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Agnes Martin and the Dialectic of Nothingness and Emptiness

"Das Erste der Philosophie aber ist, das absolute Nichts zu erdenken."
[Yet the first task of philosophy is to conceive of absolute nothingness.]
Hegel, "Glauben und Wisse"

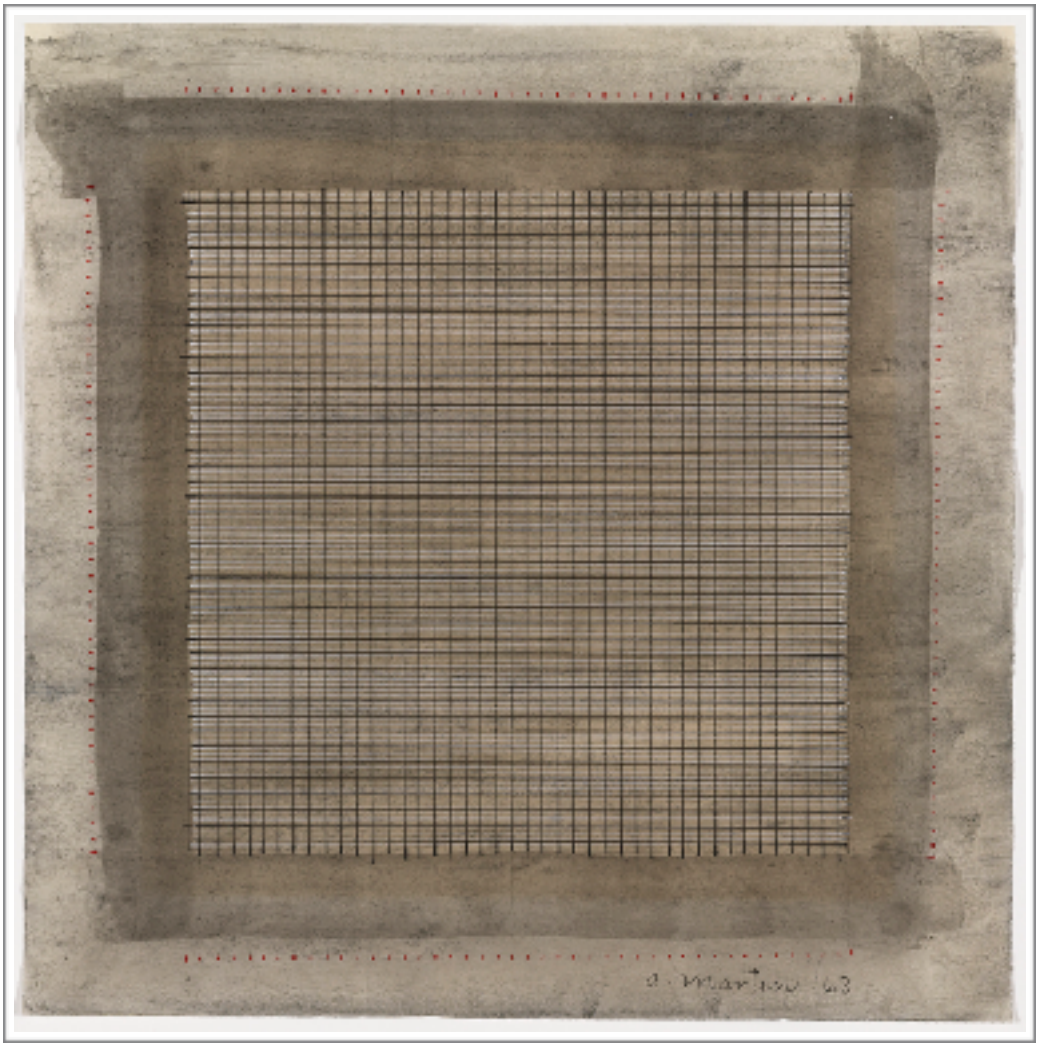
I. Buddhist metaphysics in based on four foundational truths: that of the impermanence of all composite things (Sanskrit: *anitya*); the interdependent origination of all things (*pratītyasamutpāda*); the emptiness of essence of all phenomena (*śūnyatā*); and egolessness, or selflessness (*anātman*). Furthermore, these four flow from what are called the two truths: the relative or conventional truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*), which is our 'normative' and adaptive mundane experience of ourselves and the world; and the ultimate truth (*paramārthasatya*). In this paper, I will briefly examine one of these pillars, *emptiness*, or nothingness, in relationship to two twentieth-century Continental philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre; and to the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective of the Tibetan Kagyü/Nyingma tradition through the twentieth-century scholar and meditation master, Chögyam Trungpa; to Wangchuk Dorje (Tib: *dbang phyug rdo rje*), the Ninth Karmapa, active in sixteenth-century Tibet; and, finally, I will take this exploration of emptiness into the work of the twentieth-century painter, Agnes Martin, who expresses, in visual form, the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of emptiness, or ś*ūnyatā*.

Although Sartre and Heidegger were in the vanguard of articulating a fundamental ontology grounded in nothingness, the comparatively ancient Buddhist Mahāyāna Madhyamaka/Yogācāra view profoundly challenges this accomplishment. The former, i.e.

Madhyamaka, was initially developed by the second-century C.E. Indian scholar and philosopher, Nāgārjuna, while the latter, Yogācāra, was developed by two later Indian scholars, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, who lived probably two centuries after Nāgārjuna, in or around the mid-fourth century C.E. Both philosophical systems proceed from the fundamental ontology of *emptiness (śūnyatā)* by way of interdependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). A subsequent synthesis of these two streams of Mahāyāna thought occurred in the eighth-century, ascribed to the Indian philosopher Śāntarakṣita, who subsequently propagated this development of Mahāyāna Madhyamaka/Yogācāra thought in Tibet. This synthesis, sometimes called the Great Madhyamaka (Tib. *dbu ma chen po*), is represented in this paper by the arguments of Chögyam Trungpa and Wangchuk Dorje, who sought to explain both the philosophy *and* the experience of emptiness. I will also draw on arguments by NISHITANI Keiji (1900-1990), a prominent, second-generation member of the Kyoto School, and a Zen Buddhist practitioner. This paper will examine the similarities and differences, the intersections and dialectics, found in these various approaches to, and notions of *nothing, nothingness,* and *emptiness.* We will begin the disambiguation of Mahāyāna nothingness from the kind of Continental ontological nothingness found in the thinkers Heidegger and Sartre.

II. How does Sartre's *nothingness* relate to Heidegger's *nothing*? And how can Śāntarakṣita's Madhyamaka/Yogācāra philosophy of emptiness inform our understanding of the disjunction inherent in the artist's visceral experience of emptiness and the philosopher's theoretical inference? I will argue that Martin Heidegger's notion of *'nothing* [*das Nichts*]*'*, in his 1929 public lecture, "What is Metaphysics", as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of *'nothingness [le néant]'*, in his seminal work of 1943, *Being and Nothingness*, are incomplete

projects compared to Śāntarakṣita's Madhyamaka/Yogācāra philosophical theses of emptiness, the 'two truths', and interdependent co-origination. And further, I will argue that the contemporary visual artist Agnes Martin undertook a praxis to elucidate the inexpressible experience of emptiness on canvas, embracing neither Sartre's *nothingness,* nor Heidegger's *nothing,* but rather the Mahāyāna Buddhist *emptiness*.



WOOD 1 1963
WATERCOLOR + GRAPHITE ON PAPER
38.1 X 39.4
AGNES MARTIN

III In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre first examines *being* and *nothingness* under the heading "The Problem of Nothingness". Immediately, then, we are given to understand that 'nothingness' is a 'problem', and one which must be solved! [But problem might just mean

question, and I think it does for Sartre: as in how do we think being and nothingness?] Sartre posits "that it is not profitable first to separate the two terms of a relation in order to try to join them together again later" (3). So, from the beginning, we are given that Sartre believes 'being' and 'nothingness' are inseparable. He argues that they are, in fact, a synthesis; however, they are not given to dialectical thinking. Taking his queue now from Heidegger, Sartre introduces the argument that it is time "to open our eyes and question ingenuously this totality which is man-in-the-world (Sartre 4)." He then proceeds to set up his inquiry around two initial questions: *(1.)* **"**What is the synthetic relation which we call being-in-the-world?", and *(2.)* "What must man and the world be in order for a relation between them to be possible" (4)? And to these two questions, Sartre then adds a third, questioning the very notion of "being about its ways of being or about its being" (4). With these questions, Sartre sets up his project to examine both the limitations of being-in-itself as well as the transcendence of being, all as a way of getting at an explication of 'nothingness'.

Sartre begins to construct the bridge which spans the gulf between his notion of 'being' and 'nothingness' when he argues that "what being will be must of necessity arise on the basis of what it is not. Whatever being is, it will allow this formulation: 'Being is *that* and outside of that, nothing'" (6). Hence the key move here: we think nothing relative to being—beyond being there is an absence or lack of being. So now we see his project positioning 'being' vis a vis 'nothing', which allows Sartre to conceive nothingness as non-being. There is nothing beyond being and this is indeed how Sartre understands transcendence: "non-being does not come to things by a negative judgment; it is the negative judgment, on the contrary, which is conditioned and supported by non-being" (11).

But I am getting ahead of myself. Sartre begins to consider negativity (*négativité*), which springs from the affirmative act. And it is from negative judgements that "nothingness

would derive its origin; it would be a concept establishing the transcendent unity of all these judgments, a propositional function of the type, 'X is not'" (6). Nothingness becomes the synthesis of the negative/affirmative dialectic of identity/difference he has just proposed. Nothingness is the lack of being for some 'X'. It is like looking for money in a poor philosopher's bank account. There is nothing there.

This, however, leads Sartre to pose another question: "is negation as the structure of the judicative proposition at the origin of nothingness? Or on the contrary, is nothingness as the structure of the real, the origin and foundation of negation" (8)? Either way, it is clear that nothingness is, for Sartre, separate and distinct for negation; and in our beingness we invoke nothingness. Further, Sartre says that "negation is a refusal of existence. By means of it a being (or a way of being) is posited, then thrown back to nothingness" (11). In other words, nothing is the absence of something positive: "in a word, if being is everywhere, it is not only Nothingness which, as Bergson maintains, is inconceivable; for negation will never be derived from being. The necessary condition for our saying *not* is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunts being. But where does nothingness come from" (12)? Sartre contends that non-being is not the opposite of being, but rather is its contradiction. "This implies," he says, "that logically nothingness is subsequent to being since it is being, first posited, then denied" (14). "Is Nothingness", asks Sartre, "not in fact simple identity with itself, complete emptiness, absence of determinations and of content? Pure being and pure nothingness are then the same thing" (12).

Sartre quotes Hegel, in the *Greater Logic*, chapter 1, who says "there is nothing in heaven or on earth which does not contain in itself being and nothingness" (13). Disagreeing with Hegel's notion of emptiness, Sartre recounts that "when Hegel writes, '(Being and nothingness) are empty abstractions, and the one is as empty as the other,' he forgets that

emptiness is emptiness of something. Being is empty of all other determination than identity with itself, but non-being is empty of being. In a word, we must recall here against Hegel that being is and that nothingness is not" (15). Sartre goes on to say that "nothingness is logically subsequent to [being] since it supposes being in order to deny it" (15). As we'll see, this notion of emptiness is a long way from the Buddhist Mahāyāna notion of emptiness.

The nut of Sartre's ontology of nothingness is explicated in this rather long passage from a section on the 'Dialectical Concept of Nothingness':

> If adopting for the moment the point of view of naïve cosmogonies, we tried to ask ourselves what "was there" before a world existed, and if we replied "nothing," we would be forced to recognize that this "before" like this "nothing" is in effect retroactive. What we deny today, we who are established in being, is what there was of being before this being. Negation here springs from a consciousness which is turned back toward the beginning, If we remove from this original emptiness its characteristic of being empty of this world and of every whole taking the form of a world, as well as its characteristic of before, which presupposes an after, then the very negation disappears, giving way to a total indetermination which it would be impossible to conceive, even and especially as a nothingness. Thus reversing the statement of Spinoza, we could say that every negation is determination. This means that being is prior to nothingness and establishes the ground for it. By this we must understand not only that being has a logical precedence over nothingness but also that it is from being that nothingness derives concretely its efficacy. This is what we mean when we say that nothingness haunts being. That means that being has no need of nothingness in order to be conceived and that we can examine the idea of it exhaustively without finding there the least trace of nothingness. But on the other hand, nothingness, which is not, can have only a borrowed existence, and it gets its being from being. Its

> nothingness of being is encountered only within the limits of being, and the total disappearance of being would not be the advent of the reign of non-being, but on the contrary the concomitant disappearance of nothingness. *Non-being exists only on the surface of being* (16).

Rather than an *Aufhebung* of being by nothingness, or the notion of an interdependent origination of being *and* nothingness, Sartre maintains here that nothingness depends upon being for its wherewithal; that being provides "the ground" for nothingness. In other words, there exists both being and nothingness, separate and distinct from each other, and into which non-being can be thrown, just to confuse things a little more. And yet, nothingness has an illusive quality, not unlike a *trace*, which cannot be conclusively identified and pinned down, unlike its antithesis, being.

Sartre comments on Heidegger's notion of nothingness, saying "there exist numerous attitudes of 'human reality' which imply a 'comprehension' of nothingness: hate, prohibitions, regret, etc. For 'Dasein' there is even a permanent possibility of finding oneself 'face to face' with nothingness and discovering it as a phenomenon: this possibility is anguish" (17). In continuing, Sartre says that Heidegger contends that "this means both that 'human reality' springs forth invested with being and 'finds itself' *(sich befinden)* in being — and also that human reality causes being, which surrounds it, to be disposed around human reality in the form of the world" (17). And finally, that "here nothingness [is] surrounding being on every side and at the same time expelled from being. Here nothingness is given as that by which the world receives its outlines as the world" (18). "Without a doubt Heidegger is right," Sartre maintains, "in insisting on the fact that negation derives its foundation from nothingness. But if nothingness provides a ground for negation, it is because nothingness envelops the *not* within itself as its essential structure. Nothingness carries being in its

heart" (18). Sartre begins to anthropomorphize nothingness here, referring to its 'heart'; how can nothingness have a heart? Or, to put it another way, how can nothingness be at the heart of something, without also being, simultaneously, at the fringe?

Sartre uses another anthropomorphic reference when he argues that "nothingness if it is supported by being, vanishes qua nothingness, and we fall back upon being. Nothingness can be nihilated only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being — like a worm" (21). So, nothingness is now, for Sartre, a worm, in the heart of being!

Sartre continues, "in order for negation to exist in the world and in order that we may consequently raise questions concerning Being, it is necessary that in some way Nothingness be given' (22). But, we may then ask, in what way? Sartre says "we perceive then that Nothingness can be conceived neither outside of being, nor as a complementary, abstract notion, nor as an infinite milieu where being is suspended. Nothingness must be given at the heart of Being, in order for us to be able to apprehend that particular type of realities (sic) which we have called *négatités*" (22). We will conclude our survey of Sartre's notion of 'nothingness' with an inconclusive conclusion he has drawn. He states that "it remains to learn (sic) in what delicate, exquisite region of Being we shall encounter that Being which is its own Nothingness (23)." And after much back and forth, he concludes by saying that "for man to be able to question, he must be capable of being his own nothingness; that is, he can be at the origin of non-being in being only if his being—in himself and by himself—is paralyzed with nothingness (45)."

IV. Now we turn to Heidegger's well-known essay, "What is Metaphysics?", delivered as an inaugural lecture in 1929 to the faculty of the University of Freiburg, and which centered around his notion of 'nothing'. What is this 'nothing' that Heidegger talks about and points to, and can we relate it to what Sartre is discussing in his *Being and Nothingness*?

Heidegger begins his essay by suggesting that "our existence is determined by science" (94), and that science holds the first and last word when it comes to beings, or human existence. But when one speaks this way, one is saying, in effect, that 'science concerns beings and nothing else'. Heidegger asks, "What about this nothing else?" that science rejects and proceeds to ignore (95)? Is this indicative merely of how we speak, or is there something more to it? When Sartre walked into a café and looked for his friend Pierre, he says he negated the café, the patrons sitting and talking in the café, and all the other surroundings as he scanned the faces in search of his friend. Science, Heidegger contends, wants nothing of this resultant nothing after the negation. But Heidegger wants to know, "How is it with the nothing" (96)?

This, says Heidegger, is an unusual exploration, because in asking this question, we are implying that 'nothing' is, in fact, something which can be inquired into. We have, by asking this question, turned 'nothing' into a 'something', which, as Heidegger admits, is quite absurd. However, while universal logic demands that contradictions be avoided, Heidegger suggests that in this case the intellect must be employed if we are to grapple with this question of nothing. And in so doing, he arrives at a dilemma. "Is the nothing given only because the 'not', i.e., negation, is given?" Heidegger asks (97)? Or, could it be the contrary? Is it 'nothing' which, in fact, creates the space for negation and the 'not'? Heidegger's choice here can be found behind curtain #2.

Returning to the so-called legitimacy of Heidegger's question, only a fundamental experience of 'nothing', he says, can save the project. And this can be effected through the experience, or attunement, of the singular and fundamental mood of *anxiety*. Heidegger describes this anxiety not as a fear *of* something or another, but rather as an anxiety "in the face of…, but not in the face of this or that thing" (100). Neither negation nor annihilation proceeds, but rather a "bewildered calm" persists, a "shrinking back before" (102). Nihilation is the essence of nothing. Heidegger says poetically, "in the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: that they are beings—and not nothing. […] Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom" (103). As we'll see, Heidegger is painting a picture here, in his oftentimes-difficult syntax, of nothingness which is somewhat similar to what we'll find in the Mahāyāna Buddhist conception of *emptiness*.

We have reached a turning point in Heidegger's explication of metaphysics and nothing when he explains that

> the nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counter concept of beings; rather, it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings, the nihilation of the nothing occurs (104).

Heidegger claims this exposition proves the main points of his thesis: that nothing is the origination of negation, and not the other way around, logic be damned. And it is here that Śāntarakṣita would have an argument with Heidegger. But we will explore this below. "The

saturation of existence by nihilative behavior", continues Heidegger, "testifies to the constant though doubtlessly obscured manifestation of the nothing that only anxiety originally reveals. […] Original anxiety can awaken in existence at any moment. It needs no unusual event to rouse it. Its sway is as thoroughgoing as its possible occasionings are trivial" (105-6). It is important here, Heidegger tells us, to not confuse Heidegger's 'anxiety' with our common experience of feeling anxious. Here, 'anxiety' points towards an experience of being-nowness, where our experience is not of 'this', but rather opens to all that is. It is unclear, however, how being-nowness proceeds from Heidegger's anxiety. Heidegger gets closer than Sartre. For the latter, nothingness is the lack or absence of being. For the former, nothingness is not a mere absence, but the granting of being. Nonetheless, both understand *nothingness relative to being*, and this is key.

Chögyam Trungpa, commenting from the Buddhist Mahāmudrā/Mahā Ati view, argues, however, that "essentially, anxiety comes from not facing the current situation you are in" (Trungpa *Great Eastern,* 4). "Anxieties", he continues, "can be transformed into mindfulness and awareness. Anxiety itself can be a reminder, a nudge that keeps waking us up again and again" (Trungpa *Dharma Art,* 93). It might then be postulated that it is this experience, this reminder or nudge, that is the doorway to Heidegger's nothingness, which proceeds to complete wakefulness. This mood of anxiety can be said to be fundamentally related to doubt. Trungpa explains that "when a person is not really willing to give in, give up, or feel comfortable with his livelihood, then doubt begins to arise in the form of anxiety" (Trungpa *Great Eastern,* 152). Anxiety can also be seen as a mark of frivolousness or impulse, which can then serve as a reminder to see and deal with the quality and structure of situations as they are in their spontaneity.

Hegel is correct, Heidegger maintains, when the former holds, in his *Science of Logic,* that "pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same". Thus Heidegger expands on the proposition *ex nihilo nihil fit*, by extending the statement to: *ex nihil omne ens qua ens fit*, or "from the nothing all beings as beings come to be" (108), viewing nothing and Being as equally primordial, and therefore, uncontaminated, or pure.

In a somewhat opaque summary of our encounters with, or sudden glimpses of nothingness, Heidegger states that

> only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder. Only on the ground of wonder—the revelation of the nothing—does the 'why?' loom before us. Only because the 'why' is possible as such can we, in a definite way, inquire into grounds, and ground them. Only because we can inquire and ground, is the destiny of our existence placed in the hands of the researcher. […] (109).

NISHITANI Keiji, however, unfolds this process of our unexpected confrontations with what Heidegger calls the 'ground' of nothingness in a clearer way. Nishitani explains that,

> normally we proceed through life, on and on, with our eye fixed on something or other, always caught up with something within or without ourselves. It is these engagements that prevent the deepening of awareness. They block off the way to an opening up of that horizon on which nihility appears and self-being becomes a question. When this horizon does open up at the bottom of those engagements that keep life

> moving continually on and on, something seems to halt and linger before us. This something is the meaninglessness that lies in wait at the bottom of those very engagements that bring meaning to life. This is the point at which that sense of nihility, that sense that 'everything is the same' we find in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, [that] brings the restless, forward-advancing pace of life to a halt and makes it take a step back. In the Zen phrase, it 'turns the light to what is directly underfoot' (4).

This juncture has the potential to present one with the experience of the fullness and potentiality of emptiness, as understood through the view of Mahāyāna Buddhism; or, on the other hand, one might proceed with the experience of Sartre's nihilistic nothingness.

V. How do these positions of Heidegger and Sartre stand up relative to the notion of nothingness, or, as it is more commonly referred to in the Buddhist Mahāyāna Madhyamaka/ Yogācāra tradition, *emptiness* (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*)? Keiji Nishitani tells us that "for Sartre, the foundation of human existence is 'nothingness' (*le néant)*. That man can find nothing to rely on, either within himself or without, constitutes the basis of [Sartre's] existentialism" (Nishitani 30). It would seem that for Sartre, this notion of nothingness then implies a complete negation of God, which then occasions a thoroughly subjective, inward turn. Turning one's focus to *this,* the subject, is described by Chögyam Trungpa thus:

> Nihilists have the particular philosophical or religious belief that everything comes and goes in the midst of fantastic space, unconditional space. There is room to make mistakes, there is room to make things correct, there is room to indulge, there is also room to expand our ego. We are on our own, whatever we do. Everything is in our hands, we can

> do what we want. There is immense space and immense room so we should stop trying to hassle our life and forget about chaos, practicality, earth-boundness [sic] and everything and instead just enjoy and celebrate in this nothingness or emptiness (Trungpa *1975,* 145).

Western anglophones who have tackled Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka or Vasubandhu/Asaṅga's Yogācāra expositions on emptiness have not done so in a vacuum, but rather have largely relied on Tibetan Geluk and/or Sakya scholars, translators, and commentators through whose lenses they have subsequently undertaken their translations, commentaries, and interpretations. My point here is to examine the Buddhist Mahāyāna Madhyamaka/Yogācāra philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) primarily from the Tibetan Kagyü/Nyingma view, rather than the Tibetan Geluk or Sakya view, as has been done previously by Garfield, Thurman, Lopez, et. al., while also considering the prescient arguments of Nishitani, who draws from the Zen Mahāyāna Buddhist view.

Wangchuk Dorje (Tib: *dbang phyug rod rje, 1556-1603)*, the Ninth Karmapa, poses the leading question when considering our topic from a Buddhist Mahāyāna view. He asks: "What, then, *is* emptiness [*śūnyatā*]?" To which he then replies,

> All phenomena from form through omniscience are, from the outset, not established whatsoever as any extreme elaboration such as existent, nonexistent, arisen, ceased, permanent, impermanent, empty, not empty, true, or false. To that lack of establishment, mere conventional terms such as "emptiness" and "suchness" are given. It is nothing more than that.

> This emptiness—that conventionally all phenomena are empty of their own entities—is the natural being (Tib.: *rang babs*), the abiding mode, of all knowable objects (36-37).

The Tibetan scholar Khenchen Thrangu explains that "in the Middle Way teachings of Nāgārjuna, it is said that there is emptiness, but this emptiness is not nothingness. Emptiness is not just a simple nothingness like space. There is also the aspect of clarity present in being beyond the extremes" (Thrangu 84), as elucidated by Wangchuk Dorje above.

Trungpa responds to this question of 'what is emptiness ?' in a slightly different way. He argues that

> it seems that *śūnyatā* [or emptiness] means not that, not this; it is based on transcending dualistic perceptions. […] How does a person perceive the *śūnyatā* principle in terms of the practical experience of daily living, the sense of śūnyatā, rather than the philosophy of śūnyatā? The sense of śūnyatā — what is it all about? […] The starting point itself, the basic ground of śūnyatā or emptiness, is that one has to know a sense of 'no beginner'. In other words, a complete understanding of egolessness is the starting point. Without that, there is no understanding of śūnyatā. So, you have no solid ground to work with or to walk on (Trungpa *Collected II,* 321,329).

This subject is critical to Sartre and hence he cannot think the problem of egolessness except as the lack of *a priori* essence.

"When we begin to examine the notion 'emptiness'" from the Madhyamaka/Yogācāra view of the Tibetan Kagyü/Nyingma, "we can't help but do so within a context of [asking the questions] 'what is the world?; whose world is it?; and what does relating with it actually

mean?'", Trungpa adds (Trungpa *Collected II* 401). These three investigations, as highlighted above, into what the world is, to whom we conceive the world belongs, and what it means to be living in this world, are fundamental to any metaphysical inquiry into being (whether capital 'B' or small 'b'), and further into the meaning of nothing, nothingness, and emptiness.

The Tibetan Kagyü/Nyingma approach to emptiness could, I suppose, be said to be a kitchen sink approach; a heuristic, empirical investigation. This is in marked contrast to the view and presentation of nothingness as argued by Sartre and Heidegger, and explicated earlier. As Trungpa puts it, this can be attributed to the fact that,

> the [Buddhist Mahāyāna] traditions of Madhyamaka [from Nāgārjuna] and Yogācāra [from Vasubandhu and Asaṅga] — in fact, any Buddhist traditions — are not 'founded' as are the various philosophical schools in the Western world. They are not founded; their tradition was not founded in the same way Jung and Freud established their particular systems. And they are not at all regarded as particular systems of thought in the Buddhist tradition, actually. They are just kinds of truth people happen to discover, people happen to present. That is a very important point (Trungpa *1975,* 145).

The Tibetan Kagyü/Nyingma view and practice of Madhyamaka/Yogācāra, then, is clearly concerned with metaphysics and ontology, but is approached through an experiential lens. Trungpa states:

> I think that one of the ideas of Nāgārjuna, and the idea of śūnyatā, is to realize that there is nothing we can hang onto which is actually a common idea. Everybody believes blue is blue, yellow is yellow, and red is red, but nobody really knows because we never have any way of

> [confirming our reality] with each other. We always talk in terms of our own conceptual language. […] It is very tricky, but it is very simple logic, extremely simple logic, actually. It is one of the interesting points about śūnyatā. It is a very contemplative study, śūnyatā. Do we really know who we are? Do we really know what is yellow, what is blue, what is green, or what is red? Do we really know what is up and what is down, what is water and what is fire? Well, do we?" (Trungpa *1975,* 152)

This examination is critical if one is to go beyond the consequence of the self questioning itself. When the self questions itself, Nishitani has shown that the self, or Descartes' *cogito*, is mistakenly assumed to be an immediately evident, or self-evident, truth. Which means that everything that follows flows from the view of the *cogito* itself, without questioning the validity of the *ground* of the subjectivity in play here. Nishitani argues that,

> to think about the *cogito, ergo sum* by starting from the *cogito, ergo sum* — that is, to view self-consciousness and its self-evidence as mirrored on the field of that very self-consciousness itself — is only natural for the *ego* that is the subject of the *cogito*. We might even say that this ego arises in a field where self-consciousness mirrors itself at every turn. Hence, the self-evidence of self-consciousness — the very fact that the self is evident to itself — keeps us from feeling the need to look at that evident fact from a field beyond that fact itself (14).

In his approach to the subject of emptiness, Trungpa emphasizes perception over intellectual speculation as a way of short-circuiting fruitless trajectories (can I say such a thing?) such as that posited by Descartes, which Nishitani describes above. By grounding our examination in actual experience, i.e., pure perception, we can see past the ego as "self-

consciousness mirroring self-consciousness at every turn; where the *cogito* is seen from the standpoint of the *cogito* itself, [where] ego becomes a mode of being of the self closed up within itself" (Nishitani 14). Ego and self become undifferentiated in self-attachment. Trungpa explains that,

> in many cases the philosophers have gone wrong by trying to find out the truth of the matter concerning the way things are, rather than relating with things in terms of perception. As a result, they find themselves completely theorizing the whole thing without knowing what actual experience we might have of things as they are. If we theorize about the existence of the world, its solidity, its eternality, and so on, we block a very large chunk of our own experience, because we are trying too much to prove or establish the foundations of our philosophical view. So much so, that we end up concerned with the foundations of our view rather than its relationship to the earth. That even seems to be the wrong approach to metaphysics (Trungpa *Collected - VI*, 402-403).

In other words, if we take perception as our ground, rather than nihilism or another conceptual construct, the experience of emptiness, or, as Trungpa often refers to it, egolessness, may unfold. And, as Trungpa says, the patterns of one's life then become clear and workable.

> Here the nonexistence of ego is not a philosophical matter, but simply a matter of perception. Perception is unable to trace back its existence to an origin, so it becomes just sheer energy, without a beginner of the perception and without any substance. It is just simple perception. […]

> There are three aspects of perception: the sense of experience, the sense of emptiness, and the sense of luminosity. The point is that with that level of perception [containing the three aspects above], one is able to see all the patterns of one's life. Whether the patterns of one's life are regarded as neurotic or enlightened, one is able to see them all clearly." (*Collected - II,* 401-402)

By way of introducing a summary to the above discussion, I will quote Nishitani one last time. Here, Nishitani addresses the tension that exists between philosophical and religious thought, arguing that

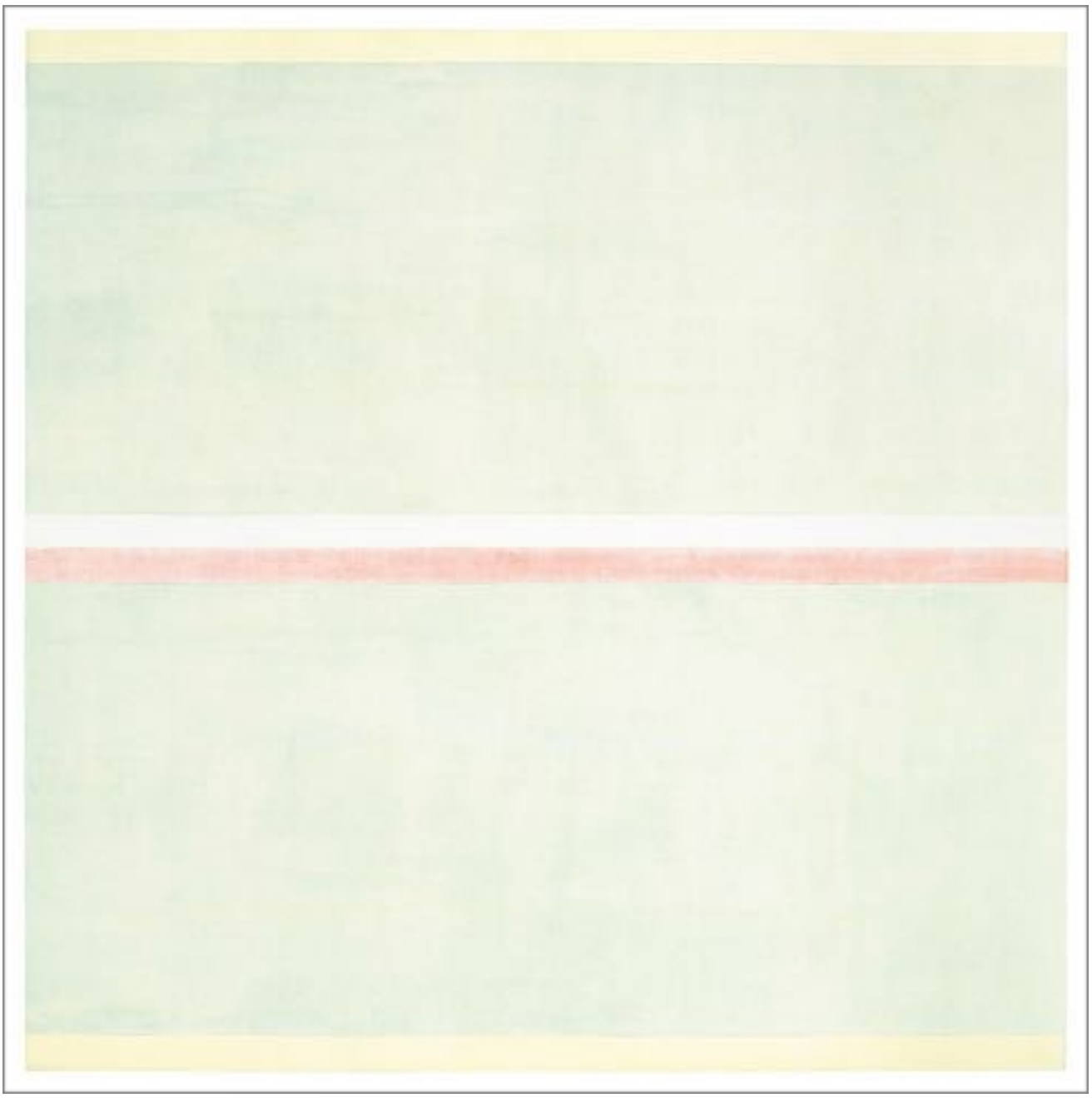
> in religion one persistently pushes ahead in a direction where doubt becomes a reality for the self and makes itself really present to the self. This sort of real doubt may, of course, show up in philosophical skepsis, but philosophy tends to transfer it to the realm of theoretical reflection, and within those confines to seek an explanation and solution of the problem (18).

And this seems to be what Trungpa, Dorje, and Nishitani address when they broach the subject of emptiness. Sartre and Heidegger consider and explain nothingness in very different ways, yet they each employ a theoretical lens through which they set about to solve the problem of 'the nothing'. They encounter the 'nothing', and then recoil from it, as though it were an abyss into which they might inadvertently stumble and plunge. For Sartre, there is anguish; for Heidegger, anxiety (*Angst*). For both, there is an overarching subjectivity at play on the field of the *cogito.* Both Heidegger and Sartre examine the *cogito* from the field of the *cogito,* and the *ego* from the field of the *ego.* This evident fact is never called into question, nor reflected upon. Therefore, the idea of the non-existence of ego, e.g. egolessness, or

śūnyatā, never arises; and whatever fleeting experiences one might have of the gap of emptiness, or, as it is referred to by Sartre and Heidegger, nothingness, are immediately glossed over, filled up, and subsequently go unrecognized. In nuce, the issue is this: neither Sartre nor Heidegger fully thinks absolute nothingness and both think nothing in relationship or reference to being; hence it is always a relative nothingness. Heidegger comes closer, but even he does not go as far as Nishitani, Trungpa, Dorje, etc.

VI. Agnes Martin painted emptiness. Neither nothing, nor nothingness, nor anxiety, nor angst; just emptiness in the form of color fields and line. To stand before a Martin canvas is to experience going beyond subjectivity into a light-filled, boundary-less space. Of course, one might say that Martin painted nothing more than lines, and grids. But there is more to see. Commenting on her own work, Martin says

> my paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything — no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form. You wouldn't think of form by the ocean… A world without objects, without interruption, making a work without interruption or obstacle. It is to accept the necessity of the simple direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean. (*Writings* 7)



GRATITUDE 2001
ACRYLIC PAINT ON CANVAS
152.4 X 152.4
AGNES MARTIN

If we consider Heidegger's subjective nothingness, his view gets us only part way through the doorway; but it is emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, found in the Buddhist Madhyamaka/ Yogācāra view which produces the eyes with which we can truly see Agnes Martin's work. We see between the lines, and inside the grids. We hear the silence. And it is Martin's own "preferences for receptivity and silence, and for acknowledging stillness and void as active and creative forces" (Nancy Princenthal 104) which imbue her work with the quiet sublimity which we experience.

The physicality of Martin's paintings plays an important role in her vision for her work. For most of her career, Martin worked with canvases that measured 6' by 6' (although towards the end of her life, she scaled down the size to a more physically manageable 5' by 5'). When asked about the size of canvases she worked with, Martin, in her signature perfunctory style, remarked, "it's a good size [when] you can just feel like stepping into it. It has to do with being the full size of the human body" (Princenthal 101).

Martin's life work was the cultivation of, as she puts it, a 'free mind, an open mind', as well as pure perception, inspiration, and freedom. She told John Gruen that "toward freedom is the direction that the artist takes. Art work comes straight through a free mind — an open mind. Absolute freedom *is* possible", she says (Gruen 3). Towards this end Martin recounts that she sought "spiritual inspiration from the Chinese spiritual teachers, especially Lao Tzu…My next strongest influence is the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng. […] I have also read and been inspired by the sutras of the other…Buddhist masters, and Chuang Tzu…who was very wise and very amusing" (Morris + Bell 232).

Martin's approach to so-called spirituality, however, was anything but other-worldly. Speaking to a group of students, Martin reflects the Buddhist view of the "not this, not that-ness" of emptiness, the absolutely no-big-dealness of emptiness, explaining that "when

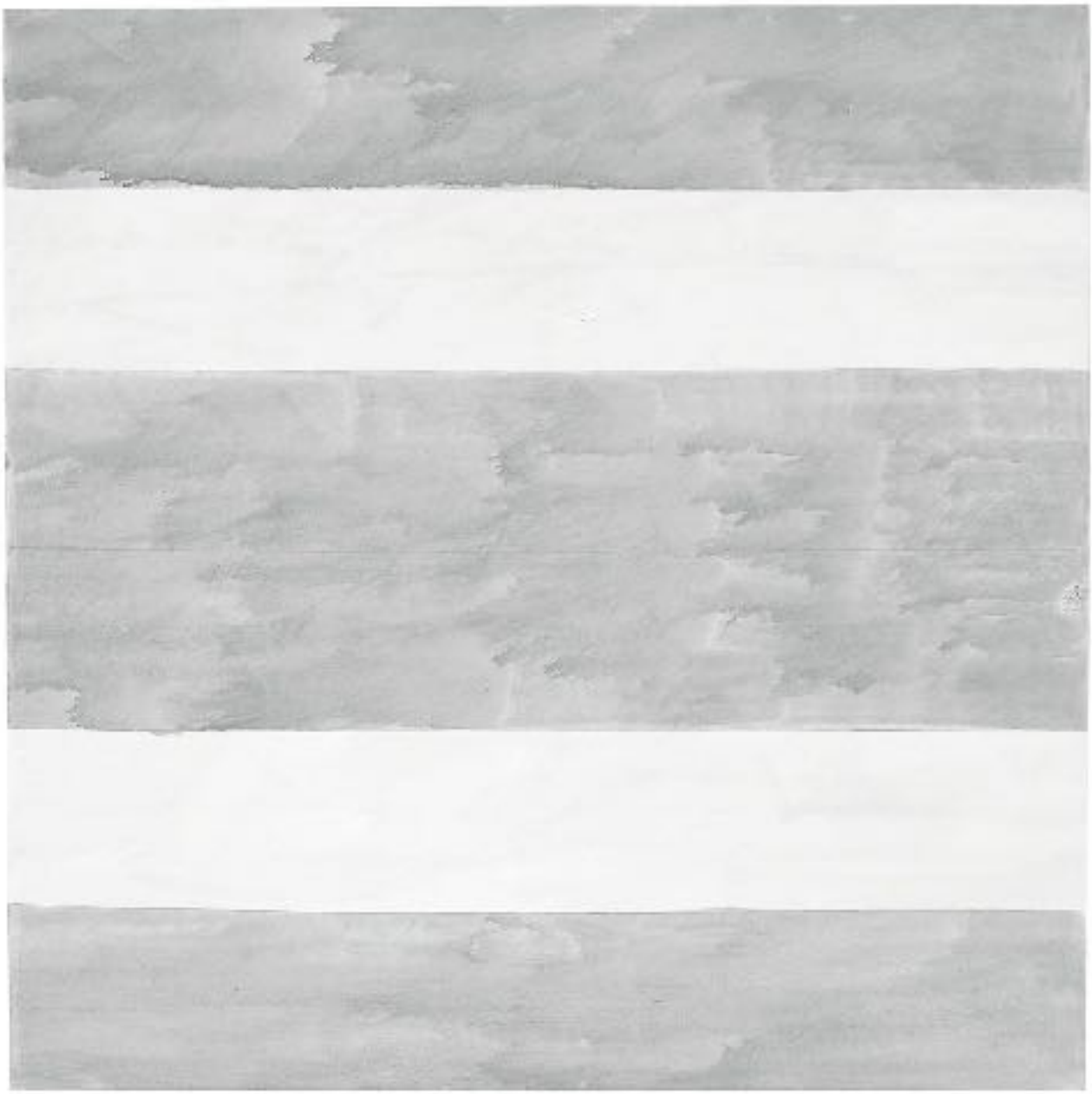
you're in life drawing, you're really thinking of all the women you've ever seen, and all the gestures they've ever made. That's what brings life into the drawing. It's your experience of life. It's not spiritual, it's really in this life. You sort of underestimate the human being when you say that every least thing that is an abstract experience is spiritual. It isn't. It's just your real self. You can be capable of fantastic abstract experiences, right in this life" (Princenthal 105).

Pressing the point of 'spirituality', Joan Simon asked Martin if she considered her work to be spiritual. Martin replied that "our minds respond to things beyond this world. Take beauty: it's a very mysterious thing, isn't it? I think it's a response in our minds to perfection. It's too bad, people not realizing that their minds expand beyond this world" (Simon 4). Continuing on this thread about mind, Martin writes in the essay "On the Perfection Underlying Life", that "I want to recommend the exploration of mind and the adventures [within] the mind. It takes so much time, that is the difficulty. It is so hard to slow down to the pace where it is possible to explore one's mind. And then of course one must go absolutely alone with not one thought about others intruding because then one would be off in relative thinking" (*Writings* 71).

Martin's mid- and late-career art making became nothing less than an expression of her lived experience of emptiness; she saw no separation between the former and the latter. In an extraordinary passage from the essay "What is Real", Martin writes

> Now let us turn to abstract response, the response that we make in our minds free from concrete environment. We know that it prevails. We know that it is infinite, dimensionless, without form and void. But it is not nothing because when we give our minds to it we are blissfully

aware. Being without imperfection it is perfection. And being without parts it is whole (95).



UNTITLED 2004
ACRYLIC PAINT + GRAPHITE ON CANVAS
152.4 X 152.4
AGNES MARTIN

"It is from our awareness of transcendent reality", she wrote, "and our response to concrete reality that our minds command us on our way — not really on a path or to a gate — but to full response". Thus, "the function of art work is the stimulation of sensibilities, the renewal of memories of moments of perfection" (95). And this, the stimulation or opening up of moments of perfection, or emptiness, is precisely what Martin did in her praxis.

VII. In this paper, I have briefly examined Jean-Paul Sartre's notions of *nothingness*, Martin Heidegger's *nothing*, and the Mahāyāna Buddhist Madhyamaka/Yogācāra view of *emptiness*; finally exploring a praxis of nothingness/emptiness as it manifested in the life and work of the contemporary visual artist Agnes Martin. In looking to Heidegger, we find that his method of inquiry into the question, *What is the nothing?* wrestles with the subjective logic of the intellect and *a priori* thought. "The nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings", Heidegger writes (98). Upon the negation of the totality of beings, the nothing can then, and only then, manifest. However, he argues that the nothing is only 'revealed' to us through an 'attunement' to the fundamental mood of *anxiety*. Heidegger thus sets up a nihilistic subject-object ontology, a world which is observed from the outside, rather than a world in which we find ourselves present.

Jean-Paul Sartre argues, in *Being and Nothingness,* that beings carry within themselves the dichotomy of being/non-being, and that non-being always *haunts* being. However, the very basis of our existence, of our being-ness, is 'nothingness'. This ground of nothingness is one and the same as our ground of being; nothingness is the very ground of our subjectivity. Sartre's existentialism becomes, therefore, a dialectic of subject and object. The ego, for Sartre, is postulated on a subjective nothingness, and this move shifts the project

from a Cartesian reliance on God to one of reliance on nihility, though both remain grounded in the field of the *ego*.

In contradistinction to the nihilistic position is the Mahāyāna Buddhist view of *emptiness*, which, according to Trungpa,

> is not merely awareness of what we are and how we are in relation to such and such an object, but rather it is clarity which transcends conceptual padding and unnecessary confusions. One is no longer fascinated by the object nor involved as a subject. It is freedom from *this* and *that*. What remains is open space, the absence of the this-and-that dichotomy (197).

The tension we find between Sartre's view, on one hand, and the Mahāyāna Buddhist view, on the other, opens the space for us to truly see the work of Agnes Martin, a painter of absolute, rather than mere relative emptiness.

Married to the clarity, freedom, and open space of emptiness, is an all-encompassing warmth and compassion for all beings. Agnes Martin says

> you must want joy for all, not just for yourself. The exact same joy, want it whole-heartedly for all. To want joy for yourself is unreal, off the track and untrue. It is just as unreal to think you give joy to others. Each has its own joy. Joy is life. You cannot give life. You can want them to have it; that is as much as you can do" *(Writings* 96).

Without this enlightened mind of compassion (*bodhicitta*), there is no Mahāyāna Buddhist view; there can be neither emptiness, nor knowledge, nor wisdom (*prajña*). This is perhaps one of the most striking differences between the philosophical projects of Sartre and Heidegger, and the Mahāyāna Buddhist Madhyamaka/Yogācāra philosophy. Sartre and

Heidegger, in their philosophical enthusiasm, seem to have overlooked the vital importance that compassion plays in the recognition and experience of emptiness and the concomitant development of wisdom. And it places Agnes Martin on the side of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and in the camp of neither Heidegger nor Sartre.

This has been a cursory survey of the differences in the philosophical projects of two twentieth-century Continental philosophers as they define 'nothing' and 'nothingness', and the idea of 'emptiness' found in the Mahāyāna Buddhist Madhyamaka/Yogācāra traditions. Furthermore, I have explored what 'nothingness', 'emptiness', and freedom have meant to the contemporary visual artist, Agnes Martin, how they have manifested in her praxis, and the intersections identified with the aforementioned philosophical streams. Considering the Mahāyāna view of emptiness serves to cast Heidegger's and Sartre's projects in an altogether different light, and certainly warrants more careful explorations into the intersections and divergences of these views.

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