

## [PREAMBLE]

**Agnes Martin:** To be an artist, you look, you perceive, you recognize what is going through your mind. And it is not ideas. Everything you feel and everything you see and everything that your whole life goes through your mind, you know. But you have to recognize it and go with it and really feel it.

I believe in living above the line. Above the line is happiness and love, you know. Below the line is all sadness and destruction and unhappiness. And I don't go down below the line for anything.

## [INTRODUCTION]

**Narrator:** Despite her largely solitary daily life, Agnes Martin shared her unique point of view in a number of interviews and lectures over the last four decades of her career. In them, she consistently advocated for an unencumbered life and the pursuit of an experience of perfection and beauty that results only from a deep state of self-awareness.

## [INTERVIEWS FROM THE MID-1970S]

**Narrator:** From 1968 to 1977, Agnes Martin lived on a remote mesa outside of the small town of Cuba, New Mexico. In 1974 and 1976, Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield recorded two conversations with her there. The recordings became part of the Video Data Bank, a collection of interviews with contemporary artists founded by Blumenthal and Horsfield, which is housed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In these excerpts, Martin discusses the concept of truth, the responsibilities of the artist, handling failure, and the importance of understanding one's own mind.

**Agnes Martin:** A lot of people will think that social understanding or something like that is going to lead us to the truth, but it isn't. It is understanding of yourself. And for that, to make a beginning on that, you have to look in your mind and see what you are thinking about. Because the truth is, you are unconscious of your own thoughts until you catch yourself.

You can't be in an unconscious state and paint. Because whatever is in your mind, and not the subject matter, but the feelings that you have related to that subject matter, is what you're going to paint. So, the beginning is not actually painting, you know. The beginning of painting is not you put down green, and then you like pink, and you put down pink. Painting's not about that anymore than music is about this sound and that sound. It is really... It's a whole thing, you know. But it's something that you can't resist putting on ... representing. And it's something that drives you to expression. And it's irresistible.

People are able to make a response to music very easily and very accurately. And I think it is the highest form of art, because with eight notes they express everything that we have ever experienced.

To be an artist, you look, you perceive, you recognize what is going through your mind. And it is not ideas. Everything you feel and everything you see and everything that your

whole life goes through your mind, you know. But you have to recognize it and go with it and really feel it.

It takes time, see. You finish painting the painting and then you turn it to the wall. I mean, you say, does it have it or doesn't it have it? If it doesn't have it, you throw it away, but if you think it has it, you turn it to the wall. And then when you have made some more work, then you turn them all over. And you, again, try to see exactly what it does mean and just exactly how effectively you have rendered this meaning.

The artist need feel no responsibility for the progress or uplift of anybody. They've got to come ready, just like the artist was ready for his inspiration.

If they can't respond, the artist works and responds himself. And then other people come and see and respond. It does happen.

And there's developing awareness, and each development is an inspiration. You know, it makes a change in our expression. The best thing about it, though, is that it tells us the next thing to do. And without it, we feel lost, and we feel very bad. We think, oh, what shall I do and what shall I do, and why was I ever born and everything. But the thing is that not only in artwork but in life itself, we wait in readiness and with patience for the next step in awareness of truth. Of reality. The revelation of truth is the process of life. When you get distracted with this and that, and people say, look at this, and look at that, and you're looking every way. And you're spreading yourself out, and you allow people to distract your mind entirely, you will soon feel as though you're terribly lost and frustrated.

Because you have left the process of the revelation of truth, or the seeking of truth, or whatever you want to call it. You have left the path of life. It isn't the mysterious thing that people make it out to be, the path. You have to find out what your reaction to life is. When you find out about yourself and your reaction to life, then you will know the truth.

The artist has to have absolute awareness of what he does. If you're desperate and your inspiration is not coming through, then you probably will fall back on the illustration of an idea.

If you're an artist, when you get finished with that, you will be able to sit back and say: It isn't anything. It just doesn't have it. It just isn't anything. It's just like a blank.

It all comes from attempting to illustrate from an idea instead of the experience coming right through. Now the way to have the experience come right through is that you simply have to be able to clear your mind so it can get through.

Anger, all the passions, they're not real. They are what I call the exhaustibles. All the exhaustible things, like anger—you know how quickly it passes. Even the sense of seeing beauty is a very exhaustible thing, seeing it with your eye. If you see something that looks very, very beautiful, but if you kept your eye on that and looked and looked and looked, the beauty would disappear from it, because the eye is exhaustible. But then the inexhaustibles, they're within the mind, you see. And the beauty that you see within the mind, it really never disappears. Now the inexhaustibles, they go on forever, that's reality.

They go on without change. But anything that is exhaustible is not real.

We start out with high hopes because people have taught us that just around the corner is happiness and contentment, and all you have to do is be good and try hard and all that. Well, you find out that you can be just as good as you possibly can be, and I mean, you try as hard as you possibly can try, and you still have, you know, the same old thing. You have failures and successes, no? Some things fail and others succeed.

Well, then you get quite desperate, you know. And you think, I'm going to work and work, and I'm not going to have any failures, right? But then you find out that failures are inevitable. That you cannot possibly, none of us, you can't even draw a straight line. You know that. And you can't have things, and you can't have all days in which you are sunny and good-natured and everything like that. And you can't be sweet to people. And you can't please people either. Well, that is the development. The development is of oneself.

I don't know why it is that people have a tendency to doubt their own mind.

To neglect your own mind, that's like to neglect your consciousness. That's like to give up all hope of joy and happiness, really.

You're the only one that can discover for you the meaning of anything. What it means to you. By that, I don't mean intellectual meaning. I mean, what it means, how it makes you feel. You have to see whether you really are happy or not. Whether you really are sad or not. And you have to investigate what goes through your mind.

[POEMS AND PROSE]

**Narrator:** In addition to painting, Agnes Martin wrote poetry and prose. Here, Martin reads two poems, along with an accompanying prose passage, all of which were first published in 1973.

**Agnes Martin:** "The adventurous state of / mind is a high house // To enjoy life the adventurous / state of mind must be / grasped and maintained // The essential feature of adventure is that it is a / going forward into / unknown territory // The joy of adventure is unaccountable // This is the attractiveness of / art work. It is adventurous, / strenuous and joyful"<sup>1</sup>

It's about adventure.

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**Agnes Martin:** "The underside of the leaf / Cool in shadow/ Sublimely unemphatic [hold on, I need my glasses] / Smiling of innocence // The frailest stems / Quivering in light / Bend and break / In silence

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<sup>1</sup> Agnes Martin, *Agnes Martin*, exh. cat., ed. Suzanne Delehanty (1973; repr., Philadelphia: The Falcon Press, 1976), p. 40.

This poem, like the paintings, is not really about nature. It is not what is seen. It is what is known forever in the mind.”<sup>2</sup>

[THE SKOWHEGAN LECTURE, 1987]

**Narrator:** In 1987, Agnes Martin served as an artist in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, a summer residency program for artists that encourages diverse points of view and unhindered creativity. It was the perfect venue for Martin to share her distinctive beliefs on beauty, the mind, and art making. The following excerpts are from a lecture given during her time at Skowhegan.

**Agnes Martin:** When I think of art, I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is in the mind, not in the eye. In our minds, we have an awareness of perfection that leads us on.

The response to beauty is emotion. Sometimes very subtle emotions of which we are almost not aware, and sometimes our most powerful emotions....

Beauty is very much broader than just to the eye. It is our whole, positive response to life. An artist is fortunate in that his work is the inner contemplation of beauty, of perfection in life. We cannot make anything perfectly, but with inner contemplation of perfection, we can suggest it.

Although we are all different, we all respond to each other’s suggestions of perfection. And we enjoy the same response as the artist. It is the inner contemplation, the wanting to respond to life, that opens our eyes to what is already in the mind.

We contemplate reality with a sense of beauty, as though it were perfect. We are also able to contemplate nonobjective beauty.... I’m very anxious for you to understand what I mean by nonobjective experiences. Say that you went blind. You know, very depressing, but you would still have a very exciting emotional life. That is a nonobjective experience.

Everything is contemplated in the mind without meditation. We make a very complicated response. Just to look at a floating branch evokes very complicated objective and nonobjective responses. The artist must slow all this down, mentally. It is this mental experience that makes the representation of beauty possible.

The part of the mind in which we experience the perfection of beauty is not the intellect. The intellect is the part of the mind that calculates, compares, associates, classifies, and decides according to the facts. It is very different from the other part of the mind, where we simply wonder what to do, and the answer comes to us without any evidence. And if we sincerely want to do a difficult thing, we call the answer inspiration.

Alone and in silence, the mind rises up from worldly concerns to considerations of the truth about life. The truth about life is not spiritual. It is the truth about this life. It is the

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<sup>2</sup> Agnes Martin, *Agnes Martin: Writings*, ed. Dieter Schwarz, (Ostfildern, Ger.: Cantz Verlag, 1991), p. 15.

real answer to our zest for living, and our faith in life. It is also the best condition of mind for inspiration. Zest for living and faith in life are nonobjective experiences, as is happiness. You may feel all of these without a material cause....

We can wake up happy for no reason and be full of zest without thinking of anything. I want to urge you to an awareness of such feelings. And I want to urge you to go in search of yourself. You have been thoroughly conditioned since the day you were born, so it is hard to find out what you think. But it is possible.

By questioning your own mind, it is possible to have absolutely original thoughts. To have an absolutely original point of view. What you want to find out is what you want and what you do not want. When you give up what you do not want, you take a move forward in life. Your conditioning has taught you to identify with others, their emotions and their needs. I urge you to look to yourself. In our convention, it is particularly difficult for women, but still it has to be done. The purpose of life is to know your true, unconditioned self....

In the middle of the work of art, an artist often feels that he is failing. And he starts interfering with his inspiration. That is a mistake. *The* mistake. It is best to push on through. Such works frequently turn out to be the best. To fail is a very ordinary experience for an artist. To fail and fail and still go on, marks his character. Most people cannot bear to fail, even once. They think of security.

We always think our output will be enormous, but because of failures, it turns out to be quite small. The inner eye contemplates all that you have ever seen. And the emotions rise as the inner eye operates. And we observe objectively, but the real life of the work depends on the simultaneous inner experience. I urge you to discover your inner experiences when you are not working.

You can realize the necessity of being alone at times. To walk alone is very different from walking with others. It is necessary to be alone to visualize your work in your mind. To see your direction. Perhaps before you go to sleep you can visualize what you are making and have inspiration.

The thing to do is to learn to accept the truth as it comes into your mind. Give up... Give up logic, deductions, and application and reference. Do not give serious attention to what others think. Do not take under consideration the art scene. You must have complete independence of mind.

If an artist looks outward in life, we say that his work is visual, and that's not a compliment. And if his work is intellectual, we say that it's brilliant, and that's not a compliment. And if it is made with the inner eye and the emotions that go with it, we all agree that that is the work with the most value.

Although I have come to the end, I just want to say again that the intellect has nothing to do with artwork, and you're going to live lives of emotion, with hardly a thought crossing your mind....

[INTERVIEWS FROM 2002]

**Narrator:** Filmmaker Leon d'Avigdor interviewed Agnes Martin at her studio in Taos, New Mexico, for a 2002 [documentary] about her life and work titled *Agnes Martin: Between the Lines*. In these audio excerpts from the film, Martin shares insights about her creative process and offers her thoughts about fundamental human experiences such as innocence, happiness, and love.

**Agnes Martin:** I was sitting and thinking about innocence. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of innocence of trees. I thought it was quite easy to be innocent if you're a tree. And into my mind there came a grid, you know. Lines this way and lines that way. And I thought, my goodness, am I supposed to paint that? Nobody will ever think it's a painting. But at least it's nonobjective. Completely abstract. So I painted it six feet square. And then I offered it to the Museum of Modern Art, and they took it. My very first painting.

There's no indication or hint about the material world in my painting. No, I don't paint about the world. Everybody else is painting about the world. That's enough.

I am simply painting concrete representation of abstract emotions such as innocent love, ordinary happiness. I do want an emotional response. And I paint about emotions, not about lines. The truth is that it's not the lines that express the emotion. It's the scale of the composition. You know, if you go into a room that has perfect scale, you feel it. And it's the same with a painting. If the painting has perfect scale, it moves you. And you have different scale to show different emotions. It's the space between the lines that counts.

I painted for 20 years without liking them very much, you know. I burnt them at the end of every year. For 20 years I burnt the whole bunch because I didn't want them to get in the market. And well, sometimes when I was starving, I used to sell one cheap, you know. But I always regretted it because you hate to think of a painting in somebody's house that you don't like well enough, you know.

My mother went to church but she didn't say anything about whether we could go to church or not. My grandfather was very religious. But we did not go. I have my own religion. It suits me. I made it up myself.

I read all about everybody else's religion before I settled on mine. It's a secret religion. You don't go out looking for converts or anything like that. Well, I guess I can tell you. It's about love, not God. There's no God but just love. That's all I'm going to tell you.

It's a secret.

The truth is that I have lived on an even keel. I don't go down, and I don't go up. I believe in living above the line. Above the line is happiness and love, you know. Below the line is all sadness and destruction and unhappiness. And I don't go down below the line for anything.