of identification and indeed as a physical type she rather resembled Stein; yet the affinities that concern me here are different ones.

There is an affinity, in visual or structural terms, between Martin's grid paintings and Stein's experimental writing, arising from Stein's characteristic use of repetition. The writer's reiteration of words and phrases has the function of tying the reader's attention to the present and to the act of reading, entailing a material, rather than a purely transparent and referential, use of language. Stein, who had been a pupil of the psychologist and philosopher William James, was stimulated by James's notion of the stream of consciousness, and excited by the possibility of establishing in writing a sense of the continuous present. This is the present as we live it now, making it as we make it; the reader of a Stein text participates in its making of the present.[47] Stein clearly drew on James's philosophical pragmatism, whose central principle he defined as the derivation of a concept's meaning, and truth, from its consequences.[48] Recent writing on Martin has pointed to the pragmatist ethos of her work.[49]

Stein's major work, *The Making of Americans* began as a (for Stein) comparatively straightforward narrative treating the history of members of three immigrant families, all German and implicitly German-Jewish in origin, like her own. As the writing progressed, she brought her techniques of repetition increasingly into play, in order that her essential subject – the generative role of character – might be manifested directly in reiterative passages. Stein's characterisations are behavioural rather than psychological in any 'interior' sense and character, viewed as a propensity to behave in certain ways, is defined through a constant set of terms and principles. There is a 'bottom' in every character, a 'stupid being', a way of eating, drinking etc., a tendency to attacking, retreating and so forth. Rather than presenting personages against a background, the text comprises a characterological fabric, continually reweaving itself. What we are is what we recurrently and characteristically do, we remake ourselves as we are.[50]

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[45] See Zukin, *Loft Living*, p. 62. Zukin finds in the fashion for loft living an attempt to overcome bourgeois alienation (a motif of the 1960s more broadly, as for example in the films of Antonioni, or Georges Perec's novel *Les choses*): 'living lofts represent an effort to supersede the intense privacy of the detached suburban house with a more public space' and promise to overcome the separation of life and work (p. 68).

[46] *Section Eleven*, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 29 December 1959 to 16 January 1960. The quotation is in the text of the present article, below.

[47] For example, the short text 'Play' begins: 'Play, play every day, play and play and play away, then play the play you played to-day, the play you play every day, play it and play it.' Ulla E. Dydo (ed.), *A Stein Reader* (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL, 1993), p. 147; originally published in 1934 in Stein, *Portraits and Prayers* (Random House: New York). Dydo points out the variation that would come from reading the text aloud and giving 'play' all its changing meanings and voicings. A reading is called for which, rather than seeking extrinsic meaning or reference, plays.

[48] 'The pragmatic method . . . is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?' William James, *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1978) p. 28. (Two books published as one volume; this quotation is from *Pragmatism*, based on a series of lectures given at Boston in 1906–1907.)

[49] Joseph Cunningham, '"the most simple, powerful things": The Art of Agnes Martin', *Art Criticism*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2002, pp. 6–29. For Cunningham, Martin's affinity to philosophy (that of Wittgenstein in particular) arises through her use of rule-based structures (p. 10). He refers to pragmatism (p. 22ff) in connection with James's and Martin's insistence that 'we share and perceive a common world'. Cunningham's important article offers a rigorous, philosophically grounded interpretation of Martin's work. My brief philosophical references here are mainly different from his; the 'common world' presupposed in Merleau-Ponty's exchange with his friend is explicitly historical, and this is important for my argument.

Stein's text, as its title proclaims, is a fictional realisation of the idea of America – meaning the United States – as a nation of those who make or re-make themselves, a nation of immigrants. While this idea or ideal is strongly contradicted by the historical realities of genocide, slavery and segregation (and, latterly, exploitation of illegal immigrants), it does hold a certain validity, most evidently in the context of great cities, particularly New York – notwithstanding, again, the realities of ghetto, slum and dereliction. The artists in Coenties Slip had come from elsewhere: Kelly and Youngerman had been living in Paris, Indiana was a provincial American (he assumed the name of his home state) and Martin a Canadian who had recently become a US citizen.

So what were they making? They – the friends and fellow-artists on the roof of the loft building, or on bicycles in Wall Street – were in a place and a condition cognate with that occupied by the characters Stein, in her novels, reiteratively presents in terms of historical beginnings. In their present, they stand – to write them here in the historical present – at the margin of the city, formerly a point of entry for ferries. It is a provisional place, of uncertain definition, or, rather, they are giving it temporary definition. The skyscrapers, embodying the permanent work of the city, its established places and practices, rise behind them. A sense of play is evident in the work Martin and Indiana do here, using industrial material lying to hand, and also in the small sketches and models made by Kelly. Kelly makes his first maquette for a sculpture as a kind of doodle while having coffee with Agnes Martin.

The contemporaries for whom these artists made their work were not, immediately, each other. As Martin at any rate recalled, they did not discuss or interest themselves in each other's work but were above all – at least as far as she was concerned – a group of close and supportive friends, having a common innovative purpose.[51] It was a case, precisely, of tacit support, there being no sharing of practice, no manifesto-like community of aims. Here I think again of Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the tacit and implicit as characterising friendship, the background of common experience that comprises the friendship without ever needing to be made explicit. In a community such as this, as in any friendship, conversations must rest on the unspoken; it is this intimate and confiding sense of community that, I suggest, finds its way into Martin's paintings, both through her acts in making them and ours in seeing them. I need to show, it follows, why this should hold especially for her work, out of all this group.

Martin's work, unlike Indiana's, was, or came to be, purely abstract and it was abstract in more austere terms than were Kelly's paintings, which had a decorative aspect. It was more formally 'public' yet also more reserved or withheld. When Martin said she set up a dissonance between the square format of the canvas and the rectangular inner grid in order to destroy the 'power' of the square, she implied (as I think the work itself implies) two things: an invocation of impersonal power and a simultaneous detraction from it, something set up to be undermined. To stand before the square is to be faced with and called as if to answer a certain summons – a 'call to order', as was said in the 1920s, but in the place of regularity there is a need for continual reorientation, in the way I described earlier. The rectangular grid forms cells of regular size which Martin said put her in mind of the Old Testament declaration 'surely the people is grass'.[52] As I stand before the grid of rectangles, somehow summoned yet left to my own devices, to look with care, look for myself, I see what others see, what anyone would see, standing where I stand, and an aspect of what I see is a multiplicity, the many. By virtue of the very generality and impersonal abstractness of the work, as well as its particular configuration, I stand as one among many. All my contemporaries are my contemporaries.

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[50] Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans, being a History of a Family's Progress* (Peter Owen: London, 1968; written 1906–1908, first published Paris, 1925). The novel opens with a motif of heredity and of original sin, and with exclamations on the perpetual novelty of being an American, 'one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create'. Next, in this experimental Genesis, comes a genealogy of character, giving the cue to both the form and content of the strange and immensely long text that follows. There is no dialogue, events are registered only remotely, and yet the novel is a pure, concentrated study in human relations, suspended in the medium of experimental prose. Some of Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the relation between an artist's life and work in 'Cézanne's Doubt' have a bearing on Stein's enterprise in *The Making of Americans*: 'in every life, one's birth and one's past define categories or basic dimensions which do not impose any particular act but which can be found in all'. Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', p. 24.

[51] When Irving Sandler asked Martin in 1993 whether she felt she 'had anything in common with people like Kelly, Youngerman, Tawney', she replied 'I don't think we talked about that. I treated them as friends and kept off the subject. You see we all lived the same kind of life and we all had the same kind of velocity, you might say. We all agreed, and so it was very, very pleasant to be with people when you don't feel the competition or the resistance . . .'. 'Agnes Martin interviewed by Irving Sandler', *Art Monthly*, vol. 169, September, 1993, pp. 3–11. The quotation is from p. 9. While there is no reason to doubt this statement, it is clear that there were definite affinities between the diverse practices, especially in the first years at Coenties Slip. See Barron, 'Giving Art History the Slip'.

I do not mean, I emphasise, that the cells of the grids represent or symbolise human individuals. Were that the case, it would hold in exactly the same way for all the grid paintings. All the same, have I not given just now a generic account of standing before a painting by Agnes Martin? Necessarily, I have; but I can say more about ways in which each work in its singularity engages our attention, and about how this is tied to the ethos of friendship.

I know of few painters, and very few of Martin's New York contemporaries, whose work draws you to it as hers does, and indeed this is a widely recognised characteristic of her work. To be drawn close – to *Little Sister*, for example – is to apprehend her care in making the painting, and to assume the posture of care and affectionate concern oneself. It is akin to a posture of close and confiding interlocution. Martin's polar opposite, from the New York artistic culture of the period, is Andy Warhol. Whereas her work vindicates intimacy, his abolishes it and both the vindication and the abolition are inherent in their respective practices.

There is a manifest contrast between works such as *Little Sister* and the grids constituted by Warhol's silkscreen repeats of dollar bills or commodities. While Martin contends with the purely figurative 'power' of the square, Warhol evokes power in real terms. As his sardonic comments on the way capitalism and communism reflect each other confirm, his works reflect (or participate in) the distribution of a standardised, collective identity; this finds deliberately perverse expression in the impersonal automatism and repetitions of his early films. However, Martin's choice of the word 'power' does I think carry a larger implication than she may have consciously intended. In very many of her New York works (though not including *Little Sister*) the array of repeated marks forms an inner square separated from the outer square of the edge of paper or canvas by a margin. This means that the part most evidently needing to be held together in perception is seen to float within the picture's boundary. As in *Milk River*, it comprises elements such as lines or points, poised between geometric 'perfection in the mind' – to use Martin's phrase – and materiality. While admitting that such perfection cannot ultimately be attained, Martin actually denies herself the evident means of approaching it, namely geometry; indeed, not only does she prefer the perceptual to the conceptual, she sets the two in opposition. Hers is an art of fine tolerances, achieved through a coordination of hand and eye that supervenes over rational order. For all her declared idealism, nothing could be further from Plato than her detraction from the square, whose 'power' consists precisely in its universality, indifferent to any particular and material realisation. The 'dissonance' between the tenuous inner formation that subsists only in the viewer's attention, and the containing square, is a dissonance between field and frame. The field requires and restates the frame, but something important is asserted in constituting the latter by perceptual means and by way of the former; this is signalled in Martin's associating her fields of rectangles with the Biblical

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[52] Schwarz (ed.), *Writings*, p. 39; from 'The Untroubled Mind', (Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1973) pp. 17–24.

'surely the people is grass'. There is a dissonance between the elective (there only if I look) and the given or established. Our orientation, our movement, must be towards the field: she advocated 'the simple, direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean'.[53] The field one might enter, in this way, is ambivalently the visual field and the experiential field of my co-existence with others. In turning her back, figuring to herself an empty beach, Martin does not deny sociality; but rather articulates an American tradition of dissent, of the elective community. Our own orientation, in looking, does not need to recapitulate hers, and indeed cannot: the irreversible acts of painting and illimitable acts of looking comprise incongruent histories whose only common term is the given work. What cannot be gainsaid, though, is that the works propose an elective movement towards the field, away from the frame. It is precisely on these terms that we may find our own way to them. The most historical line of approach may also be the most personal.

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When I went to look at paintings by Agnes Martin in New York, I of course spent time walking the streets. A visitor to a city is prey to the illusion that the city is displaying or disclosing itself; it is evident to one not caught up in the city's activity that what its inhabitants are familiar with is at the same time not known to them. I spent some time trying to find the house where my mother had lived as a young woman, an immigrant, in New Jersey. But I had forgotten to bring a note of the number with me and found myself looking at several houses as if they were the house in question. Any of them would have done, since none would in any case have shown me a habitation familiar to her, a habituation.

On the other hand, there is an archaeology (to think of Foucault) of the city that we carry within us. What happened in terms of urban renewal in New York in the 1960s and 1970s proceeded in similar ways in other cities too. To look at a grid painting by Agnes Martin is to revisit a certain possibility of the city making itself as it is made, and to stand within that possibility. It is the converse of nostalgia, in the place of nostalgia. Perhaps, furthermore, it is appropriate to think of Martin leaving the city and abandoning her grid paintings at the end of a love affair.

The passage Martin quoted from Stein comes from a love poem.[54] This is not at once evident in the passage chosen: 'In which way are stars brighter than they are. When we have come to this decision. We mention many thousands of buds. And when I close my eyes I see them.' It is striking that the concluding lines that follow immediately are among the most overt and declaratory in Stein:

> If you hear her snore
> It is not before you love her
> You love her so that to be her beau is very lovely
> She is sweetly here and her little feet are stretched out well which is a treat and very lovely
> Her little tender nose is between her little eyes which close and are very lovely
> She is very lovely and mine which is very lovely.

It is evident in retrospect, as from the poem as a whole, that affection and intimacy flood the previous lines, in which the most remote is most closely beheld: it is in closing my eyes that I see the stars, the mentioned thousands of buds. If there is a sense here of something hidden or denied or kept secret (kept close), there is at the same time a quite practicable model for the intimate seeing of the manifold, for standing and seeing as one among many.

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[53] Quoted in Wilson, 'Linear Webs', p. 49.

[54] The poem, in several sections, has two titles: 'Idem the Same' and 'A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson'. First published in *Little Review*, vol. 9, Spring 1923; included in Dydo (ed.), *A Stein Reader*, pp. 377–80. The passage quoted is from the section 'Bundles for Them. A History of Giving Bundles' (p. 379). While Stein had reason to be grateful to Anderson, the 'valentine' is really between Stein and Alice Toklas, although this is not evident in the text, as it is in 'tiny private love verses' written on the back of the notebook for this piece, according to Ulla Dydo; and what the notes give as 'Very Stein is my valentine very Stein and very fine', becomes in the published poem 'very mine is . . .'. In social terms, this obviously reflects oppression, but in artistic terms Stein converts it into intimacy, a secret in common (though the conversion does not of course justify the condition).

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