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ANNE FLOURNOY

AGNES MARTIN'S NOTES

Agnes Martin's notes for "On the Perfection Underlying Life"

This lecture was originally given at the ICA on February 14, 1973 on the occasion of the exhibition, "Agnes Martin" which was held at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, January 22 – March 1, 1973. ©2009 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Beginning No. 5

The process of life is hidden from us. The meaning of suffering is held from us. And we are blind to life.

We are blinded by pride. Pride has built another structure and it is called "Life" but living the prideful life we are frustrated and lost.

It is not possible to overthrow pride. It is not possible because we ourselves are pride; Pride the Dragon and Pride the Deceiver as it is called in Mythology. But we can witness the defeat of pride because pride can not hold out. Pride is not real so sooner or later it must go down.

When pride in some form is lost we feel very different. We feel the victory over pride, and



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working and in the work itself.

Work is self-expression. We must not think of self expression as something we may do or something we may not do. Self expression is inevitable. In your work, in the way that you do your work and in the result of your work yourself is expressed. Behind and before self expression is a developing awareness I will also call "the work". It is the most important part of the work. There is the work in our minds, the work in our hands and the work as a result.

In your work, in everyone's work, in the work of the world, the work that reminds of pride is gradually abandoned. Having in moments of perfection enjoyed freedom from pride we know that that is what we want. With this knowing we recognize and eliminate expressions of pride.

I will now speak directly to the art students present as an illustration of the work with particular references to art work.

My interest and yours is art work, works of art, every smallest work of art and every kind of art work. We are very interested, dedicated in fact. There is no halfway with art. We wake up thinking about it and we go to sleep thinking about it.

We go everywhere looking for it, both artists and non-artists. It is very mysterious the fast hold that it has upon us, considering how little we know about it. We do not even understand our own response to our own work.

Why do we go everywhere searching out works of art and why do we make works of art. The answer is that we are inspired to do so.

When we wake up in the morning we are inspired to do some certain thing and we do do it. The difficulty lies in the fact that it may turn



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that is not true. There is successful work and work that fails but all of it is inspired. I will speak later about successful works of art but here I want to speak of failures. Failures that should be discarded and completely cut off.

I have come especially to talk to those among you who recognize these failures. I want particularly to talk to those who recognize all of their failures and feel inadequate and defeated, to those who feel insufficient – short of what is expected or needed. I would like somehow to explain that these feelings are the natural state of mind of the artist, that a sense of disappointment and defeat is the essential state of mind for creative work.

In order to do this I would like to consider further those moments in which we feel joy in living. To some these moments are very clear and to others of a vagueness that can only be described as below the level of consciousness. Whether conscious or unconscious they do their work and they are the incentive to life. A stockpile of these moments gives us an awareness of perfection in our minds and this awareness of perfection in our minds makes all the difference in what we do.

Moments of perfection are indescribable but a few things can be said about them. At such times we are suddenly very happy and we wonder why life ever seemed troublesome. In an instant we can see the road ahead free from all difficulties, and we think that we will never lose it again. All this and a great deal more in barely a moment, and then it is gone. But all such moments are stored in the mind. They are called sensibility or awareness of perfection in the mind.

We must surrender the idea that this perfection that we see in the mind or before our eyes is obtainable or attainable. It is really far from us. We are no more capable of having it than the infant that tries to eat it. But our



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There is only one way in which artists can serve this function of art. There is only one way in which successful works of art can be made. To make works of art that stimulate sensibilities and renew moments of perfection an artist must recognize the works that illustrate his own moments of perfection.

Perfection, of course, cannot be represented. The slightest indication of it is eagerly grasped by observers. The work is so far from perfection because we ourselves are so far from perfection. The oftener we glimpse perfection or the more conscious we are in our awareness of it the farther away it seems to be. Or perhaps I should say the more we are aware of perfection the more we realize how very far away from us it is. That is why art work is so very hard. It is a working through disappointments to greater disappointment and a growing recognition of failure to the point of defeat. But still one wakes in the morning and there is the inspiration and one goes on.

I want to emphasize the fact that increase in disappointment does not mean going backward in the work. There is no such thing as backward in anything. There is increased and decreased awareness that is all and increased awareness means increased disappointments. If any perfection is indicated in the work it is recognized by the artist as truly miraculous so he feels that he can take no credit for its sudden appearance.

What does it mean to be defeated. It means that we cannot go on. We cannot make another move. Everything that we thought we could do we have done without result. We even give up all hope of getting the work and perhaps even the desire to have it.



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Then it is not conditioned response.
Then there is some hope of a hint of
perfection.

Without hope there is hope.
And without desire there is hope.

We do not ever stop because there is no way
to stop. No matter what you do you will not
escape. There is no way out. You may as well
go ahead with as little resistance as possible –
and eat everything on your plate. Going on
without resistance or notions is called
discipline. Going on when hope and desire
have been left behind is discipline. Going on in
an impersonal way without personal
considerations is called discipline.

Not thinking, planning, scheming is a
discipline. Not caring or striving is a discipline.

Defeated you will rise to your feet as is said of
Dry Bones

These bones will rise again.

Undefeated you will have nothing to say but
more of the same.

Defeated you will stand at the door of your
house to welcome the unknown, putting
behind you all that is known.

Defeated having no place to go you will
perhaps wait and be overtaken.

As in the night. To penetrate the night is one
thing. But to be penetrated by the night. That
is to be overtaken.

Defeated, exhausted, and helpless you will
perhaps go a little bit further.

Helplessness, even a mild state of helplessness
is extremely hard to bear. Moments of
helplessness are moments of blindness. One
feels as tho something terrible has happened
without knowing what it is. One feels as tho
one is in the outer darkness or as tho one has
made some terrible error a fatal error. Our



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helplessness drives us to ridiculousness. We go from reading religious doctrine and occult practices to changing our diet. Or from absolute self abasement or abandonment to ever known and unknown fetish.

It is so hard to realize at the time of helplessness that that is the time to be awake and aware. The feeling of calamity and loss covers everything. We imagine that we are completely cut off and tremble with fear and dread. The more we are aware of perfection the more we will suffer when we are blind to it in helplessness.

But helplessness when fear and dread have run their course, as all passions do, is the most rewarding state of all. It is a time when our most tenacious prejudices are overcome. Our most tightly gripped resistances come under the knife, and we are made more free. Our lack of independence in helplessness is our most detrimental weakness from the standpoint of art work. Stated positively, independence is the most essential character trait in an artist.

Although helplessness is the most important state of mind, the holiday state of mind is the most efficacious for artists: "Free and easy wandering" it is called by the Chinese sage Chuang Tzu. In free and easy wandering there is only freshness and adventure. It is really awareness of perfection within the mind. Everyone has memories of adventures within the mind, strange and pleasant memories, but not everyone is aware of adventures within the mind when they happen.

I want to recommend the exploration of mind and the adventure 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



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shut the door and remain there. Usually when they come out they go to a park or somewhere where they will not meet anyone. A surprising circumstance? That I will try to explain.

The solitary life is full of terrors. If you went walking with someone that would be one thing but if you went walking alone in a lonely place that would be an entirely different thing. If you were not completely distracted you would surely feel "the fear" part of the time. I am not now speaking of the fear and dread of helplessness which is a very unusual state of mind. I am speaking of pervasive fear that is always with us. It is a constant state of mind of which we are not aware when we are with others. We are used to this fear and we know that when we are with anyone else, even a stranger, we do not have it. That is all that we do know about it. In solitude this fear is lived and finally understood.

Worse than the terror of fear is the Dragon. The Dragon really pounds through the inner streets shaking everything and breathing fire. The fire of his breath destroys and disintegrates everything. The dragon is indiscriminating and leaves absolutely nothing in his wake.

The solitary person is in great danger from the dragon because without an outside enemy the dragon turns on the self. In fact self destructiveness is the first of human weaknesses. When we know all the ways in which we can be self destructive that will be very valuable knowledge indeed.

The terrible thing is that we are not just the dragon but the victim even when he is destroying someone else, and our suffering is according to just how destructive he feels. So we cannot afford one moment of antagonism about anything.



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work proceeds quickly and without effort. But at anytime the Dragon may rouse himself and then one is driven from the studio. If he can then have a good contest with someone else he is thoroughly aroused and the next day his victories go round and round in the mind. I am sure you have noticed it. But if he only goes to the park he does not get completely roused and the next day he will perhaps be quiet.

We cannot and do not slay the Dragon that is a medieval idea, I guess. We have to become completely familiar with him and hope that he sleeps. The way things are most of the time is that he is awake and we are asleep. What we hope is the opposite.

I have known some very young artists who are familiar with the Dragon and know many of his ways. They also recognize fear and are independent of judgement. They recognize themselves as mere shadows in reality. They like to be alone and seem to have had plenty of practice of being alone since early childhood. All that is a tremendous head start in art work and these artists are correctly recognized as geniuses.

We will all get there someday however and do the work that we are supposed to do. Of all the pitfalls in our paths and the tremendous delays and wanderings off the track I want to say that they are not what they seem to be. I want to say that all that seems like fantastic mistakes are not mistakes and all that seems like error is not error, and it all has to be done. That which seems like a false step is just the next step.

You may as well give up judging your actions. If it is the unconditioned life that you want you do not know what you should do or what you should have done. We will just have to let everything go. Everything we know and everything everyone else knows is conditioned.



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and in the work I must be on the alert to see myself. When I see myself in the work I will know that that is the work I am supposed to do. I will not have much time for other peoples problems. I will have to be by myself almost all the time and it will be a quiet life.

Success is contentment with no discontentment about anything: anything in the work or anything outside the work.

What was the reaction of the person who first made a symmetrical house. He felt new contentment in the house. He could see that it reflected himself. He felt a satisfaction in having built it and perhaps an awareness of clarity in his mind as the means. (A contentment with oneself that is success. Do not stop short of real contentment. You may as well never have been born if you remain discontented.)

Perfection is not necessary. Perfection you can not have. If you do what you want to do and what you can do and if you can then recognize it you will be contented. You cannot possibly know what it will be but looking back you will not be surprised at what you have done.

For those who are visual minded I will say. There seems to be a fine ship at anchor, fear is the anchor, convention is the chain, ghosts stalk the decks, the sails are filled with pride and the ship does not move.

But there are moments for all of us in which the anchor is weighed. Moments in which we learn what it feels like to move freely not held back by pride and fear. Moments that can be recalled with all their fine flavour.

The recall of these moments can be stimulated by freeing experiences including the viewing of works of art.



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I hope I have made clear that the work is about perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from being perfect – - completely removed in fact – - even as we ourselves are.

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