

AGNES MARTIN: BETWEEN THE LINES

Symposium chaired by Dr Tamara Trodd

Lucy Cavendish College

Monday 14th June 2010

2-6pm

WoodLegh Room, Strathaird

One of the most important artists of her generation, Agnes Martin (1912-2004) was associated with key American movements including, unusually, both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. During her long life she produced a body of work which is perhaps unrivalled in its sustained and intensive investigation of the interaction of line and colour. From large scale canvases to intimate works on paper, Martin's delicate, hand-drawn pencil grids combine with subtly contrasting areas of colour to create works that evoke the light and space of the wide-open landscapes in New Mexico, where she lived and worked for most of her life.

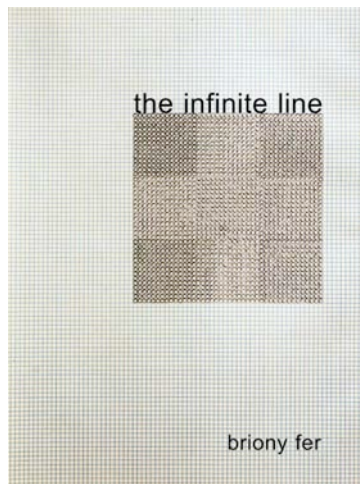
At the centre of the exhibition at Kettle's Yard are 10 late canvases, made between 1991-2002, drawn from the Artist Rooms collection held jointly by the Tate and Scottish National Galleries. As rigorous as they are lively, these late works deliver a visceral, visual experience with great economy of means. The associated symposium (details below) will develop new directions in its interpretation, including a consideration of the part her lesbian sexuality may be seen to play in her particular development of abstraction, and an examination of her links to other women artists of the time. Leading scholars including Professor Briony Fer (University College London) and Professor Jonathan Katz (State University of New York) will present new research and lead discussion on the day.

Organised by Kettle's Yard and Lucy Cavendish College

SPEAKER ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES:

Briony Fer, 'Plain Painting'

This paper is about Agnes Martin's relentless pursuit of abstract painting as a life-long endeavour. That is to say, it is about the dual pursuit of abstraction and painting as intimately entwined. Martin's early works from her time in New York drew on an aesthetics of detritus very much attached to the urban milieu of Lower Manhattan – but here I discuss the relevance, or not, of a desert landscape for her type of abstraction. Agnes Martin has been associated, through tropes of solitude and retreat, with a certain kind of desert sensibility, which continues to play out in the work of others such as Vija Celmins and Roni Horn. I want to question how relevant the idea of a desert sensibility might be in thinking Martin's abstraction. By implication the aim of the paper is to draw attention to the limits of associative and metaphorical readings of abstract art, but also to test out the grounds for what I shall call plain painting.



Briony Fer is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at University College London and has published extensively on 20th-century and contemporary art. Key publications include her books *On Abstract Art* (2000) and *The Infinite Line* (2004), both published by Yale University Press. She has published articles and essays on many contemporary artists, including Gabriel Orozco, Roni Horn, Vija Celmins, Ed Ruscha, Rachel Whiteread and David Batchelor. Much of her research has focused on the work of the American sculptor Eva Hesse, writing for the 2002 retrospective of the artist curated by Elisabeth Sussman at SFMOMA in 2002. She recently co-curated and wrote the catalogue for the exhibition *Eva Hesse: Studioworks* (published by Yale University Press), which opened at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 2009 and is currently showing at the Camden Arts Centre in London, before touring to the USA.

Jonathan Katz, 'Agnes Martin and The Sexuality of Abstraction.'

The palpable disconnect between the rigid formalism of Agnes Martin's art, and her metaphysical pronouncements about it, has generally been met with an embarrassed silence. While some, such as Rosalind Krauss, have sought to recuperate her metaphysics in art historical terms through (equally mystical) phenomenological accounts of the work, few have sought to historicize and contextualize this turn towards mysticism. As metaphysics and an interest in Zen were hardly unique to Martin in this period, a broader art historical accounting is clearly called for and queer studies offers a powerful tool for understanding Zen's favour not only in Martin's oeuvre, but in the work of her contemporaries as well.



Jonathan D. Katz, a scholar of post war art and culture from the vantage point of sexuality, is an Associate Professor at the University at Buffalo, and director of its Doctoral Program in Visual Studies, as well Honorary Research Faculty at the University of Manchester, and most recently, Terra Visiting Professor at the Courtauld Institute in London. Well known as an activist academic, Katz was the founding director of the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University – the first queer studies program in the Ivy League – and founding chair of the very first Department of Lesbian and Gay Studies in the United States, at City College of San Francisco. Katz is co-curator of a groundbreaking exhibition opening in October at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery entitled *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* – the first queer art exhibition at a national museum in US history. Katz is completing the eponymous book for that exhibition and an expanded form of his Martin talk will be published by DIA/Yale in the forthcoming book, *Agnes Martin*.

Anna Lovatt, 'Sightlines: Vision and Reciprocity in the Work of Agnes Martin and Ruth Vollmer'

Agnes Martin and Ruth Vollmer had their first solo shows two years apart at New York's Betty Parsons Gallery and became friends while Martin was living in the city during the 1960s. Vollmer introduced her to a group of younger artists including Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt, locating their common ground in 'the mathematical, the rhythmical repeats, in the importance of line and drawing.' Tracing this network of social and artistic exchange, this paper will explore the ongoing dialogue between Martin and Vollmer; and the uneasy relationships between their work and later, post-Minimal practices.



Anna Lovatt is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of Nottingham, currently on sabbatical in New York where she is completing a book on post-Minimal and Conceptual drawing. She has published articles in *October* and *Art History* and has an article forthcoming in *Word and Image*.

Alistair Rider, 'Plane and Ocean: the role of nature rhetoric in the perception of Martin's paintings'.

In spite of the fact that Agnes Martin vehemently affirmed that her paintings were 'anti-nature', many commentators have persisted in making references to landscape and the natural world when describing her work. In many ways these allusions have been unhelpful, in that they have distracted art historians from situating her art within less obvious social and cultural contexts, and, in addition, they can also confuse the precise nature of the perceptual experience which her art offers. Yet at another level these references to nature cannot be dismissed as entirely spurious either, since in her writings and statements Martin frequently draws an analogy between the type of inspiration to which she claims to constantly aspire, and the experience of standing alone in space, perceiving a particularly tranquil landscape. In my paper I shall be addressing the role of such references to the natural world, and will explore how exactly they relate to her paintings.



Alistair Rider is Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews. His research focuses on post-war North American and European sculpture, with a particular focus on Minimalism. He is the co-editor of *About Carl Andre: Critical Texts since 1965* (Ridinghouse, 2006), and his monograph *Carl Andre: Things in their Elements* (Phaidon) will be published next year. He is currently researching perceptions of 'environmental unease' in modern and contemporary art.

Chair, Tamara Trodd



Tamara Trodd lectures in History of Art at the University of Cambridge, specialising in twentieth-century and contemporary art, with a particular focus on photography and artists' film. She has published articles on artists including Paul Klee, Tacita Dean and Thomas Demand, and is currently finishing a book, *Art After Photography*, and an edited book, *Screen/Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*.