1. *The Tree*. 1964. Oil and pencil on canvas, 72 x 72" (182.8 x 182.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund

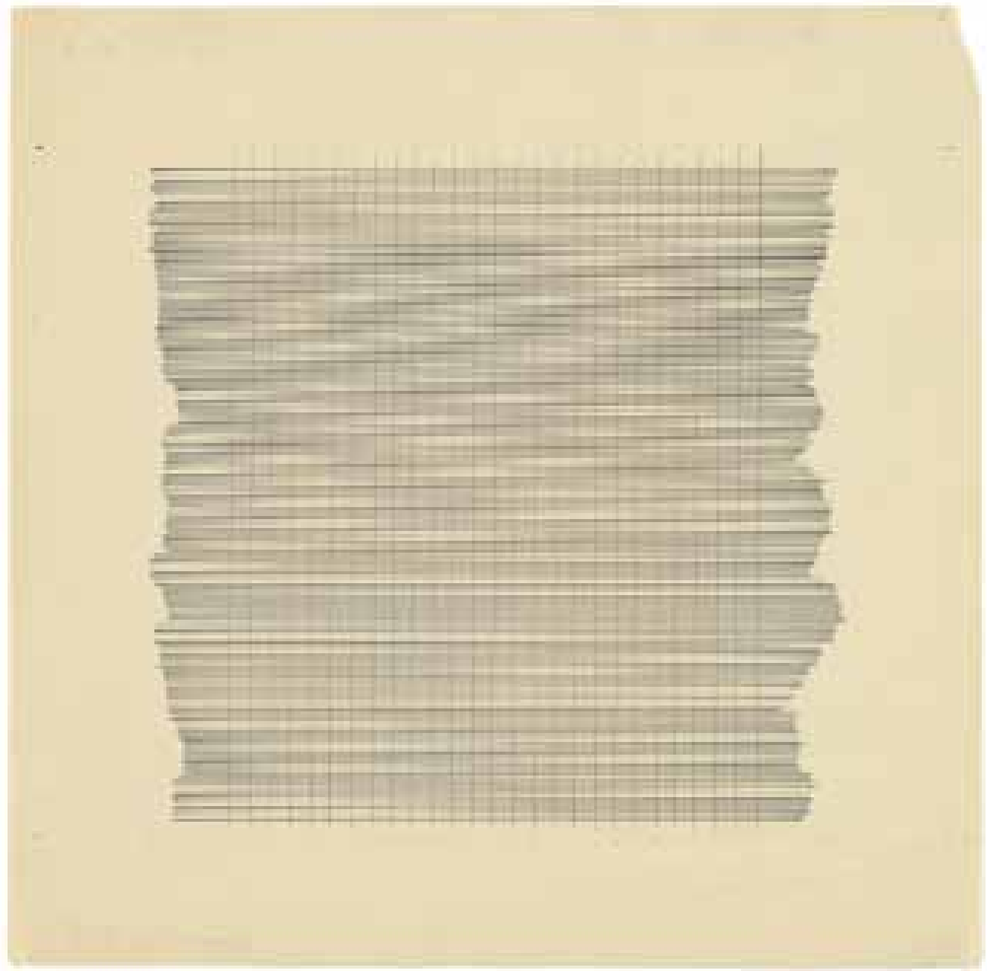
When asked if she was friendly with the avant-garde composer John Cage, Agnes Martin answered that she was, "But I don't agree with him."[1] When prodded, she offered, "Well for one thing, he wrote a book called *Silence* and in the very first line he said 'there is no such thing as silence.' But I think there is. When you walk into a forest there are all kinds of sounds but you feel as though you have stepped into silence. I believe that is silence." This brief analysis speaks volumes about Martin's artistic philosophy and her oeuvre. Martin's work, which takes the grid as its organizing principle, reflects a belief that opposites can simultaneously coexist within a whole. Her intricately executed paintings and drawings are imbued with a sense of liminality, meaning they exist on a threshold between two states and reflect a position in which one's identity becomes barely perceptible.[2] Her work strikes a balance between binaries, between uniformity and difference, visibility and invisibility, and materiality and spirituality, which has allowed viewers to see what they want in her work and has contributed to her consistently wide appeal.

Martin's artistic philosophy was shaped by a combination of her Presbyterian upbringing, particularly her belief in predestination;[3] the writings of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu, Chinese philosophers associated with Taoism who focused on humility; and Zen Buddhism, which teaches the importance of detachment and quieting the mind.[4] In her early career she moved from representational images to biomorphic shapes and eventually to geometry, having been influenced by the ancient Greeks, who she felt recognized the impossibility of finding perfect circles and straight lines in nature but, like her, strove for perfection nonetheless.[5] Martin blended these varied influences into a highly personal perspective which informed her work throughout her career, especially as she moved toward full abstraction.

Martin took up the grid in 1960, while living in New York City, in an effort to express her own emotional experiences, particularly, she said, abstract conditions like "happiness and innocence and beauty."[6] *Untitled* (no. 2), a drawing from that year, is an early example of the way in which her work employs both standardization and variation. The undulating sides contrast with the grid's quiet interior, creating the appearance that the drawing is measuring something, such as sound or movement. A strong tension exists between the strict regularity of the lines and the individuality stemming from the artist's hand. This is evident at the edges of the horizontal lines, where the ink is often darker, and in those lines which come so close together that they merge. The tiny boxes of the grid, moreover, vary slightly in height and length. Martin's interest in such infinitesimal differences may be explained by her belief, inspired in part by Christian theology, that one should imagine oneself as a grain of sand or a blade of grass; each at first looks like every other, but in reality they are always unique. Like so many other paradoxical positions in her work, Martin's strict repetition achieves something totally unexpected, an almost infinite variety of difference.[7]

The Tree (1964, no. 1) epitomizes the balance between visibility and invisibility in Martin's use of the grid. Her subtle use of color gradations makes the delicate pencil lines seem almost to disappear. Martin's self-effacing and spare compositions led many to view her work within the context of the emerging Minimalist movement, but her interest in metaphysical experience allied her more with Abstract Expressionism's spiritual ambitions. At the same time, she rejected the self-indulgent, egocentric aspects of Abstract Expressionism, whose practitioners used color, texture, and scale to create emotionally expressive canvases that came to stand for American individuality and who were often known for their bravado and self-importance. Instead, Martin sought to express her emotions as experienced "when our minds are empty of ego and the distractions of the everyday world."[8] Martin's focus on egolessness sets her apart from many of her male peers.[9] The somewhat anonymous nature of the grid, which reveals nothing about the artist's biography, gave her the freedom to succeed without being marginalized because of her gender. The often barely perceptible nature of her presence in the work provided her with a shroud of invisibility that focused attention on the work itself.

In 1967, frustrated with the distractions of New York and caught in a "confusion that had to be solved," Martin got into her pickup truck, drove across the United States and Canada, and settled near the village of Cuba, New Mexico.[10] She stopped making art until 1971, when Parasol Press invited her to create a series of prints, which, titled *On a Clear Day*, was exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in May 1973. She returned to painting soon thereafter.



2. Opposite:
Untitled. 1960. Ink on paper, 11 7/8 x 12 1/8" (30.2 x 30.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired with matching funds from The Lauder Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts

3. *Untitled*. 1978. Watercolor and colored ink on transparentized paper, 9 x 9" (22.9 x 22.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

The work Martin made in the next phase of her career, which lasted until her death in 2004, is marked by horizontal or vertical bands of translucent color as well as a tension between spirituality and materiality, as exemplified by *Untitled* (1978, no. 3). This drawing, done in watercolor and colored ink, suggests both containment and boundlessness. Indeed, like the "empty" rectangles created between the lines in her earlier grid works, the blank horizontal bands provide a quiet space, crucial to meditation.[11] At the same time, the alternating bands of light and darker orange highlight the soft materiality of the surface, and produce the illusion of movement. The composition, like her other work from this period, at once suggests a higher realm and brings us back to our own bodies, making us aware of ourselves in relation to the work of art and our physical environment.

Martin's work reflects her fascination with those dangerous and often messy spaces in between opposing sides. In her canvases and drawings we can see individuality or uniformity, the artist's presence or her absence, the spiritual realm or the concrete world, or all of the above, because they are all present in some way. Some critics try to categorize Martin as a Minimalist or an ascetic artist-monk; her work, however, consistently shakes off these constraints. It helps us to realize that silence can exist in sound; all we have to do is clear our minds and listen.

1. Agnes Martin, quoted in Irving Sandler, "You Have to Do What You Have to Do," in Patricia Bickers and Andrew Wilson, eds., *Talking Art: Interviews with Artists since 1976* (London: Art Monthly, Ridinghouse, 2007), p. 423.
2. On the liminal, see Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 95–99.
3. Martin once said that "everybody grows up to be what they were born to be." Holland Cotter, "Like Her Paintings, Quiet, Unchanging and Revered," *New York Times*, January 19, 1997, Sect. 2, p. 45.
4. On Martin's study of Buddhism, see Barbara Haskell, "Agnes Martin: The Awareness of Perfection," in Haskell, ed., *Agnes Martin* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 95. In the late 1940s Martin attended free lectures by D. T. Suzuki, who is known for bringing the teachings of Zen to much broader audiences in the United States.
5. Ibid., p. 102.
6. Cotter, "Like Her Paintings, Quiet, Unchanging and Revered," p. 45.
7. On Martin's infinite variety, see Briony Fer, "Drawing Drawing: Agnes Martin's Infinity," in Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, eds., *Women Artists at the Millennium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 177–78.
8. Haskell, "Agnes Martin," p. 93.
9. Like Martin, artists associated with the Minimalist movement often used the grid as well as industrial techniques to efface their own individuality in their work, but they sought to achieve different aims, to do away with emotion completely.
10. Haskell, "Agnes Martin," p. 111.
11. These "empty" rectangles have been called "a visual equivalent to the emptiness of the mind" necessary to perceive "the absolute." Ibid., p. 106.