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AGNES MARTIN

Pioneer,

Painter,

Icon

Henry Martin

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NINE

Coenties Slip, New York

Coenties Slip was an East River inlet—home to tugboats and trade ships—until it was filled with land in 1835. Today, it bisects a rectangle of roads that include Hanover Square to the north, Broad Street to the south, Water Street to the east, and Pearl Street to the west. In 1957, when Agnes arrived, the Slip looked like the stem to Jeannette Park, which opened like a bloom onto the waterfront. In the 1950s many of the buildings in the area, some dating to 1825, were derelict and empty. This abandonment, accelerated by the removal of the Third Avenue elevated railway made the area difficult to access, causing rental prices to drop. Over the years the buildings had been tattoo parlors, boarding houses, brothels, and ship chandleries. Nails, stencils, rope, spikes, lanterns, and paperwork had been left behind as though their previous owners had departed in a hurry.

The area was old, Dutch immigrant, New Amsterdam old. Nearby Wall Street was at one time the location of the New York Slave Market, and the Fraunces Tavern, built in 1719 on Pearl Street, hosted George Washing-

ton and his Confederation offices of foreign affairs, finance and war in the 1780s. In the mid 1820s the slip was a dock for Canadian barges that had traveled from Lake Erie through the Erie Canal from upstate New York. If Agnes had met these bargemen at the time one imagines they would have traded advice. Agnes was a keen sailor, after all.¹ However, by the time Agnes had moved to the slip, only the ghosts of these barges and their bargemen remained.

Coenties Slip had watched time pass for more than a hundred years. Some buildings had survived the fire of 1835 that burned much of the South Street Seaport to the ground. These squat red warehouses saw tall skyscrapers propelled upwards into a canopy of sky, offering views of the city previously only imaginable. Across the water they saw the Brooklyn Bridge heave into place. New York was expanding quickly around these old, cold artifacts, many of which would be destroyed by the end of the 1960s.

Living in a commercial property was an entirely novel concept in 1957. When the artists moved in they usually had to empty the loft of refuse from generations of occupants. Many of the buildings were derelict. Undesirable characters—including local sailors—frequently became squatters, with trouble trailing close behind. What the lofts lacked in domestic comfort they made up for in other ways. They were big enough to offer living and studio space, they had large windows offering the artists good light, and most importantly they were cheap.

Agnes was not the first artist attracted to the Coenties Slip area. Beginning in 1954 with Fred Mitchell, artists flowed in and out of the area until many of the buildings were bulldozed at the end of the 1960s. At 27 Coenties Slip Agnes lived with Jack Youngerman and Ann Wilson and at 3-5 Coenties Slip with James Rosenquist, Ellsworth Kelly, and his partner Robert Indiana. The artists Barnett Newman, Charles Hinman, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Rolf Nelson, Chrissy, Ray Johnson, the poet Oscar Williams, the composers John Cage and Morton Feldman, and the dancer Merce Cunningham—all lived or worked close by. The artist Lenore Tawney, who would be instrumental in Agnes's life, lived briefly on the Slip with Ann Wilson and Agnes before moving to

South Street, where she was joined by Agnes in 1961. Agnes, reflecting on her immediate community, recalls, “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 resistance.”²

In her new home Agnes found a work ethic that she had never experienced before. Though she was middle-aged, she was exploring her craft with the abandon of a radical upstart:

I thought I was on my way in Taos, but I never felt that I was doing exactly what I wanted to, not until I was in New York. It’s pretty hard out West, the pace in New York is so much faster, I mean the pace of living. Out West you have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Everybody else is leaning on walls. When I got to New York, I really flew at it; I worked hard in Taos, but in New York I just painted and threw them away and painted and threw them away, but I finally got at the place where I felt I was doing what I should.³

Agnes’s apartment was a long, rectangular loft that faced the East River and the Brooklyn Bridge. The walls were brick with cracked white plaster, and the floors were wooden and unsanded, but smoothly worn by long-gone feet. Agnes had a claw-foot bathtub in her bedroom that she found on the street and the remainder of her furniture consisted of two rocking chairs set up by the window, an old acorn cast-iron kitchen stove, a table, stools, bed, benches, and cupboard that Agnes repurposed from the walnut furniture left behind in the flat. Her loft was on the fifth floor and had no lock on the door. Visitors keen to conserve their energy on the stairwell yelled up from the street to check if she was in. Agnes usually was.

During the day the area was bustling with sailors from the gothic Seaman’s Church Institute on South Street. The institute was run by the Episcopal Church and was a hostel and social hub for sailors, though the artists would go and avail themselves of the hot water in the showers. The artists called it the doghouse because of its foreboding look. On top of the insti-

tute was a Titanic memorial lighthouse that illuminated the night. Agnes used to stand at her window watching the faces of the sailors, wondering where they had come from. By five thirty in the evening the area was quiet, except for the noisy seagulls.

The residents of Coenties Slip threw famous loft parties on the weekends, though Agnes claimed they were “dull” compared to the parties in Taos.⁴ The loft rats, as the tenants were known, made sure that friends brought their own bottle of booze and requested that everyone arrived with discarded street debris: fuel to burn in the stoves. It was at one of these parties that Agnes met Jill Johnston. Jill was a writer for the newly formed *Village Voice*, an outgoing women’s activist and one of the first publicly gay journalists in the U.S. Jill was a thorn in the side of respectable feminists and an out-and-out show-off, using her legs to dangle from ceiling beams at parties. Many considered Jill a formidable character as well as a formidable pain in the ass. She felt intimidated by very few people, but Agnes was one of them. Jill encountered Agnes reading Gertrude Stein to a small group of people in a loft antechamber, and the two became friends. On one occasion Jill brought several people to Agnes’s apartment. Once there, the group sat in a circle as Agnes spoke to them, putting them into a meditative state and posing Zen-inspired riddles. Jill recalls (without punctuation):

She went right on talking and asking us all what sort of a wall or body of water we imagined in our minds eyes and when we saw the wall or the body of water would we cross it or could we and if so how would we do it she went right on with this exercise testing us i imagined for correct answers...

Jill, it seems, found the correct answer to this riddle, which was that walls of water are transparent and so can be walked through: what is on the other side is the same as what is on this one. Water, a recurring motif in Agnes’s life, became the perfect symbol for passing from life to death.

The Slip was full of colorful characters, and Agnes was no exception.

Agnes, older than her neighbors and more spiritually inclined, played the role of a matriarch. Ellsworth Kelly recalls, “You’d go to talk to her and she’d soothe things. Sometimes she would correct us because of our follies, like a parent would, in a way.”⁵ Ellsworth lived in the loft above Agnes at 3-5 Coenties Slip, and the two frequently shared breakfast in his apartment at the time. Ellsworth brewed coffee and Agnes baked her famous blueberry muffins.

Though Agnes identified with the Abstract Expressionists, the younger men and women around her were moving away from the movement (Kelly, for instance, produced Hard-edge abstract paintings). The Abstract Expressionists had escaped Europe and wanted to avoid European influence and American cultural influences; the artists down on the Slip did the complete opposite. Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Indiana, and Jack Youngerman had all served in the military, and not only did they accept the American iconography that distressed their predecessors, but each artist, except for Johns, took art classes in Europe early in their careers before returning to the U.S.

These young artists felt free to draw inspiration from whatever culture interested them. Though their art would progress in different ways, what united them was a sense of experimentation and a serious work ethic. The same was also true of Lenore Tawney and Ann Wilson, who both worked in what was then known as the craft tradition. Tawney, a weaver and fiber artist, became a huge influence on subsequent generations of artists for extending the possibilities of weaving and textiles in sculpture. Ann Wilson, who was influenced both by Lenore and Agnes, lived in the apartment below. She was a quilter who also painted on found fabrics, something for which Robert Rauschenberg garnered more fame for *Bed* in 1959.

The Coenties Slip community was aware of itself as an artistic enclave. It consciously separated itself from the uptown world of the Abstract Expressionists and the Union Square populism of Andy Warhol’s factory, and marketed itself accordingly.⁶ In the 1959 Seaman’s Church Institute Christmas newsletter *The Lookout*, the writer Faye Hammel, in her article *Bohemia on South Street*, praised the Coenties Slip artists for their seriousness:

“Refreshingly unlike the residents of most Bohemias, they spend little time talking about their work, most of their time actually engaged in it.”⁷⁷

Faye’s interview puts “Indiana farmboy” Bob Clarke and Jack Youngerman in the spotlight. Bob, who was Ellsworth Kelly’s partner at the time, would become known as the artist Robert Indiana, whose famous four-letter emblem of LOVE was conceived in 1964 and turned into a statue in 1970. Jack, who was also acting as the landlord, was married at that time to the French actress Delphine Seyrig, star of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

Bob and Jack held art classes at number 27 Coenties Slip in what they called the Coenties Slip Workshop. For three dollars they offered the students the opportunity to “explore the adventure of today’s vision...in either a realistic or abstract approach.” While Bob, Ellsworth, and Jack were not exactly Abstract Expressionists, they explored abstract art, often informed by the locale and waterfront: “Although none of the serious artists do marine scenes—they consider themselves abstract painters—they feel that living near the waterfront has a definite influence on their work.”⁷⁸

Living near the waterfront most definitely had an influence on the work of these artists. Ellsworth Kelly’s *Atlantic* (1956), Ann Wilson’s 3-5 *Coenties Slip* (1958), Lenore Tawney’s *Dark River Wall Hanging* (1961), Jack Youngerman’s *Coenties Slip* (1959) and Agnes’s *Harbour I* (1959) and *Night Sea* (1963) all commune with the neighborhood of their origin. Much of the work of Robert Indiana, including *Ginkgo* (1957) and *The Slips* (1959–1960), was greatly influenced by the history of the area. The “Slip” also affected the artists in unexpected ways, for instance, Robert created *Law* (1960–1962), inspired by being arrested for washing windows on a Sunday. On another occasion, Agnes and Ellsworth were having breakfast. As they were talking, Ellsworth was playing with the metal lid to a coffee container. He had folded the lid and was rocking it back and forth on the tabletop, tapping it with his finger. Agnes, nodding to the rocking lid, said “You should do that.” This humble coffee lid became the start to Kelly’s successful series of sculptures known as the *Rocker* series, which includes *Pony* (1959).

Coenties Slip also had a material impact on the artists and their work.

Agnes, Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist, and Robert Rauschenberg all scavenged the shoreline and streets for materials that could be turned into art. Brass stencils, nails, advertisements, beams, and street rubbish: every item was worthy of consideration. Agnes used boat spikes and wood in her sculpture *The Laws* (1958), while Rauschenberg used street rubbish and quilts in his combine painting/sculptures such as *Monogram* (1955–59) and *Bed* (1959).

Though the artists displayed the seriousness and work ethic of established artists, they were, for the most part, relatively unknown and impoverished. Abstract Expressionism remained the dominant trend and the work of Jasper, Ellsworth, and Lenore was divergent to the norm. Hidden away downtown, these artists enjoyed a kind of freedom that was no longer available to their Abstract forebears. This freedom was not only artistic. The Coenties Slip artists also created without premeditation an environment that was, if not sexually free, at least a sexually alternative community, with women and gay people at its heart.⁹

Abstract Expressionism was a movement broadly dominated by men. Chain-smoking, whiskey-drinking, womanizing, chauvinistic, tormented, brawling, philosophizing, gifted men—so the cliché goes. Women had a role to play as wives, girlfriends, patrons, dealers, and fans, but very rarely were women accepted as serious artists. There were thousands of women artists working with abstraction, but only a handful achieved any notable recognition.

For instance, in 1950, twenty-eight artists signed a protest letter addressed to the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artists were protesting what they considered to be a conservative jury chosen by the Met to judge an upcoming competition. Only four of these progressive twenty-eight artists were women: Louise Bourgeois, Mary Gallery, Day Schnabel and Hedda Sterne. Schnabel and Sterne, as it happens, were Betty Parsons' artists, as were ten of the male signatories.

In reply to this petition, seventy-five artists wrote a letter in *support* of the Metropolitan jury, relayed here by *The New York Times*: “The artists who rejected your exhibition presumed to speak for all advanced artists...

we the undersigned, disagree.” The thirty-five of the seventy-five artists listed in *The New York Times* were all male.

This battle between artists (as well as the invisible sexism that wasn’t considered a topic) continued in 1951 when *Life* magazine commissioned a photo of the original protestors with the caption, “Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show.” Hedda Sterne was the only woman among the now infamous *Irascibles*. Standing on a table, taller than the men, Sterne’s tiny, shiny purse draws the eyes away from the somber ties and grimaces of her fellow artists. Sterne recalls, “They all were very furious that I was in it because they all were sufficiently macho to think that the presence of a woman took away from the seriousness of it all.”¹⁰

The men, it seems, were irascible about women too. Or some women. Stern’s fellow artists had a problem with Sterne but no problem with Nina Leen, the photographer, or Dorothy Seiberling, the *Life* commissioning editor of the piece. The *Irascibles* may have been petitioning against the conservatism of the Met, but who was petitioning against the conservatism of patriarchy?

In the same year, when Rothko, Newman, Still, and Pollock suggested to Betty Parsons that she drop other artists and focus her attention solely on them, they were talking primarily about dropping the women artists Betty was showing. The work of these rich female artists, who were often close friends of Betty’s, was considered objectionable by the self-appointed watchmen of the movement. Betty said no, and increased the number of women artists she represented.

It comes as no surprise that Betty went on to socialize with, paint among, and represent the Coenties Slip artists that sought to supplant Pollock et al. starting with Robert Rauschenberg in 1951, Ellsworth Kelly in 1956, Jack Youngerman and Agnes in 1958, and Chryssa in 1961.

In 1957 the women’s liberation movement, spurred on by the publication of Betty Friedan’s opus, *The Feminine Mystique*, was six years away, and the gay rights movement, instigated by the Stonewall riots, was a decade away. The Coenties Slip artists, Betty, and the gay artists at Betty’s gallery may have had no movement to join, but they managed to find ways to

take small steps away from established art forms and entrenched societal norms.¹¹ One way of doing this was to move downtown and create a community there, the other was through their artwork, as the following anecdote shows.

In 1953 Robert Rauschenberg bought and lovingly erased, stroke by stroke, a drawing by Willem de Kooning. It is difficult not to see in this action a small victory won for Rauschenberg as a queer artist. De Kooning was, at the time, the most emulated, lauded and respected abstract artist in New York. Men flocked to the city inspired to follow in his footsteps and siphon off his success. By erasing de Kooning's drawing Rauschenberg was asserting himself as an artistic replacement. The erasure was also a small defense of women. De Kooning's women paintings were more spoken about in the art world than real women artists (and of course their work). Many critics and many artists, including Agnes, thought the work misogynistic. De Kooning acknowledged some of the figures were scary but he denied he was a misogynist. Rauschenberg had specifically asked de Kooning for one of his women drawings and explained to de Kooning what he would do with it. Rauschenberg, in erasing the drawing, wrested from the establishment at least one dominant and negative image of the female at the time. De Kooning, to his credit, complied.

The artist Lee Hall, who first showed with the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1974, gives her view on the gender dynamics within the art world in the 1960s:

Abstract Expressionism was spoken of often in terms of military images, sports images, which is the way that everything is spoken of in American culture now. It was a very masculine language. Talking about muscularity, aggression, fighting and struggle. The joke was that every woman should find a good man and get to work under him and work her way up. And women who went into the Cedar Bar for instance were assumed to be there to pick up artists and all that. The women artists who were coming to prominence were gaining recognition not so much as artists but more so as fellow travelers of the guys—as their wives—like Elaine de

Kooning and Lee Krasner. Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler were somewhat different but they were still very much attached to the masculine world.¹²

For Hall, there weren't any female artists to look up to "in either history or in the contemporary scene. You were just on your own." This bleak outlook is shared by Betty Parsons and the artist Marcia Olivier. Marcia, who would one day be a close-friend of Agnes, recalls visiting New York to try and find a woman artist she could look up to and study with. One evening, in the Cedar Tavern, Marcia was on a date and noticed a lot of people stalling at a nearby table to say hello to two women. Marcia turned to her date and asked him who the women were. "Oh, that's Betty Parsons and Agnes Martin." Agnes had just opened her first show and the reviews were positive. Marcia thought, "Maybe I can study with her." She asked her date what kind of art Agnes did. "She does lines," he said. Marcia was disappointed. "What can I learn from someone who does lines?" Despite her search Marcia could not find an elder female artist to take her under her wing.¹³

One inherent obstacle to equality, according to Betty, was that "in those days women didn't really respect each other."¹⁴ This is an interesting observation from a woman in Betty's position. Though there are many examples that prove her theory wrong, particularly down on Coenties Slip where Agnes's work was mutually supported and encouraged by Lenore Tawney, Ann Wilson, and by Betty herself. Yet, perhaps, once again, Coenties Slip was an anomaly.



It is mutually agreed by the artist, Agnes Martin, and the dealer, Section Eleven, Betty Parsons Gallery, that the artist is a member of the Gallery from September 29th, 1958 to September 30th, 1960. The dealer will, during this period be responsible for promotion of the artist and the art-

ist will be responsible for any additional expenses such as advertising, catalogs, photographs, etc. The dealer will have full control of all works of the artist for possible sales and promotion until the expiration of this contract.

It is further agreed that the dealer is entitled to thirty three and one-third percent of the selling price on all sales of pictures and commercial assignments. On any sales of pictures made by the artist herself in her studio to clients outside the gallery's clientele, the dealer is entitled to a commission of fifteen percent. Signed by Agnes Martin, October 2nd 1958.¹⁵

Thus began Agnes's commercial relationship with Betty Parsons. Her Section Eleven gallery had opened just three days previously with an exhibition of four artists. Dore Ashton published a review of the exhibition in *The New York Times* the following day, outlining the scope of the venture, and signaling Agnes out as the more "assured" painter,

Betty Parsons, one of the most adventurous dealers in New York, is off on a new adventure with Section Eleven, at 11 East Fifty-seventh Street, an extension gallery that Miss Parsons hopes will serve to introduce the work of talented but as yet little-known artists.

Her opening show presents four painters—Sidney Wolfson, David Budd, Judith Godwin and Agnes Martin. They are radically different in style. Sidney Wolfson is a sternly geometric painter, cleanly dividing his compositions in stark, often compelling color contrasts, David Budd is a vague, and probably uncertain younger painter whose forms, made furry by many palette knife strokes, float lifelessly in ill-defined backgrounds. Judith Godwin is also young and hesitant, but in her thinly painted, sometimes calligraphic canvases a delicate feeling for light and tone emerges. Agnes Martin is a more assured painter with a personal style. Her canvases are pale, luminous studies in which square and oval forms float in spacious areas of diaphanous off-whites. Her quiet, dreamlike mood is consistent and well articulated.¹⁶

Each artist contributed four works to the exhibition. Representing Agnes was *The Field* (1957, \$750) *Pacific* (1957, \$750) *L.T.* (1958, \$650) and *Monument to Mountains* (1954, \$650). *L.T.* was later renamed *Dancer No. I* and is most likely dedicated to Agnes's new neighbor on Coenties Slip, Lenore Tawney, well-known locally for her love of dance. Just three months after this opening show Agnes had her first one person show from the 2nd to the 20th of December 1958, with her next one person show booked in for the following year from December 29th 1959 to January 16th 1960.

Betty and Agnes's commercial relationship got off to an acceptable start: by the beginning of 1959 Betty had sold seven paintings. As was common, Betty persuaded many of her rich friends, the Katinkas (or the powerful Katinkas as Betty called them) to buy some of Agnes's work. The Katinkas were Betty's nearest and dearest rich friends who came to Betty's aid throughout her life, supporting her financially and buying work by her artists in order to keep the gallery account solvent. The word *Katinka* was a hybrid word inspired by the Indian kachina dolls and the Powerful Katrinka, a children's character from the *Toonerville Folks* comics popular in newspapers up to the 1950s. Agnes's work, however, was not sold exclusively to the Katinkas; in the following year many artists began to purchase it, including Lenore Tawney, Ethel Schwabacher, Tony Smith, and Jeanne Reynal.

Despite her positive reviews and middling sales, Agnes was always poor. A letter from the gallery to Agnes, dated February 6th 1959, makes the economics of being a Parsons artist abundantly transparent. From the sale of seven paintings totaling \$1,500, Betty takes \$316.65 commission and another \$630.14 to cover advertisements, photographs, transport, and two advance payments to Agnes. Agnes is left with \$553.21, which does not cover her annual rent of \$600 at Coenties Slip, and her next exhibition is not due for another ten months. What did she do for money? The following year her takings were even worse, \$173.79 out of a sale value of \$1150.05: the gallery was frequently giving Agnes advances that were not recouped from the sales of the work. In her 1961 exhibition that ran from September to October, Agnes sold only three works amounting to \$450. In this collec-

tion, there is a noticeable increase in the price of many of the paintings. Up to this point the most expensive painting by Agnes on the market was \$750. In her 1961 exhibition there were six paintings priced at \$1,500. None sold.

Agnes's work was not selling and she knew she had to leave Betty's gallery. Working with Betty made Agnes anxious and paranoid: "Betty, she'd wait until I was starving, then reduce the prices and buy them up herself."¹⁷ For most of her time with the Section Eleven gallery, Agnes had been asking her mind if "today was the day I leave Betty?" For years, her mind said "no," but when it finally said "yes," she marched uptown to Betty's gallery and freed herself from Betty's one third commission.

Agnes and Betty were very different women, and their backgrounds and circumstances suggest they were as incompatible in love as they were in business. Betty had an active social life in New York and in the summer she vacationed in luxurious surroundings, living off the generosity of her friends. It's very unlikely that Agnes wanted, or shared, this lifestyle with her.

Both women had a strong personality, which often lead to arguments. According to Betty, Agnes was a "fighter" who "disliked a lot of things" and "had a great many hostilities....If she didn't like something, she came right out and said it."¹⁸ Betty was a confident woman, but she was still a society debutante with Edwardian finishing school manners. In the dynamic of their friendship it's likely that Agnes was the more controlling partner, but this was probably reversed in their professional arrangement.

According to Hedda Sterne, "[Betty] liked to dominate or to be totally dominated. All of her relationships fell into those categories."¹⁹ The same was true of Agnes, who once broached the dominant/passive paradigm with Jill Johnston. Agnes asked Jill of her experiences of "domination" and "dominating," and Jill understood intuitively that Agnes was "alluding to women as role players." Jill, however, was too intimidated by Agnes to respond, which itself suggests the power Agnes had on women, whether she realized it or not. Both Betty and Kristina suggest that Agnes enjoyed her romantic relationships. Kristina described Agnes as "very sexual," and Betty claimed Agnes's "whole life" was "to enjoy whatever relationship she had."²⁰ This indicates how important relationships were to Agnes, while

also suggesting the huge expectation she had of her partners. In Taos, it might have been possible for Kristina to accommodate every wish Agnes had, but in New York, Betty was much too busy to do so.

In her letters to her husband Eliot, Aline Porter questioned—not always for selfless reasons—Agnes’s hold on Betty. In June 1960, on a holiday back in New Mexico, Agnes was monopolizing Betty’s time and Aline was getting worried:

Betty is off camping for the night with Agnes Martin. I don’t know when they’ll be back—as Agnes likes to ‘take over.’

It’s all been so confusing. I don’t feel as if I’d seen Betty and she acts very grim anyway. I guess she is older and worn out. We are never peacefully at home—always something going on.

She seems to like my pictures, likes some I didn’t even put in show and I guess is all set to give me a show, but she doesn’t act as excited as last year. But I think that may be her and not the pictures fault. I wonder what Agnes will say to her. I always feel Agnes is jealous of other painters. At least she won’t let Betty look at Taos painters. I wanted Betty to see Oli Sihvonen—but probably won’t be able to. Agnes has been in Taos until yesterday when she came down and got Betty. Betty’s supposed to come back today—but I don’t know what Agnes will do. I have to drive them to Albuquerque Sun. morning at 7.²¹

Of course Agnes was jealous of other painters and possessive of Betty—Betty’s time and attention were precious to all artists. Betty was busy running two galleries, full of artists each believing that their work should be paid more attention than their neighbors. On weekends, Betty was busy with her own painting, and during the week had a full diary of social lunches, dinners and events. Agnes didn’t like to share and she was concerned about failing in New York, particularly after so many of the Taos artists cautioned that she might. Furthermore, Agnes had ended her relationship with Kristina and put her wellbeing on the line to “make it” in New York. She could not risk failure or increasing competition, even from

old Taos friends. When Agnes was in Taos before NY, she used to hang her artwork on the back of the kitchen door in the Stables Gallery to avoid competing for wall space with her contemporaries. Perhaps she had this in the back of her mind as she protected her new hard-won position in Betty's roster—finally her work was center stage and she didn't want to go back to the kitchen door.²²

Meanwhile, Aline was also jealous. Aline was supposed to be a Parsons artist before Agnes, and now Agnes had achieved the success that should have been Aline's. Agnes's competitive streak toward Taos artists comes across as uncharitable when one considers that many Taos friends were her first patrons. Aline, for instance, supported Agnes early in her career when she purchased Agnes's now-lost paintings *Night* (1954) and *Four Youths* (1955). Aline, again:

October 15th 1960, New York

Agnes Martin got me all worried about Section Eleven gallery and told me I should not show there. I got so worried that I had terrible cramps and diarrhoea all one night—I think from nerves. Luckily I thought of seeing Fairfield. I thought I should get outside advice. I called him at Long Island and he was coming in the next day so we had lunch. He was wonderful. He said he thought it couldn't be better as a gallery and was full of encouragement. I'll tell you more about it when I see you. So that was a relief. I know Agnes is unbalanced and queer but I thought she knew what she was talking about.²³

Agnes knew that Aline had long hoped for a New York exhibition of her own. It is not certain if Agnes was cautioning Aline because of her paranoia, or because Agnes knew from experience that Betty would not be able to generate good sales for Aline. Or perhaps the reason is more personal? Perhaps the competition between the women was not exclusively professional. In her letters to her husband Eliot, Aline recalls a courtship between her and Betty that took place the same time that Betty was grooming Agnes for the Section Eleven Gallery,

January 19th 1956, New York

Betty may be interested in me. But she knows how I feel—and she has so many friends and such an active life that it is unimportant. Unfortunately, I think she does have a reputation and I have probably been foolish to see so much of her, but I guess I needed companionship and I have certainly enjoyed her company—even though she is obviously difficult in many ways because she seems so un-real. I will miss her if I leave but it might be just as well for her not to get too used to me.

In her letters to Eliot, the Porter marriage comes across as unconventional. In one paragraph Aline is telling Eliot of her confused feelings for Betty and in another she is encouraging her husband to marry another woman. In the letter dated May 1957, a triangle emerges. Aline is interested in Betty, Betty is interested in Aline, and Aline seems to suggest Agnes is interested in her also:

May 8th 1957, New Mexico

There is also the problem of Betty, which perhaps we should face. She is more than ordinarily interested in me—and me in her I suppose—but so far I haven't been able to see anything wrong in it as I did with Agi. Betty is a different type from Agi—not a neurotic like Agi is—and much more sophisticated—and also interested in the world. However, I don't think I could go and live with her—which really would be fun, if I could.

Aline did go and stay with Betty in New York for a period, but found the pace of life frantic. While she eventually signed with the Betty Parsons Gallery (for twenty years), her work only showed there a few times. Her son Stephen Porter had more success, showing his sculpture with Betty, which he did for the first time in 1976, at the young age of twenty-eight.

Aline was surrounded by successful artists in her family: her husband Eliot, her brother-in-law Fairfield, and then her son. Her relationship with Agnes, despite the competition, resumed a friendly tone in later years, and

both artists saw each other again when Agnes returned to New Mexico at the end of the 1960s. Many years later in her old age, when Agnes had few material possessions of any description, she hung some small floral paintings by Aline on her wall. Agnes must have no longer felt threatened by Aline and vice versa.



In her first four years in New York with the Section Eleven gallery, though she didn't enjoy financial success, Agnes had a varied social life and garnered positive reviews from critics and her fellow artists. Despite selling work Agnes had reservations about the content and her style. Many of her friends favored the sculptures she created: *Kali* (1958) is comprised of painted black and white boat spikes on wood, arranged in a geometric pattern; *The Laws* (1958), bought by Lenore Tawney, was a long plank of wood, one half painted blue to represent water, the top half looking like a night sky with boat spikes as stars; *Burning Tree* (1961) was a scary-looking metal and wood construct with twelve talons.

Up until 1960 many of Agnes's paintings depicted repeated circles (*Reflection*, 1959) squares (*Desert Rain*, 1957), and triangles (*Untitled*, 1959). In 1960 Agnes began a group of small works measuring twelve by twelve inches that depicted dots arranged in lines. Over the next three years Agnes would increase the scale of these works, from twelve inches to seventy-two inches, and join the dots to form lines, thereby producing her first mature body of work that would be grouped together to become known as "grid paintings."

Agnes was feeling more confident under the stewardship of the Robert Elkon Gallery, whom she had signed with after Section Eleven. Elkon, who had bought Agnes's painting *Prospect* (1958) at her first one-woman show, was an excellent champion and promoter of her work for the next seven years. Through Elkon Agnes started to show in group exhibitions in major museums in the U.S. including the Whitney (*Geometric Abstraction in America*, 1962), Guggenheim (*American Drawings*, 1964), Museum of Modern

Art (*The Responsive Eye*, 1965) and in 1966 in her busiest year, the Whitney, Guggenheim, and Jewish Museum with the *Whitney Museum Permanent Collection Exhibition, Systematic Painting*, and *The Harry N. Abrams Family Collection*, respectively. With Elkon, Agnes began to sell more work. No longer was she dependent on the charity of Betty's Katinkas; her art was selling to notable collectors and institutions including Sam Wagstaff and the Museum of Modern Art.



According to Agnes, her most important artistic breakthrough came in 1964 when she completed her painting *The Tree*:

One day when I was waiting for inspiration I was thinking of innocence and a grid came into my mind and I thought, well, I guess I'm supposed to paint it—it didn't look like a painting to me, but I painted it, 6 by 6 feet tall and it looked like innocence very much. I called it a tree.²⁴

Although *The Tree* wasn't Agnes's first grid painting, she singled it out as the painting that established her artistic maturity, adding, she wasn't sure if anybody else would consider the painting art. Either way, she offered the painting to the Museum of Modern Art who, to her surprise, bought it immediately; it was the first painting of hers to be purchased by the museum. Of course, Agnes was not the first artist to paint a grid, nor the first to paint geometrically. After the action and gestural allover painting of Abstract Expressionism geometry had emerged as an attractive subject for artists. Lee Hall remembers,

There was a lot of very serious talk about several different things. One was always "the search" and there was always the shadow of science as the kind of ur-discipline. A lot of the language of science got picked up, such as "experimentation." [Josef Albers] was doing formulaic things with the recipes on the back, and there was a group that was beginning

to go toward *that* as the reality, as the truth, y’know, that everything is essentially geometric; you only have to discover it. And then there’s another group saying “everything is a matter of emotion, of feeling,” then there are people who fell different places on the spectrum.

Agnes’s “vision” of the grid undermines every effort to position this breakthrough (if it was indeed that) within a linear narrative that would take into account her early work, and the various influences on her development over the years. Unsurprisingly, Agnes didn’t “believe” in influence, though she did admit that if she were forced to acknowledge an influence it would be the work and words of the Abstract Expressionists. Abstract Expressionism, however, was not the only “influence” on the artist. Many factors—not all of them in the field of art—affected her personal sensibility.

Agnes believed that painting had nothing to do with the colors a painter selected for a canvas, or where the paint was positioned. The act of painting started when one was thinking about painting, which was inextricable from the artist’s sensibility. In this way, the sensibility the artist brings to the canvas is a combination of individuality and influence.

We have seen how various people and philosophies in Agnes’s past may have developed her way of thinking about life and art, including Emil Bistram and Ed Corbett. With a little exploration it is also possible to see both the obvious, and not so obvious imprint of Buddhism, Greek philosophy, the Bible, and Lenore Tawney on her work and life in New York.

Agnes meditated daily and believed that it was necessary to have an empty mind for inspiration to come: “In NY, I would stay in bed until the late afternoon sometimes waiting for inspiration so I could get up and paint.”²⁵ What did Agnes’s inspiration look like? It came in the form of an image. Once Agnes had received the image, she worked out on graph paper the dimensions of the artwork, deciding how many vertical and horizontal lines were needed and how to express the tone of the piece with her materials and chosen colors. If sitting still in a cold loft studio waiting for inspiration appears willfully passive, creating the artwork was the oppo-

site. Arithmetic was the first hurdle Agnes needed to surmount in order to create the work. Agnes wasn't good at math and her high school grades reflect this; if she got any of her calculations wrong while preparing a work it would affect the geometry and balance of the entire painting and Agnes would be forced to throw the work out because it was not possible to erase and redraw on the canvas without leaving obvious and distracting marks behind. The next hurdle Agnes faced was drawing her lines. Agnes could not use a ruler because it would weigh on the canvas and affect how straight the line would be. In order to avoid this, Agnes used string and a T-square as a tool to guide her hand across and down the canvas. The physical poise and mental concentration needed to create lines equal in width and pressure should not be undervalued. For Agnes, the act of creating the artwork was a physical meditation similar to that of her neighbor Lenore Tawney, who describes her own line drawings as follows, "Every line is made with my mind being right on the line—I kept making these drawings for a whole year. They were like a meditation, each drawing, each line."²⁶The association between the line (be it woven or hand-drawn) and Zen practice runs deep: both *sutra* and *tantra* come from Sanskrit verbs associated with sewing—*sutra* means "thread" or "string" in the sense of continuum, and *tantra* refers to threads that are woven into a fabric.²⁷

The reality of drawing straight lines is that they will always—despite practice, talent or instruments—be failures. The human hand and eye, try as they might, cannot work together to create perfect geometry. It is these small mistakes and variations in her lines that give Agnes's work its more human or *gestural* touch, to use Abstract Expressionist parlance. This human touch, or failure to eradicate human error, suited Agnes well. Agnes saw all art, and the role of the artist as one linked to failure. Failure was the necessary state for an artist. Life and art were open to chance and accident, and when and where this appeared it needed to be acknowledged, not ignored. At the same time, if the scale of the work or its execution was too far removed from her initial inspiration, she would destroy the canvas. Only error in small doses was allowed.

Agnes's approach to her work was increasingly informed by her read-

ings in Zen Buddhism, in particular the work of Japanese writer D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki lectured at Columbia University between 1952 and 1957 when Agnes was attending Teachers College and it's possible that she heard him lecture there, perhaps spurred on by the remembrance of Malcolm Junior's early experience with meditation. Certainly Ad Reinhardt, who championed Agnes and whose "last paintings" Agnes admired, would have conversed with Agnes on Suzuki's writings. Reinhardt took Suzuki seminars at Columbia and was a close friend of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, who corresponded with Suzuki and endorsed his work publicly. Eastern or "Oriental" thought was a fashionable pursuit in the U.S. at that time, in particular for such creative individuals as Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and composer John Cage. Buddhists in traditional robes were a frequent sight on the streets of New York and down on Coenties Slip Robert Indiana, Jack Youngerman, and Ellsworth Kelly were doing I Ching readings together, while Betty Parsons was practicing Subud.

Aside from D.T. Suzuki, Agnes attended lectures by Jiddu Krishnamurti and read from the ancient philosophers: "My greatest spiritual inspiration," she wrote later, "came from the Chinese spiritual teachers, especially Lao Tzu. My next strongest influence is the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng. Chuang Tzu was very wise and very amusing."²⁸ Agnes was also a fan of the Santa Fe writer Wittner Bynner's translation of Lao Tzu.

Zen impacted Agnes in many ways but by no means was it the sole influence on her thinking, as many scholars have been keen to argue. Zen alerted Agnes to the dangers of ego, pride and destruction: impulses Agnes would battle with throughout her life. Zen also helped Agnes clear her mind, but when it came to inspiration itself, Agnes held a classical view of inspiration as something bestowed on the maker by an outside or higher force. Agnes saw herself as the vessel through which her work flowed, and as such, once it was completed, Agnes was no longer responsible for it. This chimed with the role of the artist in ancient Greece. Art, *techné* in Greek, was the making of things according to rules, which we now call technique. For the Athenians nature was perfect and it was the *maker's* role (there was no word for creator) to discover and relay this perfection found in nature.

Agnes was attracted to the Greek idea of perfection as a thing that exists in the mind but cannot be found in reality. The Greeks could conceive of a perfect circle or a straight line, but these were ideals, and not real things. These ideals, however, gave humans something to strive toward: one could conceive of the perfect man, but one could not create or find him in reality. “My work” according to Agnes, “is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind.”²⁹ Take *The Tree* (1964) as an example. Innocence as a state is not something that we can easily point to or observe in reality—but it is something we can talk of theoretically and believe to exist.³⁰ But how do Agnes Martin’s lines help us do this? How can we see innocence when we stand in front of *The Tree*? The reality is that maybe we can’t, and yet people often do. To represent innocence Agnes could have painted a child reaching out for its mother, or children happily playing games. However, if Agnes had painted these she would have been *illustrating* innocence and feeding us images. Instead, by removing all narrative from the canvas, she is asking the viewer’s mind to go similarly blank. When one stands in front of *The Tree*, following the lines, trying to see through to what might be behind them, one is brought to a state of frustration, curiosity, confusion, wonder, and maybe peace, innocence, satisfaction, and joy.

The Abstract Expressionists presented the turmoil, uncertainty and violence of the ‘40s and ‘50s in the monumental scale of their work and the all-over gesture or action upon the canvas. These artists tried to evoke universal feelings through their intense, heavy, and often wild work. Agnes made her work quieter, lighter, more restrained, but also strove for universal experiences. If you hang *The Tree* next to Jackson Pollock’s *Number 28* (1950), Agnes’s work looks like a balm: order next to chaos; a whisper next to a scream.

Abstraction manifested in a number of ways in her art. Some paintings such as *Beach* (1958), *Heather* (1958) and *Wheat* (1957) were close to the work of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt, expressing chromatic fields of color. Other work, the more overtly grid-like and “geometric” work such as *Morning* (1965) is more “gestural,” but always more controlled than that of Jackson Pollock or Corinne Michelle West. In a

sleight-of-hand, these grids, even up close, resemble chromatic fields; the small squares are so tightly packed together that one fails to see the lines clearly, and the effect is one of distortion and fog: *The Rose* (1964) has over thirty-three thousand squares, while *A Grey Stone* (1963) and *White Stone* (1965) have even more. As always with Agnes, there is a blur between what the work shows, and what it suggests. This connects firmly with Agnes's belief that through abstract forms universal feelings can be summoned.

However, despite Agnes's best efforts, narratives and the real world make their way into this abstract, and geometric work. Aside from the early sculptures inspired by Coenties Slip, the Bible was often a source of inspiration. *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden* (1953), still hanging above Mildred Kane's desk in the cherry orchard cabin in Monmouth, Oregon, and *The Islands* (1961), based on a line from Isaiah 60:9, "surely the isles shall wait for me," are two examples. As this quote from *The Untroubled Mind*—one of Agnes's most famous writings—suggests, there are likely to be many more covert Bible references in her work,

I painted those rectangles
From Isaiah, about inspiration
'surely the people is grass'
You go down to the river
you're just like me
an orange leaf is floating
you're just like me
Then I drew all those rectangles. All the people were like
those rectangles
they are just like grass.³¹

It turns out, all these years later, that the granddaughter of Robert Kinnon found a place for the good word in her own daily endeavors.

Agnes wasn't alone here. Lenore Tawney studied the Bible and Alban Butler's *The Lives of the Saints* (1756—1759) with Agnes, with a view to gaining some familiarity with concepts of devotion and sacrifice. Both women

particularly liked Saint Theresa d'Ávila, whose devotion to ecstasy and rapture might have held a particular fascination for Agnes, who, we shall soon see, was often found in a trance-like state in her loft and neighborhood. Though Agnes would frequently visit churches and later admired the Rothko Chapel she did not side with any particular faith. Writing to Lenore in 1976 Agnes showed where her sympathies lay:

October 5th 1976

I guess I just go along with Mind, like Zen Buddhists. I really can't see any contradiction in any of them. But the Old Testament & Judaism and Paul's Christianity are hard to take.³²

Creed would only take her so far. For Agnes, "Religion is concerned with spiritual advancement, about trying to be better for some reward." Zen, on the other hand, doesn't believe in achievement.³³ It is for this reason that Agnes prefers Zen as a mode of living; it was also an antidote to her own chronic ambition.

Agnes's interest in Eastern philosophy was manifest in *The Willie Stories*, short parables she wrote with Ann Wilson, her first neighbor on Coenties Slip. One such parable is the *Parable of the Equal Hearts*,

Once there were two lovers that had equal hearts.
One would pursue one,
the other would pursue the other.
Then the angels looked down and said:
"What a waste," and made them perceive each other.
Their hearts melted into one.
They had no use for the world
so they leaped into the swift river.
This heart was always restless
and the only place where it had any rest at all was on the beach.
But even on the beach one said:
'I wish we'd never been made one.'

And immediately one half flew up in the sky
and the other half into the sea.
But they yearned for each other.
And when it rained the one in the sea said:
'This is a message from my other half in the sky.'
And when the water was evaporated from the ocean and rose up, the
other said:
'This is a message from my other half in the sea.'
The angels were stumped.
There's one thing that God is not able to endure—
a suffering heart.
He felt one half in the sky and one half in the sea.
God thought what to do.
So the one in the sky fell down into the sea
and immediately both turned to sea water.
Ever since that time when the water is drawn up from the sea
and it rains this is not an ordinary rain. It's the rain that affects
people and softens them. I painted a painting called *This Rain*.³⁴

The core lesson suggested in this parable is that God will guide you through your suffering. The human hearts did not know what they wanted. Together they were restless. Apart, they were suffering. It was only when they were changed by God did they have peace. But what is the rain that affects people and softens them? Divine rain? Rain that is brought on by peace? The triumph of love? The union of equal hearts? Maybe there are no definitive answers to these questions, and maybe Agnes did not, as a writer might, think through every word or image to its logical meaning. The *Parable of the Equal Hearts* is first and foremost a love poem, and *This Rain*, an emblem of that love. Perhaps it is no surprise to learn that Betty Parsons bought *This Rain* privately in 1958 for \$1,500, the most Agnes had ever made on a painting at that point in her career. Money isn't love, but as someone who did not have very much money herself, it is a charitable show of affection and protection from Betty towards her struggling lover.

Though these hearts are equal they are nonetheless, like Agnes, struggling. Pursuing. Perceiving. Melting. Leaping. Flying. Falling. Raining. The hearts struggle to keep still. They are part of the same self but are divided, united, divided again. *This Rain* picks up on this split self. In the painting the viewer is confronted with two rectangles of equal size—the top blue, the bottom off-white—centered within a white space. Even though they are separated, these two rectangles look like they belong together.

In the catalog of Agnes's work, *This Rain* is not unique. Much of Agnes's work since the late 50s presented divided plains that mirror each other: *David* (1958), *Untitled* (c.1957), *Wheat* (1957), *Desert Rain* (1957), *The Spring* (1958), *Unknown Title* (c.1959), *Untitled* (1959), *Untitled* (1960). This mirroring is seen in *Dream of Night Sailing* as early as 1954 and appears in her final works such as *Untitled #1* (2003); and it's difficult not to read Agnes's character into this. There was in her personality a definite split or divide that friends were finding increasingly difficult to ignore. Agnes saw this split as a positive. Throughout her adult life, she spoke about the conversations she had with the voices in her head, which she referred to as a kind of guide. Her voices (she also called them her "mind") would tell her when it was okay to leave Section Eleven or if she should accept an award, or have an exhibition catalog. Sometimes her voices took over and Agnes was locked inside her body unable to control her actions or her words, or, even, to remember her name.

Though Agnes could not control the viewer's response to her work, she was secretly happy when people reacted the way she hoped they might. Agnes offered her work as a kind of therapy to the onlooker. Much later Agnes said "I tell 'em to hang 'em in the bedroom and when you wake up in the morning, before daily care strikes, take a trip."³⁵ Agnes definitely intended her work to be transformative or at least, according to the last quote, transporting. In her letter to the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation back in 1954 Agnes defined her aim as making an "acceptable representation of the expression of the American people." By 1958

she was not representing the American people, she was trying to *heal* them.

The Abstract Expressionists sought to represent and confront a tormented postwar American mentality—Agnes was out to pacify it. Years later Agnes spoke to Marcia Olivier about her grid paintings, telling her that she got the idea of making grids from watching children playing hopscotch in the playground. Agnes made the grids so “people can put their troubles into those little squares.”³⁶ This account differs from the more publicized and romantic “vision” Agnes alludes to when she refers to the genesis of the *The Tree* (1964), but it supports the more practical function she envisioned for her art. Indeed, Agnes painted two grid paintings, *Play* and *Play II*, in 1966, and may have had hopscotch on her mind when she painted them.

Seen in this way, Agnes’s paintings shift from being artworks to becoming tools in the everyday sense of the word—a utensil to make living and labor easier. In this manner, Agnes’s work connects solidly with that of her neighbors Lenore Tawney and Ann Wilson. Lenore and Ann both worked within (and broke away from) the accepted female-lead tradition of crafts, the first as weaver and the second as a quilter. Where Agnes was subverting the potential of a canvas, taking something that is passive and making it almost utilitarian, Lenore and Ann were taking utilitarian crafts and asking for them to be seen as art, also subverting their accepted functional parameters.

A lot of critics consider influence a negative word that suggests a weakness on the part of the person influenced, as if they are in some way unoriginal and derivative. Really, influence is just a way of being in the world, where the recipient is open-minded and sensitive to the surrounding reality. How the artist processes this experience and expresses her own vision makes her contribution unique. Agnes was most definitely influenced by Coenties Slip, Lenore Tawney, Zen, Greek philosophy, Bible studies, and much more besides. It is not possible to understand every effect these had on her art or her thinking, but exploring them can yield rewards and help

us understand how her craft developed over time. The paintings should always stand on their own, and the viewers' thoughts and feelings towards them are paramount, but, in order to properly represent her journey, it is important to explore what inspired Agnes in New York and beyond.