



Agnes Martin

by Courtney Fiske

Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly, eds.
Agnes Martin
(Dia Art Foundation and Yale University Press, 2011)

Timed to Agnes Martin's long-term installation at Dia:Beacon, this essay collection, organized by Dia's staff, seeks to distill the essential ambivalences of Martin's production: those pendent questions of what her art really *means*. The inbuilt tensions of her textural graphite grids, penciled with the aid of ruler or string from edge-to-edge of 6-foot-square canvases, typified Martin's work from the early 1960s until her death at the age of 92. Although her embrace of spare, orthogonal geometries led her work to be pegged as Minimalist, Martin aligned herself more with Abstract Expressionism's second generation: those early articulators of "post-painterly abstraction"—Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, and Lenore Tawney among them—who lived in Lower Manhattan during Martin's decade-long stay on Coenties Slip. Poised between drawing and painting, her art slipped among modernist milieux, inviting further comparisons to Color Field canvases, Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawings*, and Hanne Darboven's iterations in cursive. While such analogies attach readily to Martin's oeuvre, her work remains elusive, her practice sustained by its play of contradictions.

Mining a broad array of scholarship, *Agnes Martin* features reflections by art historians, practicing artists, and prominent critics, for whom Martin's early interlocutors—the now-canonical scholars Rosalind Krauss, Lawrence Alloway, and Annette Michelson—serve as constant points of reference. Each contributor approaches Martin's abstraction with a distinct theoretical tack. The modes of criticism on display, from strict formalism to cybernetics, evidence the variety of frames available for Martin's work. Moreover, the collection provides an entrée into enduring debates within contemporary art historical discourse: To what extent should biography bear on an artist's work? What, and how much, theory is appropriate? Can structural analysis square with historical context?

Opening the collection, Dia's curator-at-large, Lynne Cooke, takes seriously Martin's claim, espoused in her collected *Writings*, that her production belonged to the "classical tradition" of ancient Greece, Egypt, and China. In Martin's words, hers was a quest to renew "memories of

moments of perfection” and elicit abstract emotions—“beauty,” “honesty,” “innocence”—that younger artists could not approach without irony. Critic and curator Douglas Crimp considers the implicit referentiality of Martin’s grids: their evocation of the boundlessness and ecstasy of nature, aided by their suggestive titling (“Night Sea,” “Grey Stone,” “White Flower”). His argument alights on the side of Krauss, who inveighed against reading Martin’s work as “crypto-landscape,” exemplary of Rothko and Newman’s “abstract sublime.”

Other contributors append more marked analytic frames to Martin’s work. Art historian Jaleh Mansoor couples Martin’s engagement with Eastern philosophy with Roland Barthes’s 1967 essay “The Death of the Author.” Read alongside the period’s emergent post-structuralism, Martin’s sympathy with Zen Buddhism’s critique of the unfettered ego (rampant among AbEx’s inaugural figures) illuminates a central tension of her work: its simultaneous dependence on an idiosyncratic, expressive facture, determined by the artist’s hand, and its prescription by the very form that it delineates—the grid’s unyielding matrix of x- and y-coordinates. Scholar Rhea Anastas brings gender into the mix, questioning the ways in which Martin’s grids abide by the “feminist understandings of creativity” first clarified by Linda Nochlin.

Jonathan Katz’s essay is by far the most provocative. Branding Martin a “closeted homosexual” (a fact he states was “long recognized” in the New York art world), Katz, a well-known activist academic, attempts to reconcile Martin’s art with her sexuality. His contention that Martin’s repressed lesbianism informed her pursuit of the transcendental feels heavy-handed and unfair, especially as Martin never identified herself as gay. Such arguments maintain the pervasive and problematic belief that minority artists need necessarily probe their identities—sexual, racial, or otherwise—in their art, an interpretative approach broached in several of the collection’s other essays with regard to Martin’s gender. Yet, while Martin’s status as a female artist working within New York’s overwhelmingly male avant-garde is certain, her all-consuming concern with silencing her own sexuality is not so assured: even Katz acknowledges that Martin’s aesthetic project “was never intended as a provocative exegesis or *acknowledgment*” of her queerness, a label which he applies retrospectively. Rather than conceiving biology as one factor among many that influenced Martin’s abstraction, Katz elevates it to the *sine qua non* of her art, his essay ringing of an agenda that seems, at best, peripheral to our understanding of Martin’s oeuvre.

Theoretical concerns aside, it is the text’s numerous descriptions of the experience of viewing an Agnes Martin in the flesh that prove most telling. Douglas Crimp contrasts a 1973 critique, where he recounts Martin’s ’60s production in exacting mathematical terms, to Kasha Linville’s piece in *Artforum* two years earlier, in which a focus on the tactile, diaphanous quality of Martin’s grids exudes lyricism. Bracketed by these dissonant responses, Martin’s art resolves into a series of subtle, coincident balances. Her grids are at once rigidly material, their unyielding coordinates redoubling the canvas surface, its texture concretized by the slight waverings of her hand, and diffusely spiritual, found fragments of a seemingly infinite expanse, vaporous and flickering.

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

AGNES MARTIN

*by Holly Gavin***OCT 2015 | ARTSEEN**

Agnes Martin's retrospective at Tate Modern, curated by Frances Morris, Tiffany Bell, and Lena Fritsch, is the first exhibition of its breadth and scale displaying Martin's work on our side of the pond. A highly esteemed artist in America bridging Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, Martin remains little known in Europe.

Making Friends: Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin

*by Suzanne Hudson***AD REINHARDT | AD AND ARTISTS**

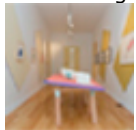
In 1967, Agnes Martin left New York City, where she had been living for a decade. She traveled for two years in Canada and the American West before settling on a remote New Mexican mesa, building a house by hand, and living in relative isolation for the remainder of her years.



Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art

*by Erin Hinz***DEC 15-JAN 16 | ART BOOKS**

One could argue that Nancy Princenthal began her newly released biography of Agnes Martin forty years ago, when, while doing research for an undergraduate paper, she wrote Martin a letter.



RICHARD TUTTLE *Both/And Richard Tuttle Print and Cloth*

*by Phong Bui***JUL-AUG 2015 | ARTSEEN**

One could associate the crease of his octagonal clothes / With Georgia O'Keeffe's and Agnes Martin's facial geography / Evocative of Santa Fe's dry topography. I came just / To treasure the imperfection of corners meeting, / To engender each of their physiologies.

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