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Concealment, Paradox & Painting

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Introduction

The paintings of Kathleen Petyarre are beautiful and mesmerizing. The myriad of dots flicker across the surface, the surface resonates with movement, released optically from the two dimensions of the picture plane. The image advances and retreats and dances before the viewer. The paintings 'take place' in front of the surface.

The ceaseless motion of the image imparts an ephemeral quality to the work; it conveys the sensation of a constantly shifting landscape. Petyarre has described this sensation as being like that of looking down upon the land from above in a small plane. She states that it is "... like looking down on my country during the hot time, when the country changes colour - you know like looking right down onto the top of big sandhills. I love to make the painting like it's moving, traveling, but it's still our body painting, still our ceremony."¹ The careful layering of dots provides more than visual interest: they simultaneously provide an impenetrable screen, denying the viewer a deeper penetration of the surface. The paintings deliberately conceal the Dreaming portrayed beneath.

The strategy of concealment is used to keep the meaning of the paintings intact; at the same time the underlying meaning gives structure and stability to the ephemeral nature of the screen of dots. Christine Nicholls describes the process of concealment as being, contradictorily, the means through which the meaning is expressed. She writes: "The groupings of tiny colourful specks or dots are applied using the sharp

¹ Quoted by Russell Storer, "Kathleen Petyarre - Dreamings Come True", Australian Art Collector, Issue16, April-June 2001, p.85

end of satay sticks. Yet ultimately control is exercised over the work by that underlying Dreaming and the power of Petyarre's work emanates from this truth. Petyarre manages to keep the sacred meaning intact, evoking, rather than disclosing her 'private Dreaming'.² The evocation of the Dreaming is performed through its crossing out, by its non-disclosure.



Figure 1
Kathleen Petyarre, Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming, 2002. Synthetic Polymer paint on Belgian linen (122cm x 122cm) Private Collection, Sydney

Petyarre's employment of concealment as a means of disclosure, together with the concurrent physical and spiritual aspects of her work, exemplify the paradoxical nature of the paintings. The concealment of the Dreaming allows the stories to

² Christine Nicholls, Genius of Place, the work of Kathleen Petyarre, exhibition catalogue, Australia: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001

remain secret, yet the awareness of the underlying meaning remains; its evocation is fascinating, remaining elusive to the eye. Christine Nicholls describes the evocation of the narrative as a experience beyond the purely visual: "*Arnkerrth*, the journey woman, the Dreaming Ancestor, is glimpsed sometimes as a trick of the surface, sometimes as a presence sensed or felt by the viewer rather than actually seen."³ The concealment creates a presence that can be felt and also the potential for the paintings to contain many stories by revealing no single narrative. Petyarre conceals her Dreaming story; consequently, every story is latently contained in each painting as each viewer is obliged to construct a personal response to the work.

Moreover, the capability to contain infinite definitions is a function of the coincidence of the material and the immaterial in Petyarre's work. The subject matter is at once of land and of spirit. This intrinsic paradox contained in the paintings is indicative of a painting's ability to maintain contradictions concurrently and, as such, elude a single meaning. The elusiveness of the paintings to the definitive articulation of a single meaning causes them to be more, rather than less, fascinating, however as they invite an individual response from each viewer and consequently embody so many more meanings in potentiality.

Petyarre's work is cited here as it offers an introduction to the concepts of concealment and paradox that are central to the following discussion, which focuses on the work of Agnes Martin. The research behind the discussion began with an initial attraction towards the paintings of Agnes Martin and the sense of a connection between the concerns of my studio practice and her work. An exploration of, and inquiry into, the issues that are raised in discussions of Martin's work formed many

³ *ibid.*

possible connections between the two practices. However, of all the possibilities, I believe the fundamental link centers on the strategy of concealment and expression of paradox and their employment within the visual discipline of painting. It has been through the investigation of these associated concerns that I have become fully conscious of the centrality of these concepts to my own practice and further clarified the position of my paintings within a wider discourse.

Concealment

Do whatever you can to behave as though you did not know that they [thoughts] pressed so hard upon you and between you and God. Try to look, as it were, beyond them and over their shoulders, as though searching for something else, as indeed you are, for that thing is God hidden within a cloud of unknowing.
- *The Cloud of Unknowing*⁴

Conceal: 1. to hide; withdraw or remove from observation; cover or keep from sight 2. to forbear to disclose or divulge.⁵

The strategy of concealment within a visual discipline, whilst initially seeming to be a contradiction, holds the potential to reveal what cannot at first be seen.

Concealment involves recognition of the positive and active attributes of repression and forgetting and the strategic pursuit of these activities.

The activity of concealment is encouraged by the unknown medieval author of The Cloud of Unknowing, a practical and instructive text for the aspirant to a deeper knowledge of God and the ways of mysticism. The reader is taught to recognise the dual nature of their thoughts, to recognise that thoughts have both helpful and unhelpful qualities and to consciously choose when to give heed to them and when they should be disregarded, or forgotten. The repression of thoughts is encouraged, for thoughts focus contemplation on the self and therefore hinder the approach to God. The author instructs:“ ..I bid thee to put down such a sharp subtle thought, and cover him with a thick cloud of forgetting, be he never so holy nor promise he thee never so well for to help thee in thy purpose. For why, love may reach to God in this

⁴ Anne Bancroft, The Luminous Vision - six Medieval Mystics and their Teachings, Great Britain: Unwin Hyman Limited, 1982, p.179

⁵ Arthur Delbridge (ed), The Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary, Australia: Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1995, p.192

life, but not knowing.”⁶

The reader is taught not only to forget (conceal, repress) their thoughts, but also to seek what their thoughts have hitherto, unacknowledged, been concealing: the God-ground that exists within the Cloud of Unknowing.

Forgetting is, in general, associated with failure and loss. In this circumstance, however, forgetting is a conscious activity and a method for gaining a new experience or understanding. Forgetting as a strategy is described by Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her book Women Who run with the Wolves as the withdrawal or concealment of what was previously in the foreground, to gain a new ground or landscape. She writes: “Conscious forgetting means letting go of an event, to not insist it stay in the foreground, but rather allow it to be relegated to the background or move off stage ... Conscious forgetting means wilfully dropping the practice of obsessing, intentionally outdistancing it and losing sight of it, not looking back, thereby living in a new landscape, creating life and new experiences to think about instead of the old ones.”⁷ A new position cannot be gained without the letting go of an existing position.

Jackson Pollock, in his early “action paintings” actively and consciously used concealment as an approach to the picture plane. He flung paint at and dripped it on and over figures upon the surface of the canvas. In her analysis of these paintings, Rosalind Krauss describes this activity as a work of cancellation, as the concealment

⁶ F.C. Chappold, Mysticism A Study and an Anthology, Great Britain: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1970, p.313

⁷ Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Women Who Run With the Wolves, Random House Group Ltd, London, 1993, p.371

of what was previously uppermost in the painting: “Below the early webs of *Galaxy* and *Reflection of the Big Dipper*, the image of human figures are clearly visible. The web of black line has been set up to efface those figures, to cancel them ... In *Number 1, 1948* ... one can barely make out an underdrawing that maps the surface with three more or less vertical poles, one at the center and the other two at either edge. It is this schema that is buried by the avalanche of the poured skein, although the flurry of palm prints at the web’s upper margin, made towards the completion of the painting, can be said to mark the sites of the schema, lying below.”⁸ A thick, dense web of paint conceals what was formerly uppermost in the image. What was formerly in the foreground is put down under a physically substantial “Cloud of Forgetting”.



Figure 2
Jackson Pollock, Number 1A, 1948. Oil on canvas (68" x 8'8") Collection, The
Museum of Modern Art, New York

The act of concealment here is, however, read as an act of violence. Rather than being viewed as an action consciously taken with the aim of a positive result, it is

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, The Optical Unconscious, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1993, p.265

viewed as an act of transgression. Krauss observes that the cancellation of the figure is read as an attack against the harmony and intrinsic unity of the traditional ordering of the figure/ground relationship. She writes: "In striking at the schema, the web cancels more than just this or that figure ... It strikes against the organic form's condition as a unified whole, its capacity to cohere into the singleness of the good gestalt, its hanging together, its self-evident simplicity, its *Pragnanz*."⁹ The established system for the construction of a pictorial space, the application of figure upon ground, upholds the values of unity and order. As such, an alternative system must by definition, embody values of disunity and disorder. Rather than being defined as an alternative model for the construction of a pictorial space, Pollock's work is, therefore, defined as an attack on the established model; his work is read as an act of transgression.

This reading of Pollock's paintings has resulted in many comparisons with the antisocial, such as graffiti art.¹⁰ Yet Pollock's striking at and concealing the figure has parallels with another, less obvious act of concealment. This action is that of not initially laying down a figure, of not-speaking. This alternative is, while less violent, still very much of a transgressive nature. To speak out of turn is an act of disorderly conduct, yet to remain silent when one is expected to speak can be an even more rebellious action.

Not-speaking, as described here, is a conscious action. It is not the absence of speech; just as forgetting is not simply the absence of remembering, but rather a conscious repression of a thought or thoughts. Not-speaking is the conscious letting go of

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 266

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 259

speech; it is the concealment of words.

The approach of not-speaking is described in Isak Dinesen's short story entitled The Blank Page. The tale is told of an order of nuns in Portugal who grow flax from which they manufacture the finest linen in the country; linen so fine that it is used as sheets on the bridal beds of newly-married royalty. Following the wedding night, to attest to the (former) virginity of the princess, the sheets are publicly displayed before being reclaimed by the convent. The central, blood-stained piece of the sheet is then framed and hung in a gallery in the convent, identified by a plate bearing the name of the princess. This gallery is a destination of and a fascination to pilgrims who travel to the remote convent. The tale centers, however, on the sheet that holds special fascination for pilgrims and sisters alike: a framed, snowy-white, unstained sheet hanging above a blank nameplate.¹¹

The anonymous princess had refused to engage in the accepted activity that would define her as being a princess. In acceptance of the role of princess, she was to sign with her blood, an act necessary for approval and to prove her passivity in the role. Viewed in this way, writing - or speech - is the passive action. Refusing to write, not-speaking, is the active endeavor, a form of self-assertion and self-expression. Susan Guber observes that the princess has engaged in a risky act of rebellion by not-speaking; she says: "... blankness here is an act of defiance, a dangerous and risky refusal to certify purity. The resistance of the princess allows for self-expression, for she makes her statement by not writing what she is expected to write."¹²

¹¹ Susan Guber, "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity" in Elaine Showalter (ed), The New Feminist Criticism - Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, Virago Press, London: 1986, pp.295-296

¹² *ibid.*, p.306

By withholding her writing, the princess has not engaged in the activity that would define her as being a princess. Similarly, by withholding a story, an author acts against the precepts that dictate the activity that defines what an author is. It is generally accepted that the page was formed for and owes its existence to its potential for being written upon, therefore the “creation” of a blank page is viewed as a challenge to this system. It is a defiant act: the princess in Dinesen’s tale acted defiantly because she refused to “write” on the blank sheet. Similarly, Pollock acted in a defiant manner because he initially “wrote” on the canvas and then “scribbled” over the top, striking at and canceling out the “writing” and rendering it illegible. Both acts constitute the withholding of a story by the author; both acts question the meaning of the activity of authorship.

The interpretation of the action of not-speaking is equally as important as the action itself. In the tale, the blank sheet is only defined as a blank sheet because of its context; in any other context it would be viewed as simply being an item of household linen. Yet, because of its context, the blank sheet is given an entirely different interpretation and the meaning given by this interpretation is what held the fascination for pilgrim and nun alike. The sheet told no story; it revealed nothing to the viewer from a cognitive inspection. However, it contained the potential of a blank page to tell every story. Stephane Mallarme once remarked that the “perfect poem would be a blank sheet of paper which, containing nothing (in actuality), would contain everything (in potentiality)”¹³. It is in the marking of a page that limits it to a single narrative; its attraction and power is that it potentially contains

every narrative.

Anna Chave references the tale of “The Blank Page” in her discussion of Agnes Martin’s paintings. The comparison between Martin’s work and the blank page of the tale allows Chave to construct a feminist reading of the works. She writes: “...if we think of Martin as having purposely produced blank pages, pages that in a sense she has declined to mark, then we may consider her art in the light of certain modern, female writers who have explicitly associated the blank page - a page that successfully eludes the phallic pen - with female creativity”¹⁴. This particular reading of Martin’s work demonstrates the ease of construction of a defined interpretation for a blank page, to construct a meaning for a painting that has been intentionally created as an undefined object. The difficulty in approaching a work in which the narrative has been intentionally concealed is to resist the temptation to write one’s own story upon its blankness.

The parallels that Chave draws between Dinesen’s tale and the work of Martin are, however, thoughtful and do construct a framework for a greater understanding of the work. The blank page has the ability to support the imposition of a number of narratives; the display of the blank page most generally results in the viewer making his or her own version of a story that they feel should or could be written upon it. This tempting quality is experienced in Agnes Martin’s works. Holland Cotter, in an article describing the experience of viewing a Martin exhibition, writes of the

¹³ Thomas McEvelley, “Seeking the Primal Through Paint: The Monochrome Icon” in Saul Ostrow (ed) Capacity, History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism, The Netherlands: G + B Arts International, p. 49).

¹⁴ Anna C. Chave, “Agnes Martin: ‘Humility, the Beautiful Daughter ... all her ways are empty’” in Barbara Haskell (ed) Agnes Martin, Whitney Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1992, p. 139

painting *The Islands*, observing: "Like all of Martin's work, *The Islands*, seems like a series of ruled pages waiting for the viewer to begin writing his or her own metaphors"¹⁵. Martin herself believes that the viewer's response is specific to the individual and that the artist cannot precondition the response by the viewer. She writes: "An artist does not and cannot prepare for a certain response ... Works of art are not purposely conceived. The response depends upon the condition of the observer."¹⁶ The display of a blank page results in a potentially infinite number of interpretations, metaphors or narratives created within the viewers' imaginations.

In the aforementioned article, which focuses on a retrospective show of Martin's work, Holland Cotter describes the exertion involved in viewing a Martin exhibition. He describes the continual expectation placed upon the viewer for a response in the following way: "It is an extraordinary experience to move from one painting to the next. The hyped-up city eye, even after passing through the show's long circular route, suddenly becomes hungry for stimulation of a familiar kind, for the sort of instant gratification that other art provides."¹⁷ The viewer is not told what to feel. The paintings offer a vague sense of dissatisfaction to the viewer, as they give no assistance towards the formulation or foundation of a response.

A further result to the display of a blank page is the potential for the viewer to dismiss the work as being unfinished or empty and therefore valueless. Even further, is a widespread negative reaction to the paintings' withholding of an image – metaphor, story. Martin's paintings have consistently been marked upon and

¹⁵ Holland Cotter, "Agnes Martin: All the Way to Heaven", *Art in America*, April 1993, p.97

¹⁶ Agnes Martin, in Notes deposited by the artist at the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in Emma Anderson (ed) *Agnes Martin*, exhibition catalogue, London: Serpentine Gallery, 1993, p.40

vandalized. Anna Chave notes Martin's comments on this negative reaction by some viewers: "You know people can't stand all those empty squares ... and the vandalism that happens, you wouldn't believe how many of my paintings have been destroyed. There are some people that just simply can't take my paintings ... they can't take those empty square. The rectangles. They don't like emptiness."¹⁸ The marking of the blank page destroys its "emptiness", the quality of the blank page that is most fascinating and which enables the paintings to embody the potentiality of which Mallarme spoke. It is through the concealment, the not-speaking, that the paintings are enabled to, in potentiality, hold all stories and express every experience.

The ephemeral quality of Martin's work corresponds with the creation of potentiality; the transient and indefinite nature of the images supports a state of transition. Thomas McEvilley's analysis of Martin's work includes a study of her notebooks and he comments on her inclusion of Buddhist terminology in reference to states of potentiality and transformation. He notes: "... [Agnes Martin] refers to Buddhist terminology that describes reality as made up of three levels: the *Nirmanakaya*, the changing everyday world; the *Dharmakaya*, the unchanging absolute; and the so-called "transformation" realm *Sambhogakaya*, which lies between them. It is in this middle realm, where change and the unchanging somehow merge that ... is like a memory of perfection. And as Martin's art suggests, in order to attain to the art of the memory of perfection we must return ... from rigid differentiation to open potentiality."¹⁹ Martin's paintings reveal possibilities and new "landscapes" by

¹⁷ Holland Cotter, *op. cit.*, p.97

¹⁸ Anna C. Chave, *op. cit.*, p. 140

¹⁹ Thomas McEvilley, "Grey Geese Descending: The Art of Agnes Martin", Artforum International, Summer 1987, p.99

remaining open, by not-speaking. They suggest the possibility of a permanent position of potentiality.

Paradox

When you feel that you can in nowise²⁰ put your thoughts down, cower beneath them as a captive and a coward overcome in battle, and understand that it is wrong to wear yourself out any longer with them ... Take good heed of this advice I beg you, for the proof of it is that you will then melt in God's hands as though poured out like water. And surely, if you do this properly, you will arrive at a true self-knowledge and feeling of yourself as you really are.
- *The Cloud of Unknowing*²¹

Paradox: 1. a statement or proposition seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, and yet explicable as expressing a truth
2. a person or thing that is made up of contradictory elements²²

The employment of concealment as a means of revelation is a seemingly contradictory action. The work of Kathleen Petyarre and Agnes Martin demonstrates, however, that the action only seems to be inconsistent; the paradox lies in that it is by means of this contradiction that the meaning of the painting is communicated. The potential for painting to support paradox is seen in works that engage with contradiction and opposition, releasing them from a hierarchical relationship to one of equilibrium. Subsequent interpretation permits interchangeable definitions for previously oppositions.

Painting has the potential to realise the conjuncture of the emotional, spiritual and rational realms in the one space and the ability to describe opposites in the same space, in the same moment. The literary parallel to this function of painting is that of the myth. From a structuralist viewpoint, a myth is an endless struggle to overcome contradictions and the narrative of the myth conceals or represses the seemingly

²⁰ "nowise: in no wise; no way; not at all" from Arthur Delbridge (ed), The Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary, Australia: Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1995, p.646

²¹ Anne Bancroft, *op. cit.*, p.179

contradictory elements with which it is composed; these contradictions are, commonly, the co-incident between the supernatural and the natural world. According to the analysis of Levi Strauss, the meaning of a myth lies below the narrative surface.²³ This being the case, the meaning of a myth is in the coexistence of contradictions – especially the coexistence of the material and the immaterial. The narrative structure of the myth, the method of concealment, is the vehicle of this meaning.

The concept of the work of art as a conjunction between the spiritual and the material is derived from the history of Western painting, as it has evolved in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Brice Marden's *Annunciation* series continues this tradition of spiritual experience in painting. The paintings not only refer to the biblical narrative, they also refer to the history of the painting of this narrative (Botticelli and Piero della Francesca, for example, both executed paintings in the same theme) and the traditional devotions surrounding the narrative. The series is composed of five paintings, each bearing a title derived from the 15th century formulation of Mary's response to the Angel Gabriel: *Conturbatio* (disquiet), *Cogitatio* (reflection), *Interrogatio* (inquiry), *Humiliatio* (submission) and *Meritatio* (merit).²⁴

²² Arthur Delbridge (ed), The Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary, Australia: Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1995, p.685

²³ Alan Bullock & Oliver Stallybrass (ed), The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999, p.555

²⁴ Stephen Bann, "Brice Marden: From the Immaterial to the Material" in Nicholas Serota (ed), Brice Marden: Paintings, Drawings and Prints 1975-80, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981, p.10

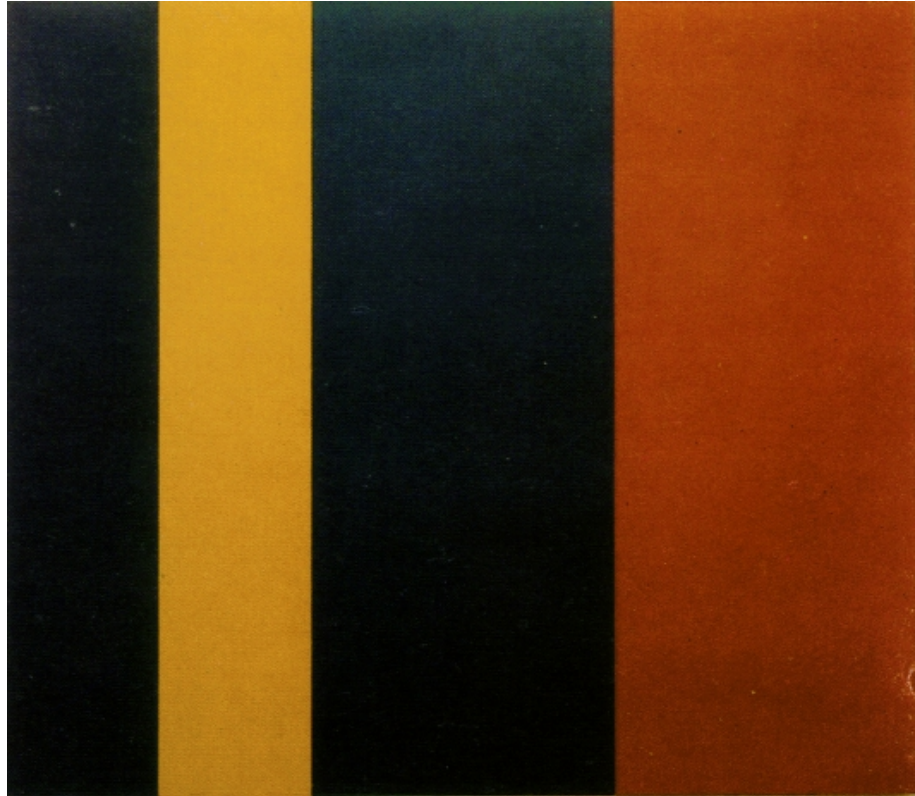


Figure 3
Brice Marden, Conturbatio (Disquiet), 1978. Oil and wax on canvas
(84"x96"). The Pace Gallery, New York

Marden, using a mixture of wax and oil paint, builds the depth and nuance of colour and the sensation of surface in each panel. Each painting is a subtle variation of colour combinations, presenting the viewer with the variations in responses evoked by the titles of the works. Stephen Bann, in his analysis of these paintings, argues that the traditions that are referenced shape our approach to and understanding of these works in particular and of painting in the broader sense, encompassing the cult surrounding the uniqueness of the work of art. He reasons: "Would it not be relevant to point out that the Annunciation signifies, not simply a type of iconography or a particular formal scheme, but the incarnation of the spirit in the material world."²⁵ The historical position of painting is the conjuncture between the material and the immaterial and as such, can contain seemingly contradictory

elements concurrently.

Rosalind Krauss, in her essay “Grids, You Say”, argues that the grid has the same function as the myth, and moreover, that it embodies material and spiritual dimensions concurrently. She says: “In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as an emblem, but also as a myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).”²⁶ Further, as it makes no literal reference to a spiritual realm, the grid can function on an even more mysterious or repressed level than biblical iconography.²⁷

The grid provides this paradoxical juncture by opening the dialectic to a perception beyond the limits of a materialism-based system of understanding. This requires the dissolution or concealment of the hierarchical oppositions that construct pictorial space. Mondrian’s lines and planes construct an equilibrium that deconstructs hierarchy. Holland Cotter describes Mondrian’s position as painting to create a refined balance between all the oppositional relationships between compositional elements of a painting. He writes: “ He [Mondrian] fervently believed that the kind of art he was making, [was] a calculus of exquisitely poised weights and measures ...

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.11

²⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *Grids You Say*, exhibition catalogue, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1979

²⁷ Holland Cotter, in an article on Mondrian observes: “As an intellectual framework, materialist art history is neither inclined nor equipped to engage the spectacles of the hereafters, astral planes and fourth dimensions, so inevitably misses the core dialectic that attracted numerous 20th-century artists in the first place.”

It is painting talking a new, self-invented language of patterns that are so random and yet so deliberately calibrated that they acknowledge flux as they move beyond it.”²⁸ Fundamental to the task of the articulation of the paradox and departure from the contemplation of the purely material is the deconstruction of traditionally hierarchical relationships within the picture plane. The essential oppositional pair to pictorial construction is the figure/ground relationship and as such necessitates negotiation by the painter.

Mondrian’s paintings aspire to the construction of an equilibrium of the constitutive parts. Neither the figure nor the ground dominates; the relationship is non-hierarchical and the equilibrium exposes the interdependence of the two. Herbert Henkels describes the nature of the relationship that creates the equilibrium in each painting: “The eye only experiences the expression of the individual parts in the context of the expression of all the others; no single part can function separately without forfeiting the clarity of the entire composition.”²⁹ That an individual part is inseparable from the whole seems an incongruous notion, yet this perception is created by and is necessary to the viewing of Mondrian’s paintings.

The interdependence of the figure/ground relationship, revealed in Mondrian’s work through the achievement of equilibrium between the opposites, can also be expressed by establishing their exchangeability. Agnes Martin creates the interdependence of the figure/ground relationship by maintaining them in an everlasting state of uncertainty and suspension. Martin’s paintings do not give a

Holland Cotter, “Abstraction and the True Believer” Art in America, November 1995, p. 75

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69-72

²⁹ Herbert Henkels, “Catalogue: Introduction” in Mondrian from Figuration to Absraction, exhibition catalogue, The Tokyo Shimbun, 1987, p.40

primacy to the ground in the relationship, nor do they collapse the figure into the ground; rather, the elements of which her paintings are constructed continuously oscillate between opposing definitions. As the definitions are constantly shifting, the figure and ground coexist and at the same time elude anything more than a transitory definition as either one term or the other. The resultant ambiguity allows the release of our “imprisoned vision” to experience that which lies outside of the material.

In general, the paintings are constructed by applying two layers of gesso, followed by a thin layer of acrylic wash. Sometimes ink is used as a wash, as in *Untitled #5, 1977* (see fig. 4). The effect of the wash is one of atmosphere, such as Kasha Linville’s description: “I don’t mean “atmosphere” in the spatially illusionistic sense I associate with color field painting. Rather it is a non-radiating, impermeable ... mist. It feels, rather than looks like atmosphere.”³⁰

³⁰ Kasha Linville, “Agnes Martin: An Appreciation”, *Artforum*, vol.9, June 1971, p. 73

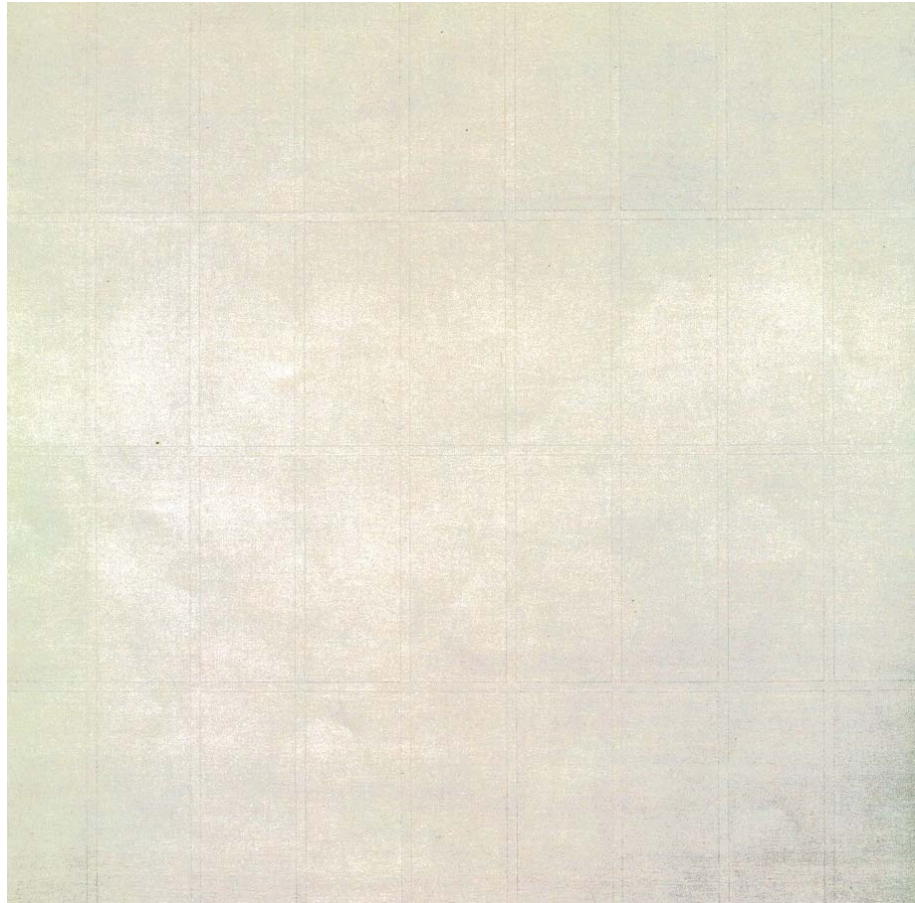


Figure 4
Agnes Martin, Untitled #5, 1977. India Ink, graphite, gesso on canvas (183cmx183cm)
The Pace Gallery, New York

The thinness of the application produces an unevenness that makes the wash appear to be constantly shifting, prompting the definition of “figure”. Yet over this, using a ruler as a guide, Martin typically pencils in vertical and/or horizontal lines in graphite, constructing a grid over the surface of the “atmosphere”. The lines appear to dance over the wash due to the tooth of the canvas that is still quite apparent due to the restraint in the application of gesso. The graphite does not penetrate the weave of the canvas as does the wash, but merely the surface. Sometimes a wash is applied over the graphite layer and the lines are redrawn on top, creating a shadow impression.³¹ The effect of both techniques promotes the definition of the grid as

³¹ Rosalind Krauss, “The /Cloud/” in Barbara Haskell (ed), Agnes Martin, Whitney Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1992, p. 158

“figure” and the wash as “ground”.

However, the historical reading of the grid in art is as a basis for guiding a subsequent application of the figure of a composition, within the perspectival tradition. Beyond the history of art, the grid is also viewed as a “blank page” such as in graph books and ledgers. This has encouraged many comparisons between Martin’s works with blank pages in exercise books. This particular - although customary - reading of the grid suggests that the grid can be viewed as “ground”. The wash would then be seen as the atmosphere laid upon the foundation of the grid.

Further, the immateriality of the “atmosphere” effect of the wash is negated by the explicit materiality of the grid. The lines evidence a consciousness of the material surface and dimensions of the canvas. Rosalind Krauss argues: “Unlike perspective, the grid does not map the space of a room or a landscape or a group of figures onto the surface of a painting. Indeed, if it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself ... Considered in this way, the bottom line of the grid is a naked and determined materialism.”³² Yet the paradox of painting is that the material and the spiritual do coincide and Krauss goes on to argue that the grid, like the narrative in a myth, allows this contradiction to coexist. She says: “...although the grid is certainly not a story, it is a structure, and one, moreover, that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of belief to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed.”³³

³² Rosalind Krauss, Grids You Say, exhibition catalogue, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1979

³³ *ibid.*

Beneath the concealment of the grid, however, the meaning of the painting lies and the paradox is articulated.

The grid's function in Martin's paintings is uncovered at different viewing distances. Close to the surface, the texture of the canvas and the hand-drawn lines are most apparent. The perception of materiality is primary. Kasha Linville describes this as the sensation of touch being made open to the sight: "At close range, you can feel her [Martin's] touch-judgements. She makes touch tangible and visible."³⁴ Linville continues her visual analysis by describing the experience of stepping away from the paintings. The material qualities initially dematerialise into an expanse of atmosphere and then moving further away again, the window to this atmosphere closes to become wholly opaque.³⁵ The experience of the window is, itself, a paradox; as Krauss argues, it is simultaneously transparent and opaque: "... glace in French means glass, mirror and ice: transparency, opacity and water ... For Mallarme, particularly, the window functioned as this complex, polysemic sign by which he could also project the 'crystallization of reality into art.'"³⁶ The grid also possesses this quality of polysemy, being revealed, in Martin's paintings, at different viewing distances to the works.

Moreover, the absence of a single focal point, coupled with more than one single understanding of the image, contributes to the ambiguity of contradiction in Martin's work. Anthony White describes this ambiguity succinctly: "... Martin plays the grid and the wash against each other, each challenging the other, each canceling each

³⁴ Kasha Linville, *op. cit.*, p.73

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.73

³⁶ Rosalind Krauss, Grids You Say, exhibition catalogue, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1979

other, rendering the image both surface and depth simultaneously, undecidable."³⁷

The figure is potentially the ground, which is potentially the figure and so on, in an endlessly undecided yet perfectly balanced interchange.

This interchange can also be seen at play in the monochrome painting. It is potentially either a description of the completeness of the ground, or, in its entirety, a depiction of the figure. The monochrome, however, provides an inclination towards neither opposing definition; rather it continuously oscillates between each definition, thus rendering itself indefinable as one or the other from one moment to the next. It is not in the removal of the figure that a painting enters the state of potentiality of the blank page, but in the removal, concealment or collapsing of the definitions of "figure" and "ground".

The state of potentiality is not always described in this way, however. In his essay on Agnes Martin, "Grey Geese Descending", Thomas McEvelley suggests that this potentiality can be described by a "return from figure to ground". This is an idea which is consistent with his essay studying the monochrome, "Seeking the primal through paint: The Monochrome Icon." He uses Turner's later work as an example: "In his old age, Turner's work underwent a shift which has been called the beginning of Modern Art; it was in effect a shift away from the figure towards the ground. In the years 1840-45 his seascapes changed. The horizon line disappeared and so did almost everything else ... The drifting cloud-like mix of sea and sky is a visual analogue of the state of potentiality ..."³⁸

³⁷ Anthony White, "Agnes Martin" unpublished essay, p.7

³⁸ Thomas McEvelley, "Seeking the Primal Through Paint: The Monochrome Icon" in Saul Ostrow (ed) Capacity, History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism, The Netherlands: G + B Arts International, p. 49

Similarly, Susan Guber speaks of the blank page as being a return from the figure to the ground. The blank sheet displays the craft of the nuns in producing the finest linen; in her reading, the linen itself becomes the artwork, raised from its former status as a women's craft: "The nuns and the storyteller recognize wisdom in the place where the uninitiated see nothing, in part by removing their attention from the traditional foreground to what is usually relegated to background ... the old crone also praises the blank sheet because it is the "material" out of which "art" is produced."³⁹ However, a "return from figure to ground" indicates a reversed hierarchy rather than equilibrium. It is not necessary to subjugate the figure in order to impart value to the ground; the acknowledgment of the interdependence of the figure and the ground leads to a balanced and equal relationship. The blank page is the acceptance of the interchangeability of the two.

The blank page is simultaneously the figure and the ground. The contradictory nature of such a statement is belied by its embodiment in paintings such as those discussed in this paper; the paintings support the paradox of the interchangeability and interdependence of the figure/ground opposition. They employ the contradictory strategy of concealment as a means of communication and embody the co-incident of the material and immaterial. Meaning is embedded in the construction of these paradoxes and imparted through the visual language of painting.

³⁹ Guber, Susan, *op. cit.*, p.306

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