

# NO MORE FUN AND GAMES

Feminist  
Parasite  
Institution

Act 1

Act 2

Act 3

WAYS OUT OF THE CAVE..Michael Dempsey

In 1793 the Louvre Palace found itself playing host to the Muséum central des arts de la République when it was officially opened in Paris. It was also the year when the phantasmagoria was first introduced. This was a theatrical show using a magic lantern that was created to terrorise its spectators through the fantasy of their imaginations. Promoted and presented deliberately as an illusionist trick – where the means of its production were hidden – much like Plato’s shadows flickering on a cave wall. It was intended to create in the spectator an experience that questioned their view of the world – an attempt to dispel the belief in religion and superstition during the Age of Enlightenment and shake the foundations of hegemony. The magic lantern later developed into a cinematic experience by projection, with the audience facing a single perspective under the control of a director... but that’s another story...

ACT II

The unfolding events and enormous feedback of the last few weeks have highlighted the importance of engaging in counter-hegemonic praxis in order to recognise the immense forces at play in gender ideology. A definite agency is in the air – #WakingtheFeminists, #Repealthe8th, #genderparity and #freewomen are active attempts in Ireland in 2016 to demonstrate that gender ideology continues to exist in (material) apparatuses of state power. For ACT II of the Feminist Parasite Institution the themes of labour division, oppression and inequality for women come to the surface. Jesse Jones has delegated the action of pulling the screen/curtain to female performers who are paid by the hour for their work. This repetitive task is carried out daily between 12 noon and 4pm for the duration of the exhibition. The female performer is paid a living wage and is available to talk freely and unscripted to any approaching visitor. NO MORE FUN AND GAMES therefore manifests itself through the performers, the audience and the (two) institutions. In doing this, Jones has introduced a MacGuffin, or plot enabler, in the cinematic experience of her installation that takes away the illusion of phantasmagoria and leads us into a structuralist film space. It exposes the mechanisms of cinema and adds yet another layer to the discussion around inequality.

Stereotyping is an essential element for the maintenance and perpetuation of hegemonic notions of femininity. As psychoanalytic theory informs us, psychic associations (i.e. fears and taboos concerning sexuality) are reproduced through the social order and so concepts of ‘equality’ are also carried

in the prejudice of existing social relations. The feedback of the Feminist Parasite Institution questioned the re-choosing of a male composer. Did this choice address the question of how women and men have historically been situated as artists/authors/composers? The decision to select a female performer to pull the curtain reminds us of the division of labour by gender which continues to relegate domestic chores to women and inequality in the workplace. What would a male performer pulling the curtain say? Admittedly, men have begun to assume more responsibilities in the home, but surveys indicate that in the nuclear, double-wage earning family, women continue to do most of the housework and childminding.

Women are exploited through the commoditisation of their bodies for the market and exploited through the production of labour power (e.g. the rearing of children). For four hours a day, six days a week we witness a woman, at irregular intervals, pulling a curtain through the gallery spaces. Here the work is located in the body and voice of the performer, but also in the time and institutional space that it occupies.

To look at the swishing movement of this cinematic image is certainly a beautiful thing but the aesthetic gain achieved by this action stands in an ironic relationship to the ethical implication it raises, i.e. the twofold nature of women’s exploitation. The curtain now acts as a signifier to the domestic, just as the reception desk acts as a signifier to the workplace. Presented is a re-enactment of domestic service in a State institution and this throws up a whole host of confusing ideas and contradictions about inequality and gender ideology. The metaphor for the construction and reproduction of gender roles is doubled because the museum is where we see patriarchy enacted and, in a wider view, it represents the State apparatuses that are located in a long and complex historical process of social relations, such as labour division, oppression, inequality and the internalised inferiority of women.

ACT II continues the Feminist Parasite Institution’s inquiry and asks fundamental questions about the construction of our society and, within that, how individual experiences and identities, including that of the artist, are formed. The term ‘agitprop’ comes to mind in this work that sees nothing in social relations as gender-free. Audiences are not only educated in how representation carries forward pictures of who we are, but through the new conditions of this environment NO MORE FUN AND GAMES shakes up the foundations of hegemony, briefly transforming the world in which we live to change our sensibilities and attitudes.

We must all become activists for feminism.



AGNES MARTIN: MUTENESS AND EXPRESSION<sup>1</sup>.... LEAH REYNOLDS

“I am not a woman,” was Agnes Martin’s pithy response to a question regarding her status as a woman artist.<sup>2</sup> The dismissive nature of the statement is typical of Martin’s idiosyncratic character and in this instance it is less so a renouncement of feminism in particular, but a resistance to being subsumed under any category at large. Identification as a woman (as well as a feminist or lesbian) were titles to be sloughed off in aspiration of an egolessness and clarity of mind – a clarity so definitive of her aesthetic.

The problematic relationship of women and their place within art history, or absence thereof, is a battle Martin did not wish to advocate. However, it is plausible that Martin felt an element of self-consciousness or ‘survivor’s guilt’ from her atypical position as a female artist gaining in critical acclaim from the 1960s onwards – particularly in the field of geometric abstraction which is so commonly engendered as a ‘masculine’ pictorial language. Her wariness of the pitfalls of pride and ego became more heightened with the increasing attention she received, and her aversion to self-aggrandisement took her as far as to believe that feelings of ‘defeat’ and ‘inadequacy’ were natural and beneficial states for the artist.<sup>3</sup> But it must be stated that this commitment to self-effacement – most eloquently illustrated in the minimal, non-figurative form of her mature paintings – is often received by the viewer as a testament to her character and an enchantment with her person. The conspicuous style and loud presence of the Abstract Expressionist’s legacy, along with other multifarious art practices occurring simultaneously and on a grand scale in 1960s New York – such as conceptual art, Pop Art and performance art – portray Martin’s practice as somewhat outdated for her time. Her artistic ethos and life philosophy was radically anti-intellectual and she could be dismissive of concerns relating to the contemporary socio-political climate. She preached a somewhat romance-infused quest for the verbal and pictorial expression of simplicity and purity, and her art and life story held steadfast to this. She sought an idea of perfection though she never claimed to give form to its image; instead settling for its awareness in the mind’s eye. Most salient in this approach is the weightiness of its affect: in 1972 the critic Lawrence Alloway remarked that “[a]n artist like Martin can fill the house with a whisper.”<sup>4</sup>

In her resistance to the above situation Martin conveys an understanding of the inherent risks of nominalism and the damage done to an artwork’s autonomy (in another instance she would come to express regret over exhibiting with the Minimalists in 1966 in an exhibition curated around the aesthetic extremes of the movement). Yet as the discourse on Martin goes, any association with Minimalism and other curatorial themes only serve to reinforce her individualism – for in the same breath critics often find her subsumption to be a misfit. Interestingly, her success in the field of geometric abstraction (though never on the scale of her male peers) resulted in her marginalisation even from the term ‘woman artist’, which historian Anna Chave notes was the case in art discourse of the 1960s and later in the 1970s, with second-wave feminism embracing Georgia O’Keeffe, Alice Neel and Louise Bourgeois to the exclusion of Martin.

Gladly, however, in 1981 Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane embraced Martin and acquired *Untitled No. 7* (1980) for the gallery’s permanent collection, though not without controversy. RTÉ archival news footage covering the acquisition captured the public’s dismay at the gallery’s payment of £23,000 for what became labelled in the media as a ‘blank canvas’ (with eight pale-banded stripes that worked out as “£3,000 a stripe” as the reporter informs us). The tone of the clip, which is available online, stresses the inscrutability the painting presented to the Irish public, media and certain counsellors, particularly in equating the monetary value with the minimality of its form. The challenge *Untitled No. 7* presented to the Irish public at the time – as insinuated by the mainstream media – was that art should be understandable; that whatever its particulars, it should fall under the commonality of a universal understanding. However, to carry this notion out to its extreme is the moment in which art loses its very autonomy and authenticity of expression. NO MORE FUN AND GAMES, and the constellation within which Martin’s *Untitled No. 7* circulates, intentionally negates this reification of meaning. The feminist collective’s curatorial decision to disassemble traditional modes of historicism in

the display of the artworks is a philosophical gesture against totalisation and for the slipperiness of identification – and these are valuable strategies to feminist theory. Thus, at the heart of the exhibition lies the capacity for movement, for creating space in which difference can flourish – and Martin’s paintings are nothing if not conduits for creating space.

For viewers standing in front of an Agnes Martin, the viscosity of the experience is most potent. It is a very hard thing to put words to, and yet despite this the potency of its form often finds its way into the language of critics who, whether intentionally or not, imitate its very ‘unutterability’. There is significance in this exchange of the relationship between the work, viewer, and writer. The difficulty such a work poses – that is, the inexplicability of the aesthetic experience and the lack of concepts that can account for it – is where the presence of what Theodor Adorno would call the inaccessibility of its ‘historical logic’ is felt. The form of Adorno’s writings stands in sympathetic accord with his theory; thus, like Martin, he speaks to the very thing that he names unspeakable. For Adorno, the moment of an authentic artwork’s making is when the preservation of a plurality of influences and factors become sealed within it. From that moment onward only inference of thought – like the veil of the hand that reaches, skims and skirts the gallery space of NO MORE FUN AND GAMES– is left only to circle the space around its object.

No doubt these are challenging concepts, given that the futility of trying to crack them is circumscribed at the outset. What Adorno is striving to account for with his theory, however, is human experience of sensuousness and embodiment – I am thinking here of Martin and her love and desire for wide open spaces, of the joy it granted her and the suffering that called for it, and the mute force of her grids, lines and stripes that innervate both silence and expression, presence and absence.

1. This essay utilises Theodor Adorno’s writings on his theory of the ‘constellation’ and the ‘non-identical’ in his posthumous publication *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

2. Agnes Martin, interview with Jill Johnston, cited in Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 232.

3. Agnes Martin, in notes from the 1972 lecture ‘On the Perfection Underlying Life,’ quoted in *Agnes Martin: Writings/Schriften*, ed. Dieter Schwartz (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz and Winterthur, 1992), 68.

4. Lawrence Alloway, ‘Agnes Martin,’ *Artforum* 11, no. 8 (April 1973), 32-37: 36.

5. Anna Chave, ‘Agnes Martin: “Humility, The Beautiful Daughter... All of Her Ways Are Empty,”’ in ed. Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992) 132.











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*The Feminist Parasite Institution*  
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Parasite performers: Tara Mc Keon, Niamh Moloney, Rachel Fallon, Jesse Jones

Photography: Miriam O'Connor

Curators: Michael Dempsey and Logan Sisley

Production: Stephen Dodd, Erin Hermosa, Flan Hedderman and The Hugh Lane Collection Care Team

Music composition, *Pneuma*, by Gerald Busby  
Flautist: Kevin Carberry  
Sound Recording: Philip Donegan

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