

A Sense of Company

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The work and words of Agnes Martin

Introduction

“the body is the articulation, or better yet, the *organ* or *organon* of the sign: it is for our entire tradition that *in which* sense is given and *out of which* sense emerges.”¹-

Attention and Fullness

Underneath the torn away bark on the bottom of the tree were subtle colors. I was walking the dog. She was relieving herself and kids were playing, so I had to act and could not fully concentrate on what I was seeing. But afterwards, those colors coming from the tree stayed on my mind. They were soft and changing slightly all the time, shifting through muted pinks and beiges. Later I came back to paint. Filling canvasses with these colors, one shade per surface, gave me the possibility to linger for a while and view them as phenomena, instead of as part of a wider context.

When I first saw the tree, the nuances and subtleties of the colors underneath the bark almost drowned in the abundance of information that surrounded them. ‘Muting’ the environment was needed, in order to see the subtleties: an active stance of directed attention that blinds us to parts of the place that we are in.

I am interested in how this mechanism can be countered by giving subtleties a firmness of presence that allows them to take on an active role instead of a passive one. The fleeting nature of an experience then makes way for something new that holds its own relation to time. Its firmness conceivably allowing for nuances *themselves* to speak. Environmental inputs that were once distractions then become a natural context, allowing for a more open and “full” experience of the world.

The Shifting of Sensibility

There are two kinds of artistic process: intimate attention and storytelling. Although they are antipodes, and both ask for a very different sense of awareness, they can be brought together.

Storytelling is communication based on information, while intimate attention is something that is bubbling underneath the intelligible. These approaches can switch and overlap, but with visual storytelling alone a sense of company cannot be achieved. And a sense of company is what I’m after.

With intimate attention, a sculptural engagement with phenomena is possible. And that engagement makes it possible to approach ‘a sense of company’, as something that is sculptural, a sensation that becomes present in the specificity of a space.

I explore the porous relation between painting, sculpture and architecture to see how a sense of company can be developed and supported. My main area of focus has been, and most likely will be for some time, static, visual art. For its static nature offers a contrast to a life that is always changing and tempting us to contextualize.

But there is a great field of phenomena to be explored. And to take part in a full sense of self, sensation and reflection must come together.

Since I am invested in feeling this sense of company as something sculptural, I realized a lot of this sense comes from a specific state of presence. To find out more about what this specific state of presence is, and how it comes about, I decided to approach different artworks through the question of how they made me feel present, or not at all spoken to. I describe this research in the following thesis.

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy’s Birth to Presence

A Personal Exploration of Phenomenology in Modernist Painting

“For the player in action the football field is ... pervaded with lines of force (the “yard lines”; those which demarcate the “penalty area”) and articulated in sectors (for example, the “openings” between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the “goal,” for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal planes of his own body.... At this moment consciousness is nothing other than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field.”³

This passage by Merleau-Ponty describes a form of interaction, based on phenomena instead of objects. Naming fleeting or complex effects ‘phenomena’, allows for a more conscious engagement with specific things that cannot be seen at first glance but can be felt.

I have been exploring especially senses of human-like qualities in artworks as entities in their own right. You could maybe relate it to how ancient cultures believed that emotions like anger were gods “passing through” the body. Approaching senses as such, as entities, makes them easier to recognize sometimes.

For the following descriptions of encounters with paintings, I would like to suggest that we look at paintings as a specific form of sculpture. For phenomena happen in relation to us, in space, where the painting appears as an object.

³ Merleau-Ponty Maurice, *The Structure of Behaviour* (168-69)

Barnett Newman

Barnett Newman's *Cathedra* is big. Fields of blue are painted in many tints. Brushmarks are visible and provide a strong sense of succession. I take a seat on the bench opposite the painting. I have been sitting for a while and at this point when I shift my gaze, the blue tinted fields start to float around in a lighter version of themselves. They float over the canvas and the wall that supports it. The white "zip", or vertical stripe, both separates and holds together the fields in their movement. The surroundings turn yellow now. I look around until things look more familiar again. I explore the painting a bit further and notice the application of blue paints around the less noticeable muted green vertical stripe to the right. Maybe the stripe was created by leaving some underlying green layer visible. The blue seems to have been stacked around it.

The relations I have with this work in a single sitting are variable. When I look at the direct physical attributes of the work, and look at the paint application, it feels as though I can look behind the curtain of a theater show. I can almost see Newman painting it as I watch the canvas. This contrast between the 'show' and the behind the curtain view feels a bit like alternating between two separate works.

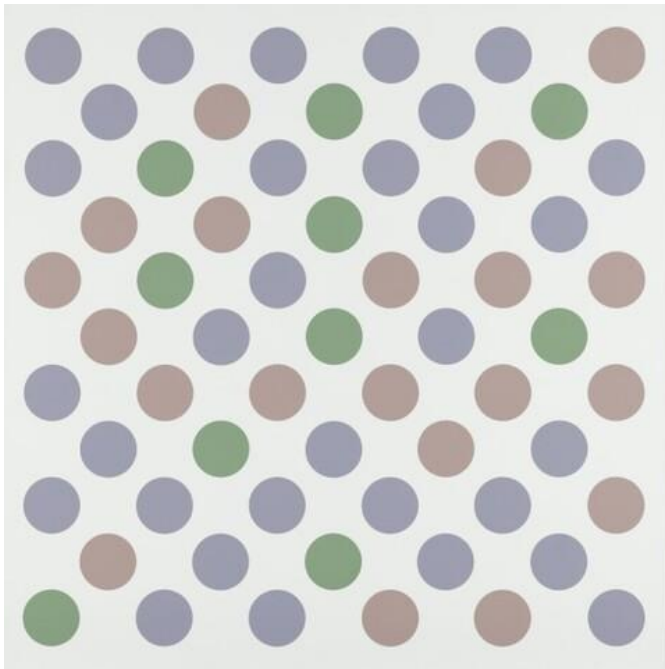
There is a disorienting, treacherous, slightly astonishing, or perhaps slippery something to this work. I think it is mystifying.



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⁴ Is the man in this picture keeping an eye on Newstead Abbey?

Bridget Riley



Measure of Measure 1, Bridget Riley 1931

The works in Kunstmuseum Den Haag by Bridget Riley appear completely innocent, at first sight. A small collection of her works hangs here in a space that I would describe as something in between a passageway and a room. On previous occasions in this museum, Riley did not really grab my attention. Maybe I was looking for something that she did not offer here, with these canvasses. But the last time that I came into contact with the same space, the same works, the experience was completely different. I started looking at them. And they became a blind spot. An area where my vision scrambled, and it was uncomfortable in a way that thrilled me. It looks like what interacting with chaos feels like. And it is not illustrative but a living sense of it.

I can't travel inwards, and the perfidious order of dots refuse to come forth and leave their surface tension. Maybe this is the opposite of a horizon.

After visiting Mondriaan's *Boogie Woogie* we had to find the exit and go through Riley's corridor once more. I averted looking for too long in passing, but then felt a bit of resistance rise up in myself and felt that I could make them flat images once again if only I could look at them as such. Put them in their place. I failed.

Frank Stella

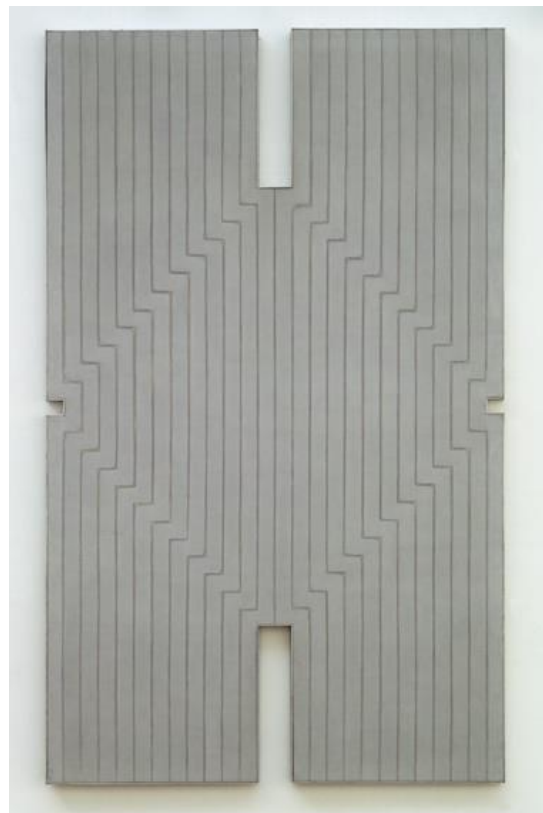
A few meters and a corner to the left from *Cathedra*, we find *Newstead Abbey*. This work by Frank Stella measures 301 x 183 x 8cm. It does not come across as small. However, learning about the dimensions, its measurements are much taller and wider than I would have suspected based on its atmosphere. Maybe it is the care with which the aluminum paint has been applied, revealing the soft warmth of cotton that has been left unpainted. This work seems intuitively well proportioned. What is asking to be noticed? Or coming forth?

The first thing that drew me to hang around this work was a sense that something was present in the space with me. Or actually not quite present yet but wanting to be. The canvas feels like it is coming forward, onto us. It carries the sense of someone or something being upright. Someone or something wanting to come into the space of life in the room of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, but not quite managing.

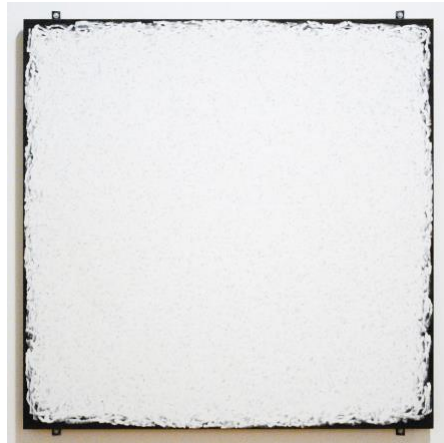
Maybe it does not really want to become more physical in the space. In a way this is supported by the fact that we cannot see its backside. It does not show a backside, and maybe it would not even be interesting if it did. There is something about paintings which tells you that it is not purely physical and entices engagement beyond looking. They are partly out of sight.

However, I really want it to come through. I realize that my annoyance is with the metal slates covering up the edges of the canvas. They rein it in.

This holding back creates great tension. Now that I notice this tension, I feel like I understand the work more. Everything about the work supports this tension. The work remains in a state of becoming tangible, but not completely. Reserved maybe. If Stella had been a portrait artist, I imagine he would have come across someone like a clerical father at some point in his life. I walk over to read the title: *Newstead Abbey*. Great title.



Robert Ryman



In the image above you see a painting by Robert Ryman. *Untitled*, 1980. It is a structure mounted to the wall in one of the spaces of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It consists of carefully applied white oil paint on a panel with black surface, which is attached to the wall with visible small metal handles. These handles, for me, articulate something about the presence of a painting. In this sense the work does not seem to build on the tradition of either illusion or representation in painting.

The brush strokes are not necessarily neat, but they seem to have been placed with a rhythm and they don't pass through the imaginary barriers towards the sides of the surface. Here on these barriers, the dynamic of the white rhythm pushes onto the black background. This creates an ongoing movement that might not measurably be there, but when observed with some patience it certainly is there.

A quality that I appreciate in this work is that as a thing or object, it can be seen in an instant, almost in its entirety. Sure, we can walk to the wall, put our face to the wall and look at its structure from the side, but the main event is taking place frontside. The work seems to have a "face" -side like that, similar to Newstead Abbey but serving a different function in this case. It delivers a density to the surface that makes it feel filled, brimming. And that is a stunning effect since we tend to assume that surfaces are flat.

The sense I get is of being with something protuberant and contained.

Because the work does not seem to want to inform me of anything or change my state in any acute way, I feel more open to what the work might offer if I spend some time with it. And in doing so, I find myself engaged with the rhythm of the white surface. In a way the rhythm seems still like white noise. Some kind of order is holding it together. I think it is intuition. Like music, but quiet. And somehow it is without speed. Not fast paced, not slow. But instant.

The point of singularity

When a phenomenon becomes a character in space

Looking back on differences in the experiences of the works that I described, I notice that there is a quality that sets some works apart from others. When comparing Newman's *Cathedra* to Riley's work, *Cathedra* grabs my attention in so many ways, and it has such varying effects and modes of communicating, that I feel as though the work is a combination of loose fragments. Somehow this makes it feel like *Cathedra* is unaware of what it is doing at any point in time, and I don't get that intense feeling of something being present. The experiences that are tied to the work exist side by side, like a collection of effects.

In contrast, the initial contact with Riley's work offers depth to how the presence of the work in space changes over time. The longer I spend time with its perceptible elements, the richer it becomes. There is an evolving sense of unity.

A prime example of this unity are the drawings by George Seurat that he drew with Conté on Michalet paper. They are so very much *drawings* in every fiber of the work, that I would say they become sculptural. These drawings are made with such incorporation of the material of the paper, that there is no surface anymore. The imagery is full and continuous. They become open to be apperceived⁵. These drawings are not images, they attend both the mind and space.

The point of singularity⁶ is what happens when something becomes clear enough that it starts to show itself, and thereby becomes present in the space. There is unity within the work that is dense and saturated, and so it turns outward. A firmness of presence then asks: "And what are you?"

This is where a work has squeezed out of the uncertainty and noise of everything else and becomes art, for me.



⁵ To perceive (something) while being conscious of perceiving

⁶ Singularity = a point at which a function takes an infinite value, especially in space-time when matter is infinitely dense, such as at the center of a black hole.

The way Velimir Khlebnikov uses words, and language, would fall under this description of attending both mind and space as well. I believe he approaches words as phenomena. And in his longer poems especially, he combines this susceptibility with a feeling for mythology and folklore. But the following is a poem of his that primarily exhibits roots in phenomenology.

ЗАКЛЯТИЕ СМЕХОМ

О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!
О, засмейтесь, смехачи!
Что смеются смехами, что смеянствуют смеяльно,
О, засмейтесь усмеяльно!
О, рассмешищ надсмеяльных — смех усмейных смехачей!
О, иссмейся рассмеяльно, смех надсмейных смеячей!
Смейево, смейево,
Усмей, осмей, смешики, смешики,
Смеюнчики, смеюнчики.
О, рассмейтесь, смехачи!
О, засмейтесь, смехачи!

Invocation Of Laughter

O, laugh, laughers!
O, laugh out, laughers!
You who laugh with laughs, you who laugh it up laughishly
O, laugh out laughingly
O, belaughable laughterhood - the laughter of laughering laughers!
O, unlaugh it outlaughingly, belaughering laughists!
Laughily, laughily,
Uplough, enlaugh, laughlings, laughlings
Laughlets, laughlets.
O, laugh, laughers!
O, laugh out, laughers!⁷

I never quite know if there is a layer of mockery in *Invocation Of Laughter*, somehow a condemning of laughter as a social convention, or if it is truly playful optimism. Either way the words form a material in themselves that is interesting.

And combining words as phenomena with the sort of presence that Seurat's drawings have in space, there is the work of Ed Ruscha.



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⁷ Translator unknown

⁸ LIPS, gunpowder and pastel on paper 11 1/2 x 29 inches, 1970

A Sense of Presence

“ What we are, that only can we see.”⁹



A Western system of thought based on non-contradiction has taught us that turning inwards and looking outwards are opposites. This is a false assumption. I have not been looking for ways to combine these processes but searching where they naturally become one.

As I drove in my car over the highway, I wondered what would happen if I could bring together the color of the sky, and the color of the asphalt underneath it, more intimately.

I prepared two panels of aluminum for receiving oil paint, and as they cured asked my mother to drive me around so I could mix the different shades that appeared on the road. The panels come together with some space in between, in total forming a square meter. The slight gap in between, through its shade, forms something that relates to a horizon.

Responses I have had the pleasure of receiving varied. Someone felt it was particularly present in the space, and it was “full”. Someone else saw something that was very empty and had a sense of the eternal. Another described it as ominous.

When I visited the KMSKA in Antwerp, I came across a work by Rodin: a glass-paste portrait of Rose Beuret. The emotions of its expression seemed in flux: It moved from concern, to focus, through concentration, engagement, deep enjoyment, and at times, seclusion. The subject does not change, no new information, there are just different states that the work emits by reflection.

There is singularity, which in relation to an observer varies, all the while being static in its visual nature.

If a work does not have this quality of singularity, it means that different variations have been made directly perceivable already in the artwork, making it more of a story than something sculptural.

This means that there are qualities within the work that relate to each other in varying ways and therefor remain at a distance from the observer and draw every experience “into it”, instead of forming relations with the person who perceives it, in its surrounding.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature chapter 8 page 46

In the case that something is successfully sculptural, after the initial relation has formed, it is then able to transform. And when we notice this transformation, we become conscious of our perception while still involved with the work. This consciousness brings a special feeling of presence. The work is then open.



Architecture and openness

So, I prefer not to create separate elements as part of the artwork. That begs the question: how can I install one of those sculpture-paintings while supporting their phenomenological qualities, but without losing the immediate nature of the objects?

I believe such an object needs architecture, not an installation to live in. Meaning that the feeling of the object being a unity of itself remains.

Questions of lack or abundance of natural light, color and texture of supporting surfaces and variation in possible physical proximity to the object are some elements to play with. For instance, for the horizon painting of the sky and asphalt, a large part of the work for me is that we can see it from far away initially and come closer to it, and as we do, feel more intimate with it. In the architecture of a space, a lot can be done to either feel a sense of width and vastness or feel secureness in partial enclosure.

Phenomena can be supported, and the work as a whole can lean more specifically into a certain effect depending on its environment. This means that installing objects in space gives the opportunity to support the way you view the object, by choice of placement and adapting the space itself. It is working with the phenomena you feel in relation to an object, in a sculptural manner.

But the object cannot start to gain meaning from its surrounding. Then it would become an installation. I strictly give space to phenomena, I don't create meanings. Meaning comes from people when they engage in a work.

Where the "work" begins, and ends, cannot be defined exactly. The object, which has a life of its own, can function in many types of environments. Let's say someone decides that they want to live with an object in their domestic space, then the work is complete in my eyes as long as there is some light to see it. I believe a large element to my work only comes alive when it is lived with, spent time with.

Feeling Separated

In Carré, a 1887's theater in Amsterdam, on the main stage, there is a man sitting on a chair. He is staring straight ahead, and as far as I know not making any eye contact with us, the people around him on stage. We are surrounding him, testing his responses a bit, and passing him by. I walked by and wondered what else was happening at the same time in the theater building, for this day the whole building would be a continuous site of performance under the name "No Intermission". After wandering around for a while I found myself in a basement with three large film screens, one screen in front of every wall in the corner forming an open cube.

The films showed Abel Azcona, sharing stories of his childhood and relationship with his mother, which caused him to offer himself up for sexual abuse later in life. This abuse is made visible on the screen behind me as I listen to his story. The third screen shows him sitting at the top of a large, classical, white marble staircase. The composition is symmetrical and seems to lift his position to that of someone holy.

He seems unwell on top of those stairs.

At some point a few young people who look like they might be students coincidentally passing by, try to make him drink some water. They seem concerned for him, but he barely interacts with them. Maybe he is unable in his state.

I focus on the screen with the story and after some minutes look back to see him on the staircase again, but at this point he is falling over and seems like he is passing out.

I look at the filmed abuse for a while. It's certainly unpleasant, so I decide I know enough of what is to be had there in the basement. I climb some stairs back to the main stage. Now I am more interested in the man sitting on his chair.

As I approach, I hear the murmurs of people around me speaking of how he has intoxicated himself with an unknown substance. His systems seem to be failing as his posture seems now saggy as opposed to how I saw him as I first walked by, but he still maintains his seat.

His overall stillness and lack of eye contact make looking at him feel more like looking at a sculpture than looking at a person. At the same time it is clear that he is being harmed by this unknown substance as we look at him. He seems so frail. There is a girl who is desperately looking for contact with him, she sits close in front of him, kneeled on the floor, with a look of very intense compassion and some expression that looks like blind determination. But she does not touch him. She wants response. Other people do touch him I believe, on the shoulders and such.

I tend to get annoyed when I feel like I am being tested in some way, and the swarming of varying human reflexes in response to his presence starts to bother me.

I move on.

Maybe an hour or two later, I step onto the stage again to find Azcona being carried down the steps of the stage, through the door to the hallway, by both people of the public and people from Carré.

For some time, I do not see him again until he reappears walking the hallways, still in a state. I want to check the basement once more, and as I walk in, I see him casually drop down on a couch there. He takes out his iPhone and starts filming the people watching his films. No one really notices, I think. He is not very noticeable, maybe due to his unaffected manner.

Right before closing time late at night, I brush the sand off my feet from a different performance. As I put my socks and shoes back on, a woman in her fifties joins the conversation I am having with my companion about Abel Azcona. She tells how she had stayed with Azcona for the most part, and supported and held him as he fell into her and could not support himself anymore. Her motherly instincts made her hold him she says. She had five kids at home and could only think of staying with him. She seemed satisfied that she came to Carré today.

Yes, we "consume" the work as he brings it to us. But I have a feeling that he wants something from us that he can never get through his approach. As he films us he seems to identify us, as we are there, like characters in his story.

This is uncomfortable and I struggle with receiving an identity in this manner. Especially because no matter what response you have to his work and presence, you are always moving within his perspective. And you cannot escape it.

Being a part of someone else's story, the process of identifying with this given role and feeling how it could become reality if the role is accepted, can feel threatening. Beware of the other's dream, Deleuze said. And I'll take that to heart.

The woman with the protective instincts felt that the image of her was true. But there must be some strange residue of a feeling, since her affection was only asked for as a fleeting and impermanent element to a story, when usually a mother's affection has the potential of bringing forth a series of positive effects. Love begets love,

In the meantime, what remains of Azcona when I think of him, is a vast sense of isolation. I think he started to identify himself with the story of the martyr. And so I felt like I could only look at him from afar, even though in his medicated state he was sitting a few feet away from me. There is a martyr in all of us probably, but I believe he accepted it as his full self during this performance. Complete distance is what he showed us. Any form of connection unattainable. He creates loneliness and does not solve it.

I don't think I have ever felt a story that forced me to become a part of it so strongly. I thanked him, cringy as that is, when he lay on the couch filming us. I'm not sure if he heard me, I tend to mumble.

He is still walking around now, and I guess it's quite an accomplishment, to be a martyr while alive.

Concept of the Self

What if we think of the self as the total of what you are now, plus the total of all those things that you could still be? You as reality plus you as potential. Potential, by definition, is not yet manifested.¹⁰ And something that is not manifest cannot really be part of our understanding, but as it manifests, we can feel it happening.

In the years that I have studied at the Rietveld Academy, something shifted in how I work. Before, I tried to articulate myself somehow. Explain myself. My history and feelings a potentially fruitful soil. I found recognition in classical stories of mythology, and Biblical stories as well. But they always remained stories. And however lively they can be, they always feel like just another context to relate to. I was looking for something to relate to that was not another context to place myself in.

Good stories write about (a lack of) beauty. They make us hope for resolution in the form of peace, love, or connection and sometimes they provide that, which in tragedies they do not. Either way, stories can inform us of what we are looking for. And tragedies? Maybe those are warnings.

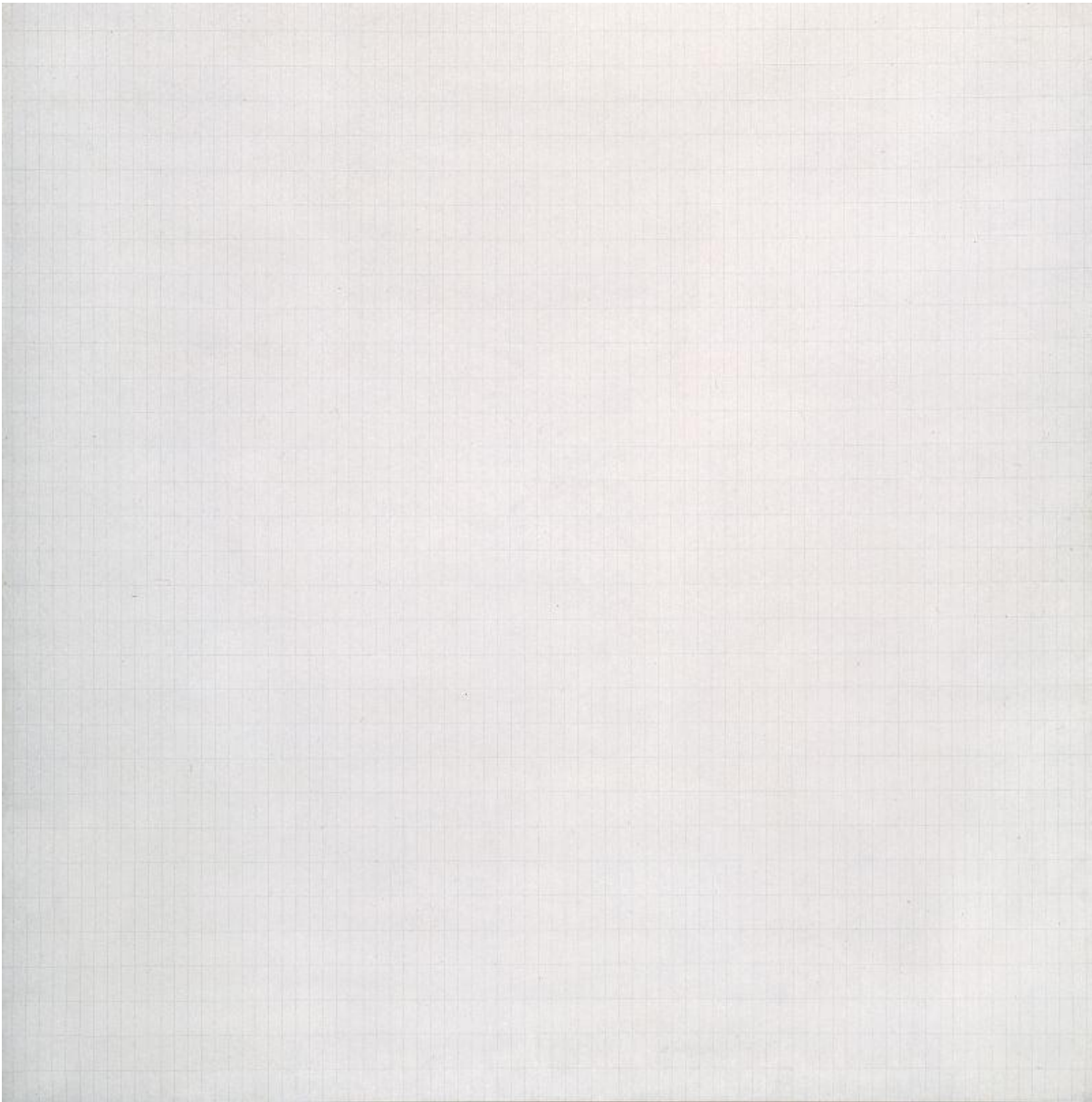
I think in Azcona's work I recognize a craving to make recognitions in stories more direct. But in this process there is a downside. As you build stories, you can start to feel like you are missing out on exploring the part of yourself that responds to things that don't have meaning yet, or perhaps don't offer a clear CV as to what role they would play in your fabulation. There is a sense of running after the facts, and simultaneously biting your own tail. It's quite the confusing movement to find yourself in.

Luckily for us, images of the 'self' are incomplete. Beyond identifying with stories, we can sense the world directly as it manifests. Identification can be suspended, and form itself over a longer period of time, continuously changing and transforming. In the meantime, forms of art can offer a contrasting immediacy to the uncertainty of life.

I hope that in a way, the things that I make form a story of themselves. The things I try to make immediate are sometimes the things I feel a lack of, and sometimes they are the things I celebrate. Often it's a combination of the two.

¹⁰ Jordan Peterson, *The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories: Genesis*, 2017

Agnes Martin



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A lack of connection can cause a state of hunger that is unpleasant. The grids of Agnes Martin feel like an alternative to the turmoil that comes with that fact. A place to rest, in her own words. Perhaps, it was only as a byproduct of her own inspiration, but she made works that are incredibly generous to other people.

I would like to end this thesis with her words.

¹¹ Grass, acrylic paint and pencil on canvas, 183 x 183cm, 1967.

'Nature is conquest, possession, eating, sleeping, procreation
It is not aesthetic, not the kind of inspiration I'm interested in
Nature is the wheel
When you get off the wheel you're looking out
You stand with your back to the turmoil
You never rest with nature, it's a hungry thing
Every animal that you meet is hungry
Not that I don't believe in eating
but I just want to make the distinction between
art and eating
This painting I like because you can get in there and rest
The satisfaction of appetite happens to be impossible
The satisfaction of appetite is frustrating
So it's always better to be a little bit hungry
That way you contradict the necessity
Not that I'm for asceticism
but the absolute trick in life is to find rest
If there's life in the composition it stimulates your life moments,
your happy moments, your brain is stimulated
Saint Augustine says that milk doesn't come from the mother
I painted a painting called Milk River
Cows don't give milk if they don't have grass and water
Tremendous meaning of that is that painters can't give
anything to the observer
People get what they need from a painting
The painter need not die because of responsibility
When you have inspiration and represent inspiration
The observer makes the painting
The painter has no responsibility to stimulate his needs
It's all an enormous process
No suffering is unnecessary
All of it is only enlightening, this is life
Asceticism is a mistake
sought out suffering is a mistake
but what comes to you free is enlightening'

Agnes Martin¹²

¹² Agnes Martin, *Writings* p.36

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