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# History and Desire: A Short Introduction to the Art of Cy Twombly

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# HISTORY & DESIRE



Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston, Texas

# HISTORY & DESIRE

*A Short Introduction to the Art of*

## CY TWOMBLY

MICHAEL SCHREYACH

AN OPEN ACCESS PUBLICATION  
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Michael Schreyach

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*Frontispiece:* Cy Twombly  
Gallery, Houston, Texas.  
Photograph by the author.

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## NOTE TO READERS

This monograph has its origins in a thesis I wrote nearly twenty years ago for an M.A. degree at the University of Texas at Austin, awarded in 1998 within the Department of Art & Art History in the College of Fine Arts. In response to a commission for publication in 2008, some of that earlier work ("[Cy Twombly's Lexington Paintings](#)") was revised and incorporated into the present text. The current manuscript underwent the initial stages of the publication process (peer-review, revision, illustration research), but following the unexpected cancellation of the introductory series for which the book was written (and subsequent to my release from the publisher's contract), the monograph gathered dust. In 2017, I decided to offer the text to interested readers in the form of an Open Access publication hosted on the Digital Commons of my home institution, Trinity University.

Much of the following account is based on my close looking over the years at Twombly's paintings, sculptures, and drawings held by the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, and especially at those works that are on frequent display in the [Cy Twombly Gallery](#). Although there are no illustrations within the text to accompany my references to particular works of art, I have tried to indicate where reproductions can easily be found. An indispensable resource is Kirk Varnedoe's *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994). Readers may locate the pertinent images in that exhibition catalogue by attending to the abbreviations in brackets next to the work under discussion; e.g. "[TR23]" (for plates) or "[TRFig.25]" (for figures). I have also sometimes provided cross-references to another comprehensive resource: *Cy Twombly: Catalogue raisonné of the*

*Paintings*, vols. I–V: 1948–2007, ed. Heiner Bastian (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1992–2009); e.g. “[CR:III 31]” (designating volume and entry number). Finally, I have attempted to supply working hyperlinks to some of Twombly’s works that are held in museum collections and that are reproduced on their institutional websites; those links are indicated by the title of the work being rendered in blue underlined italics, as in [\*Untitled\*](#) (1973).

A useful compendium of critical writing and reviews has been edited by Nicola Del Roscio, *Writings on Cy Twombly* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002), and is highly recommended for further reading. Since this book’s completion in 2009, exciting new scholarship and critical writing has emerged regarding Twombly’s practice. And, to be sure, there was much good work done before 2009 that, due to the nature of the project, I was unable even to mention in my short overview. I can only hope that my selected bibliography—for which I make no claim to comprehensiveness—will help readers pursue their own lines of inquiry into the artist’s work and its scholarly analysis.



## INTRODUCTION

The art of Cy Twombly (1928–2011) has at times confounded viewers, but it has never bored them. Why? Because Twombly’s imagery never settles. It seems to proliferate endlessly, even when recognizable forms repeat themselves, ever generating new and provocative contacts between our sense of the materiality of art and our other senses, whether affective, cognitive, or kinesthetic (or some combination of that indivisible triad). His work is simply direct, accessible to attentive viewers, even when it seems to refer to half-remembered myths, to canonical but distant—even forgotten—heroes and poets of the Western cultural heritage. Twombly is by turns condemned and lauded for his elite high-art references, for his distance from the everyday. But, Twombly’s art is close. It is proximate, there to touch us.

This book is intended for readers (and viewers) searching for an introduction to the major themes of Twombly’s art, and for an explanation of the techniques by which he realized his ambitions. It presents a developmental history of the artist’s achievement in various media (mostly painting, sculpture, and drawing). At the same time, it addresses certain issues that concern art historians more broadly, such as modern art’s relationship to the past. Because a dual relationship to “classicism” and “primitivism” consistently preoccupied Twombly, an insight into how he repeatedly navigated those two categories helps us in turn to understand one of the underlying themes of modern painting as a whole.

Finally, this book aims to advance the reader’s understanding not only of Twombly specifically, but also of postwar art generally. Although he was an American who strongly identified with the South (he was

born and raised in Lexington, Virginia, and maintained a studio there until his death in 2009), Twombly also relished the sophistication that often accompanies life in urban centers, where regular exposure to forms of high cultural achievement invariably enriches an artist's work. Indeed, Twombly's passionate interest in classical culture culminated in his moving permanently to Rome in 1959. Yet early travels to Morocco and subsequent trips to Egypt and around the world confirm that Twombly was also drawn to ancient, even archaic, art. He was also well aware of the effects postwar affluence and consumerism had in producing a pervasive commodity culture, especially in the United States and Europe. Although not without its beneficial attractions, this "society of the spectacle" (the term is Guy Debord's) seemed to some, including Twombly, to threaten more refined modes of thinking and feeling that high art traditionally had maintained and cultivated.

Concisely: Twombly's art is born of multidimensional experience. Classical and archaic themes jostle with pop-cultural references; authenticity is peppered with knowing irony. In its own particular way, his art inaugurates a typical modern dilemma: does contemporary art give creative and original form to a society's most aspirational values? Does it harbor genuine cultural and personal understanding? Or, given the spectacular (and thus, some might say, compromised) conditions of its production, is it destined to be hopelessly false, even theatrical? Because he consistently engages such questions, and attempts to answer them through his art, Twombly exemplifies an artist whose practice may yet shed light on a wider history of modernism.

## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

**1928**

April 25: Edwin Parker “Cy” Twombly, Jr. is born in Lexington, Virginia.

**1942–6**

Attends lectures on modern European art and painting classes.

**1947**

Enrolls in the Boston Museum School, where he is exposed to German Expressionism.

**1949**

Enrolls in the art department at Washington and Lee University.

**1950**

Obtains a tuition scholarship to the Art Students League in New York City. Studies under Will Barnett, Morris Kantor, and Vaclav Vytlacil. Meets Robert Rauschenberg.

**1951**

Attends Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Meets poet Charles Olson. Aaron Siskind helps arrange Twombly’s first solo show at the Seven Stairs Gallery in Chicago.

**1952**

Visits Black Mountain in summer. Meets John Cage, Franz Kline, and Jack Tworkov. Travels with Rauschenberg to Europe and North Africa.

**1953**

Twombly and Rauschenberg have joint exhibitions in Florence and New York (the latter at Eleanor Ward’s Stable Gallery). They share a studio on Fulton Street. Twombly is inducted as a cryptographer into the United States Army for one year.

**1955**

Has first of three solo shows sponsored by the Stable Gallery. Accepts a teaching position at Southern Seminary and Junior College in Virginia.

**1957**

Travels to Italy; reads Mallarmé; meets the Italian painter Toti Scialoja; summers on the island of Procida, in the Bay of Naples; meets Giorgio Franchetti and his sister Tatiana. Rents an apartment in Rome.

**1958**

Exhibits at Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome and Galleria del Naviglio in Milan. Breaks with Ward’s Stable Gallery. Signs with Leo Castelli, who represents Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

**1959**

Marries Tatiana Franchetti in April. Visits Cuba and the Yucatán.

**1960–4**

Travels widely.

**1964**

Twombly's first show in New York in four years. Donald Judd pans the exhibition; the work is elsewhere in the press met with hostility.

**1965**

First comprehensive museum exhibition is sponsored by Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany; it travels to Brussels and Amsterdam.

**1968**

The first Twombly retrospective in the United States opens at the Milwaukee Art Center.

**1974**

Heiner Bastian establishes in Berlin the archives of Twombly's artistic production.

**1975**

A retrospective of paintings, sculpture, and drawings opens in Philadelphia at the Institute of Contemporary Art; it travels to the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco.

**1976**

After a period of seventeen years, Twombly begins making sculptures again.

**1979**

A retrospective opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the exhibition catalogue features an essay by French literary critic Roland Barthes.

**1981**

First museum show of sculptures held at the Museum Haus Lang, Krefeld.

**1981–5**

Travels widely.

**1987**

A retrospective organized by Harald Szeeman opens at the Kunsthaus Zurich and travels to Madrid, London, Düsseldorf, and Paris.

**1989**

A large exhibition of paintings, sculpture, and drawings opens at The Menil Collection in Houston and travels to the Des Moines Art Center in April 1990.

**1992**

Volume 1 of Heiner Bastian's *Catalogue raisonné of the Paintings*, covering the years 1948–60, appears. It is followed by four additional volumes.

**1994**

A major retrospective opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The show travels to Houston, Los Angeles, and Berlin.

**1995**

Opening ceremony in Houston of the Cy Twombly Gallery, designed by Renzo Piano, and funded by the de Menil family and Philippa and Heiner Friedrich.

**2000**

A retrospective of sixty-six sculptures opens at the Kunstmuseum Basel and travels to Houston and Washington, D.C.

**2003**

A retrospective of works on paper opens at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. It travels to Munich, Paris, London, and, in 2005, to New York and Houston.

**2007**

Twombly travels to Paris to oversee his ceiling commission for the Salle des Bronzes in the Louvre (completed 2010).

**2008**

A retrospective opens at the Tate Modern in London; it travels to Bilbao and Rome.

**2011**

July 5: Twombly dies in Rome, aged 83.

# 1

## APPROACHING THE SURFACE

In July 2007, a thirty-year-old French artist and visitor to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Avignon, France, kissed a Cy Twombly painting valued at nearly three million dollars, leaving a bright-red lipstick print on the white surface. She was arrested. Charged with voluntarily damaging a work of art, she defended herself at trial by claiming that hers was a spontaneous “act of love,” not a crime. Despite her apparent sincerity, she was convicted, ordered to take a class on good citizenship, and fined a small sum for damages (including a symbolic payment of €1 to the painter himself).

Whether it is considered disrespectful vandalism or unalloyed devotion, the episode provides an instructive instance of the kind of dramatic response periodically elicited by Twombly’s art. “The paintings are revolting,” wrote a reviewer of Twombly’s first solo show in 1951. “They repel [me],” he continued, “as a rattlesnake in the hot sand.”<sup>1</sup> A perusal of the comments left in the guest book by visitors to the Cy Twombly Gallery in Houston, Texas, reveals a range of reactions to his work, from adoring reverence, to blunt incomprehension, to outright hostility.

### ■ Poetry and Interpretation

Twombly is a figure who, despite the length of his career and the substantial bibliography devoted to him, remains enigmatic. This was in part the result of his own reticence during his lifetime regarding his art. Twombly’s single published statement of artistic intent appeared over half a century ago, in a somewhat obscure Italian journal, and he

consented to only two interviews—both relatively late in his career.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he did not want to reduce what he felt to be the fullness of his art to empty description. Whether temperamental or strategic, that silence has deprived commentators of one of the conventional foundations of art-historical interpretation, namely the testimony of the artist. Those seeking to understand the works by summoning as evidence Twombly's explicit statements of his intentions necessarily seem to be at a disadvantage.

This austerity has led some commentators to propose that Twombly's work *cannot* be explained. "The theme of [his] pictures," wrote Richard Hoppe-Sailer, "is specifically the ... opposition of pictorial phenomena [to] interpretative language."<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, critical writing contains numerous opposing—even antithetical—views of the artist's work. Twombly is deemed both laconic and eloquent, random and ordered, calculated and imprecise, mindless and educated, spontaneous and deliberate. This lack of consistency complicates any attempt at simple synopsis, and clues us to the complexity of the artist's work. It also reveals the importance of grounding interpretation on observation. Too often, casual commentators fail to establish how Twombly's particular artistic processes support one account of meaning over another.

Twombly's most common technical procedure—making graphite or wax-crayon marks into wet paint, and then often effacing these marks with additional coats of paint—results in a physical layering of the surface which seems to both reveal and conceal his cryptic autography. That autography itself tantalizes viewers because it sometimes seems to verge on legibility, yet often remains an indecipherable scrawl. Various scholars have expressed frustration over precisely this aspect of the artist's style. Linda Norden exclaimed that his work was "maddening, because we want to *read* these images and can't."<sup>4</sup> Margaret Sheffield similarly noted that Twombly's numbers and words "only have a 'look' of intelligibility."<sup>5</sup> The artist's technique literally covers up previous markings; it also metaphorically veils or blots out meaning.

The paintings require the viewer to consider Twombly's idiosyncratic script without actually reading anything. Messages seem in need of excavation; they are hidden under paint-covered patches layered over and distributed across the surfaces of his canvases, momentarily obscured or scattered but potentially recoverable.

Denied the authoritative voice to which they might otherwise refer their evaluations, some writers abandon analysis and turn to poetic rumination on the supposedly ineffable qualities of Twombly's art. Of the 1955 painting *Panorama* [TR23], the artist's close friend, editor, and author Heiner Bastian wrote:

Whence comes this light we cannot tell. Is it a bright reflection of night's cipher, an immaterial inscription that cannot fade? ... *Panorama* is as much a landscape of light as it is a passage from a breathless unending colloquy unable to fall silent as it first speaks through us ... It is poetry written, as it were, upon the melancholy of the night sky.<sup>6</sup>

Suggestive because effusive, these attempts are generally as intimidating as they are indeterminate. Perhaps in the hope of fascinating those who may not necessarily have viewed the art itself, writers indulge in a style of literary expressiveness to create their own poetry about Twombly—a rhetorical equivalent of what they take to be the artist's lofty sensibilities. Generous readers might excuse such loquaciousness, since poetry and myth do indeed constitute a central theme in Twombly. Retrospectively, erudite poetic treatments would seem to be appropriate, even necessary. To others, notably the critic Peter Schjeldahl, that approach is explicitly impertinent, “inauthentic, smarmy, self-hypnotized nostalgia.”<sup>7</sup> Regardless of what might be its cosmetic appeal, the *belle-lettrist* mode of description frequently mystifies Twombly's work, and contributes to a mythology of art and artist that downplays, when it does not overtly ignore, the material specificity of his canvases as well as the contexts of their creation.



## ■ History and Surfaces

Although it is somewhat of a cliché, Twombly is considered by admirers to be a “painter’s painter.” His work appeals profoundly to other artists similarly concerned to discover their art, and themselves, through investigating the possibilities of expression latent in the physical properties of various media and in the conventions by which those materials are made into valid artistic statements. At the same time, Twombly’s apparently bold grip on the great cultural themes embodied in history, myth, and poetry inspire the faith that art is central to a continuing effort to represent, for those in the present, the experience of human life within the context of a meaningful heritage. Undaunted by cynics who periodically declare the “death of painting,” the painter’s personal commitment to renovating aesthetic experience in the face of its perceived degradation continues to serve as a model for like-minded idealists. In a panel discussion on the occasion of Twombly’s retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1994, the Italian artist Francesco Clemente put it this way: Twombly, he said, transformed history and tradition into a vital resource, making it “happen again, making it alive” for artists seeking solutions to social and political impasse.<sup>8</sup>

Others think Twombly’s art evinces not a rejuvenation of the classical humanist tradition, but rather contemporary culture’s ironic distance from it. Consider his 1957 treatment of [Olympia](#) [TR31]. Surely a reference to Édouard Manet’s iconic 1863 painting of the same name, Twombly’s painting appears its abstract twin. A number of widely dispersed pictographic butterflies, hearts, and schematic body-parts float on an otherwise bare surface. The name “OLYMPIA” is clearly legible, albeit presented in a child-like scrawl; above it, just to the right of center, the word “MORTE” (death) is wedged next to what looks like the crude sketch of an erect penis entering a vagina (the double heart shape careening toward the right corner of the picture).<sup>9</sup> Given the emerging motif, the juxtaposition of text with a diagram of joined sex

organs begins to evoke the complex psychosexual overlap of death and orgasm, captured by the French euphemism for the latter, *la petite mort* (the little death). Manet's painting implicitly stages a transaction of sex for money, reducing the status of Olympia from goddess to prostitute (and violating bourgeois decorum in the process). Note that the capitalized word "FUCK" is visible to the left of Twombly's rendering of Olympia's name, as if ordering us to perform an act, or else instructing us to reject the modern tradition of Manet—once avant-garde, to be sure, but no longer so.<sup>10</sup> But what is Twombly up to? Is this homage? Or mockery? Probably both. He seems to relish and emulate Manet's strategy of degrading classical traditions of representation, yet resolutely sets even modern traditions in his sights.

*Olympia* provides a good instance of Twombly's engagement with art history, and relies on the viewer's familiarity with certain key moments in that history. But another rewarding way to appreciate Twombly's achievements is to keenly scrutinize the particular material features of his works, and to attend to the processes by which a canvas surface is painted and marked or a sculpted mass formed. To many viewers, his technique seems at first to amount to little more than random scribbling. On closer inspection, Twombly's surfaces invariably reveal a more complex manufacture, involving his fastidious, even obsessive, engagements with physical materials and the various ways their actual properties can be manipulated in the service of virtual ends. This is not to suggest that Twombly's paintings are ultimately best understood within a framework of control and order. It is merely to assert that *how* his surfaces are marked is of utmost importance in our interpretation of the artist's meaning.

Consider a small but revealing example from 1957: the Menil Collection's [Untitled](#) [CR:I 87] is a nearly square canvas covered with *cementito*, a thick but viscous oil-based house paint (in the provided hyperlink, the work I refer to is the smallest one visible). Although highly textured with flows, drips, and nodes of paint, the surface also carries a few eye-catching touches of red. Most of these colored marks

appear as scribbles *beneath* the *cementito*. But at the top edge, just left of center, Twombly drew two short lines *into* the still-wet ground (creating small ridges along the length of the incised pencil strokes). And one red-pencil dash appears definitely marked *on top of* the white ground. Thus, even in a seemingly “empty” canvas, there is a complex sequence of marking and covering that is a hallmark of much of Twombly’s work. Surfaces are everything.

## 2

### ACHIEVING DIRECTNESS

Edwin Parker Twombly, Jr. was born on April 25, 1928 in Lexington, Virginia, where his father, Edwin Sr., and his mother, Mary, had moved from New England. A swimming coach at Washington and Lee University and former professional baseball player, Twombly's father nicknamed his son "Cy" after the legendary pitcher Denton True ("The Cyclone") Young. The boy's upbringing combined periodic exposure to northeastern culture with the daily experience of living in the American south, a heritage that developed in him a sensibility both refined and romantic, qualities that critics later recognized in his art.

Twombly's artistic interests were revealed at a relatively young age, when, in 1940, at just twelve years old, he copied Pablo Picasso's portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter from the cover of Jean Cassou's 1937 monograph on the Spanish artist. Two years later, the boy began taking painting classes with Pierre Daura, another Spaniard who had fled to Paris during the Spanish Civil War. Profoundly affected by the vision and sense of purpose he discovered in modern art (the history of which he avidly pursued in books such as Sheldon Cheney's famous 1924 tract, *A Primer of Modern Art*), Twombly began his formal training at the Boston Museum School in 1947. Known for emphasizing German Expressionism, the school nourished Twombly's enthusiasm for figurative and expressionist Northern European art, as opposed to the School of Paris abstraction championed by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Twombly's admiration for artists such as Chaïm Soutine, Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, and Max Beckmann—the latter two of whom visited Twombly's school while he was there—augmented his attraction to the Dada-like collages of Kurt Schwitters,

the Surrealist sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, and the gritty paintings of Jean Dubuffet.

After two years in Boston, Twombly enrolled in the art program at Washington and Lee University, where his teacher, Marion Junkin, encouraged him to attend the Art Students League in New York. Upon his move to the city in 1950, the young artist began absorbing first-hand an exhilarating range of art in museums and galleries, especially the contemporary work of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. Perhaps most importantly, the Art Students League brought Twombly into contact with Robert Rauschenberg, another student and the first person close to Twombly's own age to share his commitment to art. The relationship between them strengthened in the summer of 1951 and winter of 1952, when, at the instigation of Rauschenberg, they both attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina. There, Twombly met various individuals who would in retrospect appear to be crucial influences, including Motherwell, Kline, the composer John Cage, and the magnetic poet Charles Olson.

### ■ Early Intuitions

Twombly's earliest works are characterized by their small to medium format, monochromatic palette, thickly encrusted surfaces, and basic imagery. "I'm drawn to the primitive, the ritual and fetish elements, to the symmetrical plastic order," he wrote in a 1952 travel fellowship application. Although based on pieces of ancient Iranian metalwork known as Luristan bronzes, the paintings he began making in the summer of 1951 at Black Mountain—such as the monochromatic paintings *Myo*, *Didim* [TRFig.6], *MIN-OE* [TR3], and *Untitled* [TRFig.7], all made with tar and industrial paint—convey a colossal force that belies their diminutive origins.<sup>11</sup> Each image shows a nearly symmetrical white figure comprising two massive bulbs, touching tangentially. Thick lines attached to them serve to transform the shapes into totems,

or perhaps creaturely bodies, that are simultaneously set on top of and encrusted into a dark ground. The tense combination of virtual, iconic imagery with substantial, weighty surfaces yields an immediate visual presentation that approximates a physical impact. Motherwell, in a short statement written for Twombly's first solo show at the Seven Stairs Gallery in Chicago in 1951 (where *Untitled* was shown), drew attention to this characteristic feature of Twombly's early works, as well as to the "fetishes half-buried in his violent surface[s]."<sup>12</sup> Observant viewers might also have connected Twombly's crumbling surfaces to the photographs of decaying urban walls by [Aaron Siskind](#) (who had arranged the show after meeting Twombly at Black Mountain), as well as with Dubuffet's paintings. More proximately, the stark black-and-white paintings by Kline, Motherwell, and de Kooning provided Twombly with models of raw visual force. So did the poetry of Charles Olson, who became an exemplary model for the kind of direct, physical address Twombly evidently aspired to in his own painting.

### ■ Charles Olson's Theory of Poetry

Olson (1910–1970) was the rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 until the school's closing in 1956. A charismatic and imposing presence, his embodied approach to poetry helps us understand Twombly's earliest ideas about what the artist called "simple directness" in painting. While the painter's later concern with particular poets—such as John Keats, Paul Valéry, Arthur Rimbaud, and Rainer Maria Rilke—has led scholars to interpret Twombly's work in reference to Romantic and Symbolist legacies, Olson's American, pragmatic, and embodied approach to poetry might help us fathom Twombly's earliest ideas about poetic language.

Olson belonged to a group of American poets whose commitment to vernacular language contrasted sharply with what they took to be the over-intellectualized poetry of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens (the loose affiliation included John Ashbury, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley,

and Robert Duncan). For them, the figures William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound pointed the way to a more direct poetic form. The new poetry would use language “concretely,” nourishing the inherent evocative power of words without relying on outworn devices of symbolism and allegory. Williams, for example, expressed his desire to “wipe soiled words clean” of the meanings society had imposed on them. The result would be more valid, honest, and authentic. A parallel to Olson’s ideas in the visual arts is found in Jasper Johns’s encaustic paintings of targets and flags, which due to their obviously hand-made quality—painstakingly put together with pieces of newspaper print dipped in encaustic and painted—seem to objectify and interrogate the “symbolic” meaning of the American flag. Merce Cunningham’s choreography of everyday movements in dance manifests similar concerns.

Olson also theorized that the rhetorical means of poetry—syllables, words, lines—contained inherent physical energies that it was the task of the poet to liberate. In a 1950 essay called “Projective Verse,” he argued that “open composition,” in contrast to traditional closed verse, more effectively transferred kinetic energy to the reader. Projective verse recognized the physicality of poetry, which would henceforth be based on certain “possibilities of breath.” He wrote: “Because breath allows all the speech force of language back in (speech is the ‘solid’ of verse, is the secret of a poem’s energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as [real].”<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of 1952, Olson wrote a short statement for an exhibition Twombly had planned at Washington and Lee University (the show was never held). In it, he extolled the artist’s “accurate penetration of the reality bearing in on us.”<sup>14</sup> Olson must have seen in Twombly’s art a visual analogue to his own poetry, and clearly his admirer—although working in a different medium—internalized aspects of Olson’s thought as a means to articulate his own goals.

## ■ Broadening Horizons

Twombly's immersion in Black Mountain's creative environment—one constituted as much by avant-garde experimentation as by exciting personal connections and professional opportunities—immediately preceded his first show in New York, sponsored by Motherwell and held at the Sam Kootz gallery. Two opposed responses met the show. The paintings were seen either as “grimy” or “graceful,” a dichotomy that roughly corresponds to the two ways various critics would categorize Twombly's work over the course of his career.<sup>15</sup> Not long after the show closed, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts awarded Twombly a travel fellowship, enabling him to embark for Europe. He did so, with Rauschenberg as a companion, in the summer of 1952, making his way south through Italy to Rome, then moving on to the Moroccan cities of Casablanca, Marrakech, Tetuán, and Tangier (where he made some large abstract tapestries later exhibited in Rome and Florence). He returned to Italy via Spain in early 1953, and finally reached the United States in May.

Back in New York, Rauschenberg and Twombly shared a studio on Fulton Street. There, Twombly produced a number of large paintings (some over six feet wide) which were based on sketches he had made in Rome of tribal objects on display at the Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography. The new works were featured in a joint show with Rauschenberg at Eleanor Ward's new Stable Gallery in September 1953. Titles such as *Quarzazat* and *Tiznit* [TR11] demonstrate, as we might expect of a student of Olson's poetry, Twombly's attraction to the suggestive sonority of words—in this case names of North African villages. His utilization of the most basic materials for expressive ends (house paint, wax crayon, white lead, and lead pencil on canvas), and a technique that simultaneously scores the surface with incisions and covers it over with paint, reveals a preference that governs his entire body of work. *Volubilus* (1953) [TR14] is characteristic. It transfers and monumentalizes parts of sketches,



transforming whatever might be the forms' empirical referents (fetish objects, vernacular architecture such as huts or kilns, funerary monuments that were photographed by Rauschenberg on the trip) into animated, interacting creatures bristling with electric energy. Yet, obviously, identifying the objects Twombly drew is not the point. Our attempts to discover the painting's original models must be considered secondary to gauging Twombly's success in making a surface that, in its striking imagery and complex texture, retains the immediacy and directness of a powerfully symbolic object. The critics, however, were not impressed—particularly James Fitzsimmons, who lambasted the “pre-kindergarten” graffiti of Twombly’s “tottering, crudely fashioned spikes or totems” as conveying nothing more than “the feeling content of ... ugliness: [of] shrillness, conflict, and cruelty.”<sup>16</sup>

### ■ Primitivism

By his own admission, Twombly was “drawn to the primitive, the ritual and fetish elements” as resources for his work.<sup>17</sup> Numerous sources could have stimulated that interest: not only had a fascination with the assumed authenticity and virtue of primitive life and art pervaded the history of modern culture, but also, more specifically, the Abstract Expressionists routinely invoked the primitive as a key to understanding their art. Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman famously declared, “[W]e profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.”<sup>18</sup> Olson himself held an enthusiasm for the archaeology of the ancient Maya. To both the poet and painters, primitive art seemed to exhibit a unity of experience that contemporary culture had lost. According to the art historian Michael Leja, the Abstract Expressionists felt that primitive art “expressed in a universal language essential truths about human experience.”<sup>19</sup>

Twombly was not immune to these assumptions, nor to the power and energy he felt such forms might convey to a modern audience. In 1950 he wrote: “I’ve been interested in the primitive art of the

American Indian—of Mexico and Africa. So much art looks affected and tired after seeing the expressive simple directness of their work.”<sup>20</sup> Twombly considered the cave paintings at Lascaux, discovered in 1946, to be “the first great art of Western civilization.”<sup>21</sup> By appropriating forms from primitive cultures, Twombly believed his art would become more authentic, concentrated, and “directly” meaningful.

### ■ Automatism and Materiality

In late 1953, the United States Army drafted Twombly into military service and trained him as a cryptographer (he served from late autumn 1953 to August 1954). On what must have been unconventional weekends for a military recruit, he rented a hotel room in Augusta, Georgia, and experimented with drawing automatically in the dark. That Surrealist-inspired procedure was cultivated to counter ingrained habits of mark-making and the facility of drawing that usually comes with controlled practice, and had been deployed widely in the Abstract Expressionist milieu. The results of Twombly’s attempts constituted a noticeable departure from his ethnographic drawings and paintings. He abandoned the desiccated, spiky, crude shapes of those earlier works in preference for continuous linear stretches, circuitous lines almost narrative in their temporal associations. In the paintings from this period, attenuated biomorphs—worm or snake-like creatures—seem to probe blindly for the edges of the paper, gushing scribbly discharges from their ends. Schematic renderings of butterfly figure-eights, like breasts or buttocks, marked at center with heavy pencil dots like holes or orifices, suggest an erogenous anatomy seeking and finding sexual release. In *Untitled (1954)* [TR19], a thick phallic protuberance growing from the lower right edge spouts a thinner member that reaches up to the top edge before curling back in on itself; in *Untitled (1954)* [TR17], an uncircumcised penis edges its way into the field from the lower right, making erotic contact with other lines and dots along the way. It is as if Twombly wants to string along

the eyes' voyeuristic probing in order to excite a kinesthesia of bodily desire.

Dry and obdurate, the mottled surfaces of works such as these suggest a desiccated topographic space within which serpentine lines meander. The new labyrinthine paintings also exhibit Twombly's attempt to make pictures that express something like the medium's stubborn materiality. His lines "struggl[e] for survival," according to the poet Frank O'Hara (the metaphor evokes the image of aggressive vines coiling to the top of a tree for sunlight, strangling and killing the tree in the process).<sup>22</sup> Multiple and finely adjusted procedures of covering, inscribing, and marking sustain visual (or optic) interest while simultaneously evoking our tactile (or haptic) awareness of a palpable surface density. Look, for instance, at the lower left corner of [Untitled \(1954\)](#) [TR19]. Here, barely visible passages of black have been veiled with a wash of thinned house paint, over which a more bodily, viscous paint has been applied. Somewhat browned over time, this amorphous passage was marked with a red wax crayon, inscribing it with color. Yet another layer of gummy paint was then added. Finally, elliptical impressions, made with fingertips, drag and smear some lead marks through the zone. The ensemble appears spontaneous, but that appearance belies the complexity of Twombly's technique, which involves many disparate procedures of marking and covering. Eye-catching imagery there surely is, but paint is also present physically as sheer stuff.

Another instance of Twombly's deployment of complex mark-making procedures to generate intricate yet enticing visual phenomena with a quite limited range of means is evident in the Broad Collection's [Untitled \(1955\)](#). The painting certainly does not lend itself to simple visual description. There is no figurative imagery here, although the two areas repeatedly marked by elliptical scribbles—the tumbleweeds are not exactly *shapes*—do establish a tenuous relationship between "figure" and "ground." At the same time, the graffiti-like script is evidently marked *into* an already-layered surface, since ridges of white

house paint have been formed by the pencil lead being moved through the wet ground, yielding a surface that appears at once wall-like and atmospheric. A detail, barely noticeable in reproduction, will suffice to give an indication of this complexity. Very near the left framing edge of the canvas, just below a series of near-vertical lines which seem emphatically to acknowledge and reiterate the limit of the canvas, a small square shape is visible. Yet close visual inspection reveals that two, or perhaps three, of the sides of this square have been made at different times. Look, for instance, at the left side of the square: it appears as a line glimpsed through the veil of overpainting, and thus must have been made close to the initial stages of the painting. The top edge of the square seems to have come second; it is obscured by some subsequently painted loops. The most perplexing sides are at the right and bottom. They appear as narrow grooves inscribed into the painted ground, as if with the pointed handle of a small paint brush. These slender channels were subsequently marked with pencil. The bottom edge, particularly, appears as a quasi-dashed line: only sections of the continuous groove are marked with pencil, suggesting that in order to make this single line Twombly engaged in two distinct procedures: first inscribing, then marking. (The sequencing is made all the more complex by three or four loops impressed within the square by a small brush or fingertips; this seems to have taken place between the inscription and the marking. Indeed, those loops divide up the inscribed line into the parts that Twombly marked with dashes.) That is to say, what viewers might now identify as the “square” is the happenstance result of some reiterative procedure, a fortuitous constellation of “sides” made at discrete intervals. At some point, Twombly must have noticed that his lines were beginning to make a box, and chosen to enclose it. It is as if the material process had prompted him to realize a previously unrecognized intention to articulate the field with a “shape” by marking it in just such a manner.

Twombly was drawn to surfaces that possessed an aura of age (it formed a complement to his interest in the putative “timelessness”

of primitive art). In an application for a fellowship in 1956, the artist wrote, “Generally speaking my art has evolved out of the interest in ... a deeply aesthetic sense of eroded or ancient surfaces of time.”<sup>23</sup> Twombly’s canvases of the 1950s are heavily worked, and thus present to our view an insistently tactile quality. They appear naturally aged or corroded through extended exposure to the elements. By treating the canvas surface as the site of natural processes such as erosion or abrasion—or, concomitantly, accretion—Twombly lets “nature” enter the realm of art as a palpable process of production and degradation, not merely as an image to be copied and represented. In the words of John Cage (paraphrasing the Indian scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy), Twombly’s art has become “the imitation of nature in her manner of operation.”<sup>24</sup>

### 3

## EXPANDING THE FRAME

The first half of the 1950s found Twombly responding energetically to the stimulating influences he encountered during his student years, and actively exploring his own independent artistic vision. The rate of transition between one style and the next was swift: in barely four years he went from the Franz Kline-like paintings of *Black Mountain*, with their architectonic and archaic monumentality; to the primitive surfaces and fetish forms inspired by his European and African sojourns; to the probing and sometimes delicate linearity of the paintings done after the blind drawings produced in Augusta; to the sculptures that infuse everyday objects or junk material with a static and funereal gravity, such as *Untitled* (1953) [TR7] and *Untitled* (c.1955) [TR25].

Equally important and rapid developments occupied the second half of the decade. Photographs taken in 1954 and 1955 by Rauschenberg in the Fulton Street studio show Twombly posing with some of his works. The images document a series of six to eight paintings on dark grounds, sadly no longer extant. Just one painting survives, *Panorama* (1955) [TR23]. Upon an expansive, mottled, dark-gray surface, frenetic marks made with white wax crayon and chalk create an all-over tangle of staccato lines and rudimentary pictograms. The image gives the impression of a rebus-like legibility while remaining inscrutable. (Perhaps it is significant to note that Rauschenberg's painting of the same year, *Rebus*, features an upside-down drawing by Twombly just below and to the left of center, and similarly confounds conventional readability.) *Panorama*'s vast size—over eight by twelve feet—merits comparison with the all-over paintings of Jackson Pollock. Yet there are noticeable differences. Kirk Varnedoe has astutely noted:

The evidence of process [in Twombly's picture] tells of insistently discontinuous, programmatically repeated passages with the chalk stick, yielding none of the liquid, variegated, organic webbing of [Pollock's] poured paintings ... The wholeness of Pollock's dense, explosive clouds of energy is replaced by a dispersed, jumpily nervous electricity, as the local structures of both drawing and writing seem continually to pull and tug at the cumulative abstract palimpsest.<sup>25</sup>

From early 1955 to spring 1956, Twombly taught at Southern Seminary and Junior College in Virginia. During the summer of 1955, he travelled to New York, where he painted [Criticism](#) [TR27], [Free Wheeler](#) [TR29], [The Geeks](#) [TR26], and [Academy](#) [TR30]. (Scroll down the hyperlinked page for the relevant images.) Twombly chose the titles from a list he compiled with Rauschenberg and Johns, and although he assigned them randomly, the names conjure associations of a narrative kind. Indeed, in these works some of his signature graphic marks repeat themselves from canvas to canvas, as if Twombly is duplicating the standard units of an idiosyncratic language—yet one that hints at its possible legibility and therefore evokes something like a quasi-public meaning. For instance, a series of parallel lines struck through with diagonals signals counting; a rudimentary box bisected horizontally and vertically becomes a window that appears in roughly the same place in all four canvases. Lines and curves become letters (X, H, F, K, A, L, C, E, U, V) that either approximate, or are, words (such as at the center bottom edge of *Academy*).

Although exhibited at the Stable Gallery in 1956, these works, along with *Panorama*, garnered no critical response until 1957. When that response came, it was not adulatory. *Arts Magazine* reviewer Martica Sawin was particularly offended, seeing in Twombly's "seismographic record" nothing more than "material for the graphologist's examination." She concluded that only the "utmost egotism" would consider such non-artistic statements to be meaningful

communication.<sup>26</sup> Negatively comparing Twombly to Pollock, another reviewer saw a “painful autobiography” that terminated in “utter nihilism.”<sup>27</sup> But if considered more judiciously, these canvases do seem to be making a point—albeit not one we should expect to *read* (as if the painting was supposed to deliver the kind of formulaic messages entrenched in most forms of contemporary mass media). Perhaps we are meant to attend to the tension Twombly institutes between our yearning for communication, and the almost lacerating viciousness of marks that prevent us from feeling it can take place. More speculatively, one might propose that Twombly’s effort to suggest—only to frustrate—legibility is his means of analogizing the psychological experience of a subject living under conditions of modernity; his means, in other words, of representing the type of fragmented consciousness that is often presumed to be characteristic of the modern individual.

### ■ Italian Sojourn

Energized by his travels to Europe, the artist returned in the spring of 1957 to Italy at the invitation of a childhood friend, Betty Stokes. While in New York, he had befriended the Italian painter Conrad Marca-Relli through Eleanor Ward, their mutual gallerist, and had the chance to meet many others, including Afro, Piero Dorazio, and Toti Scialoja. Supported by Ward, he could now pursue more lasting relationships with Roman artists and gallerists. That summer, he found himself for an extended period the guest of Stokes and her husband, a Venetian count, in Grottaferrata (on the outskirts of Rome) and on the island of Procida (in the Bay of Naples), where he produced drawings and paintings. Perhaps most auspiciously, he met Giorgio Franchetti, a patron of the arts from an aristocratic Italian family, and his sister, Tatiana, a portrait painter, whom Twombly would marry in 1959.

Thus, a new network of fulfilling personal and professional relationships coalesced for Twombly during the late 1950s, just when



younger Italian artists became especially interested in modern American art. Indeed, Franchetti was instrumental in convincing Plinio de Martiis, the somewhat conservative owner of the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome, to showcase progressive young artists like Twombly. By the end of the decade, Martiis's gallery, with Franchetti's financial backing, had become a central outlet for emerging talent. Newly established journals such as *Arti visive* and *L'Esperienza moderna* gave voice to proponents of abstraction. Twombly's only written statement about his art for a public audience appeared in the latter journal in 1957.

Although Twombly concerned himself little with complicated issues of postwar Italian art, it was within the broader context of aesthetic debates and art-market changes that his work was received, and so a brief discussion of those contexts might be useful in better understanding his growing international profile. The art historian Benjamin Buchloh has argued, convincingly I think, that Twombly's art should be interpreted with respect to what from one point of view appears to be the artist's contradictory, and perhaps compromised, effort to reconstruct something like a trans-historical culture in post-Fascist Italy, "at a moment when humanist legacies were disappearing," and in which the "rise of a monolithic American postwar consumer culture" seemed inevitable.<sup>28</sup> During that period, conversations in Italian art circles centered around what role contemporary artists should play in a wider social and political context. How could art be socially engaged without becoming mere propaganda? How could artists maintain their individual and aesthetic freedom while addressing pressing issues of the moment? At base were important issues regarding national identity and artistic regeneration in an international, postwar climate. Yet commonly, these discussions took the form of heated and polemical debates over style. Disputes between advocates of realism versus proponents of abstraction created a sharp divide between two broad factions. On the one hand, avant-garde artists who embraced the idea of aesthetic autonomy (the idea that art should be independent of overt political and ideological messages) championed

abstraction. On the other hand, the Italian Communist Party, following the lead of the policies instituted in the Soviet Union, emphasized the need for art's subservience to politics. What was required for the rejuvenation of culture, in their view, was art with clear, legible content. Stylistically, this meant realism. This cultural program created conditions in which younger Italian artists sympathetic to the abstraction of an international avant-garde felt increasingly isolated. Twombly's art seemed to point to a way out of the impasse.

Also in 1957, Twombly took a studio overlooking the Coliseum in Rome. There, he resumed painting larger canvases with a new material—*cementito*—often using a very restricted palette. The relatively even surfaces of works such as *Sunset*, *Olympia* [TR31], and *Blue Room* [TR33] appear less dryly encrusted than the preceding ones. While a palimpsest of marks and inscriptions continues to activate a play of scarred surface and neutral depth, the overall scattering and dispersal begins more emphatically to suggest a luminous and atmospheric sparseness. A diagonal drift from lower-left to upper-right appears, as if the pictorial elements have been wafted on a breeze. Simultaneously, simple graphic marks cluster and begin to form recognizable pictograms: sideways eights marked with scribbled dots at their crossings become butterflies with wings, or hearts, or parts of human anatomies. Lines become windows, graphs, letters, and words. In *L'Esperienza moderna*, Twombly offered his enigmatic thoughts about this new monochromatic work:

The reality of whiteness may exist in the duality of sensation (as the multiple anxiety of desire and fear). Whiteness can be the classic state of the intellect, or a neo-romantic area of remembrance—or as the symbolic whiteness of [the French poet Stéphane] Mallarmé. The exact implication may never be analyzed ... [but] one must desire the ultimate essence even if it is “contaminated.” Each line [in my work] now is the actual experience [of] ... a crucial moment of sensation or release

... with its own innate history. It does not illustrate—it is the sensation of its own realization.<sup>29</sup>

Whiteness is neither blankness nor emptiness. Perceiving Twombly's whiteness is simultaneously the occasion of mind's transparent self-reflection and of the body's sensate feeling. They are inseparable.

A solo show at La Tartaruga in May 1958 featured these canvases. For an Italian audience contemplating the meaning of art, freedom, and society in a post-Fascist climate, idiosyncratic and eccentric gestures of individual expression could not be allowed to trump clear demonstrations of social engagement. The novel contribution of Twombly to the situation of Italian art lay in the way his paintings seemed to mitigate purely subjectivist impulses—a danger identified with Abstract Expressionism. His personal graphic marks, which could appear to border on the neurotically obsessive and utterly private, somehow also seemed to address something like a general public sphere. In *Olympia*, the words “Olympia,” “Roma,” and “Morte” appear as graffiti, the anonymous but common language of the urban environment. Cesare Vivaldi recounted in 1961 that Twombly had “[a] way of approaching the canvas with the attitude of an action painter, but at the same time with such a shrewd charge of irony as to offset any melodrama[ti]c possibility, any danger of egotism and unbridled self-exaltation.”<sup>30</sup> The combination appealed to collectors in Milan, who bought every canvas when the show traveled there in November 1958. Twombly's success immediately preceded a six-month return to New York, where, in a flurry of events, he ended his contract with gallerist Eleanor Ward, opting to be represented instead by Leo Castelli (who had sponsored successful shows for both Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns), married Tatiana Franchetti, and produced a major cycle of paintings.

## ■ The Lexington Paintings

Anticipating a show in late 1959 at Castelli's gallery, Twombly rented a studio in Lexington in February and began work on a group of ten large canvases. All of them untitled, it is expedient to call them the "Lexington paintings" (see [TR36], [TR37], and [TR41]). In a letter to Castelli concerning which paintings would be included in the exhibition, Twombly asserted the coherence of the group by advocating their display as an exclusive set. He resisted Castelli's suggestion of showing additional oil paintings alongside them, explaining "I like the image of seeing just the paintings you have with a few drawings ... The new [works] are naturally more active and physical so a certain poetry would be lost with juxtaposition with these."<sup>31</sup> Although the exhibition was postponed for a year, and ultimately excluded these particular canvases, the set indicates the trajectory of his ongoing development of his unique pictorial poetry. Rejecting conventional strategies of composition, eschewing all but the sparest use of color, and retreating from the densely marked surfaces of previous years, Twombly's paintings present the possibility of making art out of the barest minimum of means. As David Sylvester has noted, the painter's "insolent originality ... resides in an acute awareness of how little an artist can dare do in the course of creating great art ... Twombly does as little as possible."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps we are meant to see the effacement of personality as a challenge to the overblown rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, and as an attempt to facilitate a viewer's profound, if quiet, experience of "a crucial moment of sensation."

In their usual installation, five of the Lexington paintings surround a viewer in the Cy Twombly Gallery, a building designed by the architect Renzo Piano in close collaboration with the artist. (It opened in 1995.) The paintings' creamy white grounds suspend within their layers tiny marks of graphite and crayon. Twombly's irregular applications of paint (thick here, thin there) create patches of differential substance and sheen that give the canvases a variable

quality of surface and depth: more heavily painted areas seem to hover just in front of the surface of the painting; lightweight ones recede into an indeterminate spatial depth. The architectural envelope of Piano's building enhances the visual effect, where fluctuating intensities of natural light—filtered into the galleries through a glass-and-canvas ceiling—cause the paintings to appear to grow and shrink, their canvas surfaces to breathe, their dimensions to change in size and tone according to external conditions. The pictures flourish before a viewer's eyes.

What might we infer is happening here? Is there a subject? A theme? A narrative? If there are any pictorial "events," they are so unconventional—and so seemingly insignificant—that they escape categorization: as we look, we simply gather the scattered inscriptions of Twombly's graffiti-like squiggles, pseudo-writing, heart and figure-eight symbols, cloud-like doodles, sparse hatchings, window frames, and an occasional recognizable letter, signature, or date. The distribution of marks follows no apparent organizational principle (although Twombly's characteristic diagonal drift is increasingly prominent). As the French literary critic and philosopher Roland Barthes perceptively noted, "the materials seem to be thrown across the canvas, and to throw is an act in which are enshrined at the same time an initial decision and a final indetermination."<sup>33</sup> If there is any "direction," it is of a quirky, unregulated sort. Whatever patterns or tendencies we might discern in the Lexington group emerge artlessly, generated only by Twombly's unpredictable and additive responses to the material features of his developing surfaces. One thing happens after another, without necessary connections of cause and effect. Previous incidents, such as dried nodes of paint drips, simply attract later marks (or do not). Yet these "events" become spots of interest, motivating but not controlling Twombly's blooming affinities. He might return to them repeatedly, until an agglomeration of marks and drips becomes an autonomous pictorial constellation. The art historian Richard Shiff put it best: "an even distribution of nothing [has become] a charmed something." Here,

mere accident has been supplanted by a purposeful sense of things forming or coming together. A generative principle appears.

The literary description of visual art requires the writer to demarcate “marks” from “drips,” or “figures” and “grounds,” but in Twombly’s works these are indivisible. An organic notion, indivisibility suggests that Twombly’s paintings, like living organisms, cannot be split into parts. His surfaces are continuous with themselves. Reflexively emergent, they spontaneously germinate, like life itself. This is part of the poetic effect of Twombly’s environment: the promise of inevitable gathering and parting, of accretion and erosion, inherent in his process signifies to us the continuance of imperceptible change, the unmeasurable change of growth and decay, always non-incremental and analog. The layers of the palimpsest could either wear away, revealing contents underneath, or build up even more resolutely, hiding forever the strata of marks below. The Lexington paintings are surfaces that allow fortuitous inception but resist final completion, just as notions of nature and the self as continuous with change and becoming deny absolute beginnings and endings.

### ■ Immanent Departures

The Lexington group contrasts in both scale and effect with [Poems to the Sea](#), the intimate drawings Twombly made just after he returned to Italy in the summer of 1959 ([TRFig.24] and [TRFig.25]). Experimenting with oil paint squeezed directly from tubes, the drawings convey a sense of substantial physical materiality absent from the larger, atmospheric paintings. Grids, numbers, rows, ruled lines, and repeated geometric shapes evoke a system or rational plan. Still, the drawings are hardly rationalized, and when Twombly enlarged their basic formal strategies in [Study for Presence of a Myth](#) [TR45] and [View](#) [TR46], the result was an almost disconcerting conjunction of uncontrollable organic proliferation and the contradictory deployment of an arithmetic that tries (hopelessly) to compute it.

This dimension of Twombly's practice—its unsettling multiplication—communicates an urgency that climaxes in the last painting he made in 1959, *Age of Alexander* [TR47]. Slipping away from a family New Year's Eve party—a family that now included his son, Cyrus Alessandro, born two weeks before—Twombly went to work on a bolt of canvas nearly ten feet high and over sixteen feet in length. The result was a seemingly endless variation on a few basic, but now familiar, elements: numbers, letters, words, zig-zags, and pictograms such as hearts, buttocks, clouds, phalluses, vaginas, and breasts. Yve-Alain Bois has astutely noted that the sheer size of the canvas mismatches the miniature internal scale established by “myriad Lilliputian marks” that compel a viewer’s “myopic attention.”<sup>34</sup> The energy visible in Twombly’s obsessive effort testifies to a self wedded to time (note the inscription of that lived temporality near the right edge: “1959 into 1960”), and alludes to the psychological and emotional experiences that accompany any life. They are given written form here: “SAD FLIGHT”; “Why my heart in your birth DEATH for EVEN now”; “(Kill) (what)??”; “what wing can be held”; “FLOODS”; and, of course, “xALEXANDERx.” Twombly’s son’s name appears just to the left of the only major passage of paint, squeezed thickly from a tube, and marked with crimson crayon and black graphite. The passionate attempt to pictorially actualize the poignancy of such “crucial moment[s] of sensation or release” would reach baroque heights in the next few years.

## 4

### EXTRAVAGANT PAINTING

When they are seen as objects, paintings are blunt. They are, after all, usually pieces of cotton canvas stretched around a wooden frame and covered with particles of pigment suspended in a spreadable medium, like oil. Encountering those quadrants of fabric as *things* hanging on a wall—resisting their appeal as *art*—will invariably be dull compared to the sensations of quickened experience, to living feeling. Twombly attempted to reduce the difference: to make paintings that veritably transferred, to borrow a phrase from Jackson Pollock, “not an illustration [of experience], but the equivalent.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, he recognized that the “actual” realization of sensation (as he put it in his 1957 statement for *L’Esperienza moderna*) must be accomplished pictorially, as a matter of *art* and its modes of imaginative address—not one of reflex. The painting, as a work of art, is not the occasion for the stimulus of an automatic physical response, but rather is the special condition under which we as viewers are solicited by the artist to attend to the fictional order within which his expressive meaning is harbored and from which it might emerge. The kind of experience Twombly targeted, to judge by his work of the late 1950s and early 1960s, appears to have been one that encompassed a gamut of physical, psychological, and emotional states, from forceful agitation, to delicate rumination, to frenzied or anxious exuberance, to violence.

The last mentioned mode came to dominate Twombly’s output in the early 1960s. After moving into a seventeenth-century mansion close to the famous Farnese Palace in Rome, Twombly produced *A Murder of Passion* and *Crimes of Passion I and II* (all 1960). In each, titles placed high at center signpost the theme: violence driven by



sexual obsession. Nervously drawn pictograms of dismembered body parts advance a sadistic narrative (tellingly, Twombly originally dedicated *Crimes of Passion II* to the Marquis de Sade).<sup>36</sup> Less elite literary terrain is mapped by the motif's easy association with a whole genre of popular dime-store novels and *films noirs* of the 1950s (such as the 1957 *Crime of Passion* directed by Gerd Oswald and starring Barbara Stanwyck as murderer). Yet schematic diagrams of numbered steps or peaks, measured rectangles, and repetitive markings, such as Xs and parallel rows of scribbles, generate associations with the methodical or analytical, perhaps moderating the extremity of erotic psychosis.

Other compositions from 1960 inaugurate what would become Twombly's signature habit of delivering high cultural references via titles. *To Leonardo*, *School of Fontainebleau*, *Woodland Glade (to Poussin)*, *Garden of Sudden Delight (to Hieronymus Bosch)*, and *Study for School of Athens* all designate artists central to the European tradition. *Herodiade* alludes not only to a nineteenth-century opera based on a novella by Gustave Flaubert (which concerns the story of King Herod's passion for the dancer Salome and the beheading of John the Baptist), but also to a poem of the same name by the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé (and includes at the lower right of the picture the poet's line: "I have known the nakedness of my scattered dreams!") Yet the tenor of Twombly's references—are they reverent, or sardonic?—remains ambiguous (for instance, the artist once expressed that Raphael bored him).<sup>37</sup> These sophisticated invocations spark intellectual interest, and might even occasion knowing viewers to parade their superior erudition. Notwithstanding, Twombly winkingly reminds us not to indulge too readily in high-brow ostentation: he playfully delivers the references that would enable such displays as dirty, dumb graffiti.

## ■ Energy

When, in 1961, Twombly moved his studio from his home to rented rooms a few blocks away, he commenced the ambitious and epic *The Italians* [TR50] and *The First Part of the Return from Parnassus* [TR51]. An immediate change in direction is evident. While he maintained the peculiarities of his personal calligraphy as well as his characteristic ensemble of pictograms, a more liberal use of color and oil paint, sometimes applied directly with fingers, prefigures the lavishly corporeal productions of later that year, including *Triumph of Galatea* [TR48], *Bay of Naples* [TR55], *Empire of Flora* [TR53], and, finally, the five canvases known as the *Ferragosto* paintings (named after the summer holiday during which Twombly created them) [TR60] and [TR61]. Contrasts of visual elements like shape, size, color, and texture suggest more fundamental polarizations—between moderation and excess, for instance—but also between controlled reason and disobedient urges, activity and passivity, vitality gained and depleted. Look, for instance, at the triangle at center right in *Untitled* (1961) [CR:II 15]. Its form suggests accumulating energy, moving upwards from a stable base to climax at an apex. At the same time, the shape is paired with its formal antithesis. The tangle of smudges and lines just below and to the right of the triangle is the shape undone, formlessly inverted and dissipated.

A similar logic of inversion governs another *Untitled* (1961) [TR49], where a buoyant red heart struggles to maintain its suspension in the field of marks against a barrage of scatological degradation. As Giorgio Agamben notes, “every ascent is reversed and suspended, almost a threshold or caesura between an action and a non-action: [Twombly’s] falling beauty [is] the point of de-creation.”<sup>38</sup> The unstable combination of rising and falling vectors in both *Untitled* paintings further advances the theme of intensification and expenditure of energy. In each work, as the density of marks and the dynamism with which their surfaces were evidently painted increases from lower left to upper right, the viewer senses a driving upsurge. Yet that potency is immediately

compromised: the marks begin to cascade down in unruly arcs, fallen and “de-created.” Agamben’s declensional rhetoric captures Twombly’s entropic decomposition.

Indeed, this visual dualism of making and unmaking, doing and undoing, contributes to the challenge viewers have experienced in discerning conventional compositional strategies in Twombly’s canvases. Pierre Restany claimed that Twombly’s procedure of marking has “neither syntax nor logic, but quivers with life”; Cesare Vivaldi noted the artist’s “hysterical” graphic signs, that were “scrawled” with “enchanted fury”; Gillo Dorfles suggested that his surfaces cohere only as “strange constellations.”<sup>39</sup> In isolation, each of the five Ferragosto paintings supports such remarks. But together, it may be significant that certain patterns and preferences are evident. For instance, some shapes, particularly ovals and elongated ellipses, occur predominantly along the top, right, and lower edges. Relegated to these zones, the position of similar shapes in relation to the limits of each canvas becomes predictable. (Note, for example, the similar placement of the predominant phallic shapes at the bottom edges of [Ferragosto III, IV, and V](#).) Discerning such consistencies indicates that despite his apparently noncompositional results, Twombly is bound by certain embodied tendencies that, once we notice them, help us infer from the paintings’ repetitions a confirmation of our own corporeal and psychological regularities, perhaps of our subjective persistence through time.

The Broad museum’s [Untitled \(Rome\)](#) (1961) also reveals the characteristic dialectic of Twombly’s surfaces. Desiccated, thickly clumped oils, hand-pressed passages of color, and a battery of scratches and marks threaten to undermine coherent pictorial organization. While at first no principle of composition can be discerned which rules this melee, scrutiny exposes numerous pictorial elements that serve to establish, if not outright order, then at least a provisional sense of containment or framing. A large rectangular grid reiterates the left edge. On the right, a series of vertical scribbles, and a thin peach-

colored stain that drips nearly the whole length of the edge, reinforces it as a limit. Above, rosy circles (the now familiar iconography of the breast/buttocks pairing) conjoin with the artist's signature to create a strong horizontal that closes off the right upper corner. If painted matter seems to fall or cascade from that corner (note the ejaculation of pencil lead and blue wax crayon from the phallus just below Twombly's inscription), the descending flow is stopped formally, in part, by a scribbled arch (reiterated by a second, just to its right, in smudged brown) that shields the bottom edge from the tumbling and chaotic spill of the marks from above.

### ■ *Triumph of Galatea* (1961)

Consider my foregoing observations in light of the epic breadth of [The Triumph of Galatea](#) [TR48]. Confronting the large canvas, viewers are likely to experience visual overload: diverse touches, smears, marks, textures, and shapes jostle in an expanse nearly sixteen feet wide and ten feet high. A color palette of blood reds, fleshy pinks and peaches, excrement browns, and sunlight yellows intensifies the impact. The plethora confounds legibility, and initially short-circuits interpretation. Twombly makes a glorious mess of our senses and intellect as well as the surface.

Stains of an altogether bodily connotation soil the relative purity of the canvas surface. Look, for instance, just below the upper right edge, where Twombly painted with his fingertips two pink circles, and conjoined them roughly to suggest breasts or buttocks. If they are breasts, then highlights of white near their pronounced centers (nipples?) suggest lactation; if buttocks, then the conspicuous brown turds of thick paint just below, applied directly from a tube, suggest excretion. (Perhaps it is relevant that Twombly painted this work soon after the birth of his son, Alessandro, whose spontaneous discharges, along with his regular need for sustenance from his mother, would likely have preoccupied the young father.)

An infantile corporeality pervades this picture. At the same time, the insistent repetition of phalluses across the surface insinuates a kind of adult psychological fixation on orgiastic sexuality. Along the left edge a flaccid one, overpainted in an aluminum gray, hangs downward; to its right, about two feet from the bottom edge, one points decidedly to the right. Along the lower edge, four or five straight or curved members crane upwards. The ground itself is stirred, both visually and metaphorically: three or four nodes (testicles? breasts?) transform a passage near the top edge into a monstrous sack, from which enthusiastically protrudes a large phallus containing the last letters of the word “Parnassus,” the mountain sacred to Apollo. The form surges uncontrollably toward the organs or orifice of a breast/buttocks pairing to its right.

Aroused by the picture’s materials, if not by its imagery, the viewer experiences a characteristic mapping of visual and somatic pleasures. Psychoanalytically, it is enjoyable to look (especially at parts of the body that are usually hidden), just as there is a natal satisfaction in feeling the body’s secretion of waste (it is an infant’s form of making, an activity that becomes social productivity in the adult). Still, pleasure may be accompanied by disgust, experienced as an imperative to turn away—or else as an almost repulsive desire to inventory, in all its details, the iconography of the picture’s scatology. Kirk Varnedoe aptly noted that this painting “conjure[s] not just the surface of the body but its interior, rapturously disgorged.”

As *Triumph of Galatea* and other paintings of the period demonstrate, the significance of Twombly’s noncompositional “compositions” lies in part in the associations of fluidity, dynamism, energy, and passion they evoke. At the same time, perhaps, their significance can be traced to themes that had long occupied the artist: namely, his desire to “realize” sensation. His facility at keeping things moving, of generating eccentric, even idiosyncratic, ways of ordering a picture, helped him accomplish the task. Yet again, Varnedoe is the best guide: “Through the insistently episodic, uncomposed sequences

of marks and signs and names he put on the canvas ... [Twombly] resisted any structure of narrative organization that ... threatened [the painting's] moment-to-moment specificity."<sup>40</sup> Seeing and sensing coincide.

### ■ Medium and Reference

The productive tension between Twombly's high cultural and literary allusions (the realm of the intellect), and the physical properties of his canvases (the terrain of touch and feeling, in both making and viewing), has contributed to some interpretative confusion. Is his art about the medium, or his references? Should we attune ourselves to the specific qualities of the picture surface, or should we instead explicate his mythological, historical, and poetic citations? Roland Barthes, who wrote an essay on the artist in 1979, drew attention to this problem, describing Twombly's ability to intensify the materiality of the medium, to handle his materials so that they "remain as 'things,' as stubborn substances whose obstinacy in 'being there' nothing ... can destroy."<sup>41</sup> So emphatically does the artist make "materials exist as matter," that even when he does inscribe a name or phrase onto the canvas to suggest a subject or theme (as in *Bay of Naples* and *Empire of Flora*), it often fails in Barthes' eyes sufficiently to ground the imagery (it doesn't *look* like the Bay of Naples, after all). The physical surface is too insistent. "Contaminated" materiality trumps "classical" learning.

*Hyperion (to Keats)* (1962) is dedicated to John Keats, the English Romantic poet who died in Rome in 1821 (in his home at the base of the Spanish Steps, less than a mile from Twombly's studio). Just before his death, Keats had abandoned his epic *Hyperion*, a poem inspired by the tale of the usurpation of Olympus by the Titans, and their subsequent defeat by Jupiter. The name "Hyperion" also refers to a Titan and sun-god who was often conflated with his son, Helios. Given Twombly's admission that he identified with Apollo—a son of Jupiter and the god of youth, music, creativity, prophecy, and, of course, light—the painting

accumulates layers of cultural and personal reference that resonate in the imagination. Still, when *looking* at the painting (not thinking about its citations), viewers will be drawn to the specificity of the image by the insistence of Twombly's mark-making. Note, for instance, the fastidious way he develops an ensemble of marks that, taken together, become a significant pictorial event. Seven inches to the left of dead center, Twombly firmly made a fingerprint, pristine enough for us to see the ridges and hollows of what appears to be his thumb. He then drew a box around the digital impression with red wax crayon. But note *how* he rendered the box: instead of beginning at a point, then drawing a continuous line that he angled by ninety degrees to make each corner, he fitted together an "L" shape and an inverted "L" to create a rectangle comprising two separate joints, forcibly conjoined. Why make things difficult? Self-interference seems to be the rule of Twombly's "habits."

From one point of view, Twombly's neurotic doodling seems ill-fitted to handle the exalted histories to which he is constantly drawn. (If it is not already perfectly clear, let me stress that the sense of neurotic fixation that his repetitive scribbling sometimes seems to convey has nothing whatsoever to do with Twombly's actual mental state, but everything to do with the techniques by which he realized his sophisticated intentions.) Consider his 1964 triptych, *Ilium (One Morning Ten Years Later, Part I)* [TRFig.45]. The putative subject of the three paintings is captivating: Ilium is a name for Troy, and the paintings refer to the ten-year period during which the Greek forces under Agamemnon battled the Trojans, finally overcoming them through the ruse of the wooden horse, and allowing only Aeneas to escape and find a new home in Italy. How can a surface of ideographic graffiti and illegible scrawls capture the weighty import of the legend? Look at the winged heart/phallus at lower center, to the right of the signature. Just above it, slightly to the left, there is a short stub angled by a straight line. A viewer can reconstruct at least four procedures in making this complex mark: (1) first, an underpaint of beige mixed with crimson is (2) drawn over wet with pencil; (3)

then parts of that inscribed graphic line are elaborated by a crimson crayon; and (4) a final smudge is dragged over the apex of the stubby arc with a finger or brush, pulling both lead and wax crayon with it. Admittedly, it seems out of proportion—even perverse—to attend to such passages as offering us a “key” to Twombly’s representation of the Greek myth. At the same time, the micromanagement testifies, perhaps, to the personal relationship a certain type of modern subject can have to such a past. It is as if what the viewer sees is the record of Twombly’s own private encounter with the classical humanist past, an imaginative “witnessing” of that legacy informed by, and filtered through, images and memories gleaned not only from his erudite study of poetry, philosophy, and history, but also from his wide travels and residence in Italy (the setting of the culmination of the story). In short, what the viewer sees is an individual’s response to a public myth, a “history” that is idiosyncratically coded but that—because it is shared through a convention of easel painting—nonetheless speaks to a wider audience about the conditions of myth’s persistence in the modern world (at least, its persistence for an individual who occupies a particular class position).

That Twombly consistently complicates the creation of marks is a characteristic feature of his practice. In the Menil Collection’s [\*Notes from a Tower in a Northern Climate\*](#), a drawing from 1966, the artist again demonstrates his proclivity for self-interference: at the center of the drawing appears a window frame drawn in red pen. At midpoints along the left and top edges, and again at the lower right corner, Twombly pressed the pen tip so hard that it deeply indented the paper, creating disruptive stoppages along what would otherwise be a simple shape. His ‘habit’ of drawing is anything but habitual: opposed to ease and speed, he makes it hard for himself. In doing so, details of Twombly’s point-by-point, line-by-line, and mark-by-mark pictorial construction gathers significance against the odds.

In [\*Leda and the Swan\*](#) (1962) [TR64], Twombly invokes the mythological episode during which Jupiter, taking the form of a



swan, ravished Leda (their union produced Helen, whose subsequent abduction inaugurated the Trojan war). Yet viewers will be frustrated in any attempt to see a depiction of the protagonist and antagonist here. Instead, the violence of Jupiter's seduction, and the passionate nature of the pair's forced consummation, is conveyed schematically: pencil dots set within heart-shaped pictograms mark orifices in bodies; the testicle sack of a red phallus touches a pink heart/vagina at center; smoky lines in tightly repetitive loops suggest a flurry of feathers; finally, the title is written at lower right, with the word "SWAN" vehemently scribbled over. Yet even if the title were lacking, the manner in which Twombly deploys his materials conveys an impression of explosive unruliness, which in turn expresses a volatility that functions independently of the painting's putative subject. The conspicuous, doubly bisected rectangle hovering near the top edge of *Leda and the Swan* could be a schematic window. It would thus invoke the Renaissance status of paintings as windows onto the world, and by extension would symbolize the eye's surveying vision and the mind's ideal self-possession. The analytic geometry of the shape, in other words, would figure the clarity and control of reason, a mental transparency that is compromised or even negated by the brute physicality of the melee below. But the diagram could also be a token of a quadrant of blank canvas itself, backed by its stretcher bars, and could thus serve as a sign of the actual material out of which painterly representations are made—a sign of the object that is transformed by an artist into a medium of his expression in his drive to realize a pictorial truth.

*Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1962) [TRFigs.30–32], based on the cruelty of a Roman emperor, extends the theme of brutality over a group of nine canvases that were to have a significant impact on Twombly's career. When they were shown at Castelli's gallery in March 1964 (Twombly's first show in New York after an absence of four years), the critics did not greet them approvingly. Lawrence Campbell saw them as "paintings of indecisive pinkish scrawled areas floating across each other at the edges."<sup>42</sup> Most damning was the critic and minimalist

sculptor Donald Judd, whose terse dismissal merits extended quotation:

Twombly has not shown for some time, and this adds to this fiasco. In each of these paintings there are a couple of swirls of red paint mixed with a little yellow and white and placed high on a medium-gray surface. There are a few drips and spatters and an occasional pencil line. There isn't anything to the paintings.<sup>43</sup>

The negative press (and negative rumors) distressed Twombly personally and damaged his professional reputation in New York.<sup>44</sup> Still, those reactions had mitigating circumstances. New York audiences saw his *Commodus* series within the context of emergent pop and minimalist tendencies, compared to which its tragic drama appeared anachronistic and eccentric. And since much of his output between 1959 and 1964 was unknown to American viewers, the larger context of Twombly's artistic development was lost. How bittersweet it must have been, then, when his long-time friend Robert Rauschenberg won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale later that summer, an event that marked the international recognition of American art.

## 5

# AFFIRMING PRESENCE & PASSING

In 1967, Twombly showed what in retrospect seem to be his most iconic pieces: gray-ground paintings marked over with white wax crayon, often referred to as “blackboards.”<sup>45</sup> Though the formal similarities may not withstand extended comparison, these works do exhibit some features that evoke hand-writing exercises and erasure. They also recall Twombly’s early works, such as *Panorama* (1955). The new imagery of 1966–7 represented in [Night Watch](#) [TR65], [Cold Stream](#), [Untitled](#) [CR:III 31], and [Untitled](#) [CR:III 32] is of two distinct types. The first features geometrically regular forms like cubes or rectangles, as in *Night Watch* and *Untitled* [CR:III 31], where three rows of horizontally oriented boxes are superimposed at angles by other, thinner, rectangles marked by letters and numbers. The second type encompasses long horizontal rows of less regimented but repetitive loops, as in [Untitled](#) [CR:III 32]. Yet care should be taken before categorical oppositions are made. Sometimes, the types of imagery coexist. The overall impression of continuous, looped registers dominates, but under many of the curved loops is an abundance of right angles, corners of boxes inscribed with dark graphite on the gray ground, and thus nearly invisible in reproduction. The critic Max Kozloff combined formal description with meteorological metaphor to see in the new works “an all over, but low pressure, imagery.”<sup>46</sup> The supposed dichotomy between measured, geometric, rational forms and spontaneous, organic, intuitive alternatives is one that Twombly’s work in general, and the gray-ground paintings in particular, calls into question.

The advent of the gray-grounds coincided with Twombly’s first major museum retrospective in the United States, at the Milwaukee

Art Center in 1968. Robert Pincus-Witten, writing what would become the first of three insightful essays about the artist, framed these new works in terms of “elemental beginnings.”<sup>47</sup> The critic’s evaluation depended upon the suggestion that Twombly’s loops in works like *Untitled* (1967) [CR:III 32] resemble handwriting—or, more precisely, the Palmer Method exercises imposed on children of Twombly’s generation to standardize script. The association prompts the inference that the subject of this work could be something like the origin of language or communication (or, more nefariously, the disciplinary measures implemented in the schoolroom to train students in the regimentation of motor skills and behavior).<sup>48</sup> However, as is so often the case with Twombly, this thematic evocation of beginnings is not merely tied to imagery that has a particular cultural touchstone. Instead, it is also a matter of surface. Robert Rosenblum wrote that Twombly “speaks in a kind of layered past tense, in which we recognize long-ago beginnings and erasures, near-invisible strata that lie below the surface like ghost memories of earlier impulses.”<sup>49</sup>

One of the most compelling features of the gray-grounds is, precisely, their unique formal qualities. The painter took great care to prepare visual fields that are anything but “neutral.” The putatively inert, matte surface—its literal materiality and brute physicality—is transformed into the *virtual* condition for what is now sensed as a strictly pictorial expression of something like direct, moment-to-moment, point-by-point specificity. Twombly’s technique fuses each ground with surface markings, creating a plenum that prohibits viewers from seeing them as mere backgrounds. In *Untitled* (1968) [CR:III 71], Twombly first covered the canvas evenly with a dark gray, upon which he spread a very thin wash of lighter gray, fluid enough in application to have left behind numerous drips. In the lower half of the painting, the paint has been applied with a wide brush in more or less vertical strokes that angle or curve as they reach toward the upper right corner. Some are horizontal, roughly parallel to white or black lines extending from one edge to the other. The sensation of horizontality

is continuously challenged by the vertical vectors of the brush strokes and their drips. The ground itself seems to have an energy or charge that forcefully acts on its figures, as if magnetically. The lines, in turn, measure the extent and duration of a visual storm. In this hypnotic reciprocity, we are seeing something like the conditions of possibility for “figures” to emerge from “grounds.”

Specific visual effects vary according to each particular painting. In general, though, the layered surface intricacies of the gray-grounds of 1966–71 occasion complex perceptual effects. Contrary to first impressions, while viewing *Untitled* (1970) [TR77], it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate the three most obvious rows of loops from the canvas ground. The longer one looks, the more the rows blend into the field. At its remotest or most distant virtual layer (the adjectives belie the relatively thin strata of paint that actually adhere to the surface), the tumbleweeds appear subsumed into a barely visible but all-over pattern of angled scribbles. The paradoxical effect is notoriously difficult to pin down in description: how can something “barely visible” subsume a recognizable pattern?

Similarly, *Untitled* (1971) [TR79] is graded in multiple, thin layers of gray, creating an atmosphere in which a rush of S-curves or figure-eights descends from upper left to lower right. The viewer’s sense of an indeterminate but vast spatial expanse behind the picture plane is only momentarily quelled by registering the lateral speed of Twombly’s pattern, measured against the insistent verticals marking spatial intervals—and perhaps by extension *time*—across the surface. Varnedoe describes this work as conveying a sense of “trance-like monotony” that “opens out into a sense of serene, oceanic dissolution” (the last phrase derives from Anton Ehrenzweig’s notorious description of the effects of Jackson Pollock’s all-over paintings as much as from its original formulation in the psychological studies of Sigmund Freud).<sup>50</sup> That effect might convey the sense of a primordial beginning (or, dialectically, ultimate ending), and thus create the momentary illusion that one could actually experience either. Perhaps to emphasize

the theme of origin (or end) in such works, Twombly chose to display three large gray-grounds in the central rectangular room of the Menil's Houston gallery, a classical architectural space analogous to the *cella* of a Greek or Roman temple, used to house the image of a deity, and thus symbolic of both.

If some of the gray-ground fields conveyed the impression of unmeasurable sensations of oceanic dissolution, that initial effect was often checked by signs of quantification. Twombly frequently combined evocations of the non- or un-differentiated with those of the measured, ordered, directed. For instance, numerals and letters embedded in the surface blur of *Untitled* (1971) [TR79] are even more visible in other works of this period, such as *Synopsis of a Battle* (1968), *Untitled* (1968) [TR68], and *Treatise on the Veil (Second Version)* (1970), where imprecise lines spanning the length of the surface appear measured against four more rigid sectional templates. In *Untitled* (1968) [CR:III 63] and *Untitled* (1968) [CR:III 65], curved geometries cascade in a space filled with annotations that suggest mathematical equations and computational tables. In *Synopsis of a Battle*, words with military connotations, poetic phrases, and mythological names (“Issus”; “What w[ing] can be [held]”; “equa[tion?]”; “Flank”; “[b?]reak”; and “hole”) compound the psychological drama of an all-out physical assault in ways that beg comparison to another painting of a battle that seems to be this one's point of reference, namely Albrecht Altdörfer's 1529 *Battle of Alexander* (commemorating the great battle at Issus in 333 BC, the second fight in Alexander the Great's conquest of Asia).

Although gray-grounds dominated the years 1966–71, Twombly continued to paint lighter-color pictures, such as *Veil of Orpheus* (1968), where motifs of trajectory, rotation, sequence, and measurement take hold. In this canvas, three roughly horizontal lines of varying length are joined by a fourth that careens upwards, terminating in a crude appendage (grasping claw or shell?) near the right edge. The lines are marked with words and numbers indicating temporalities, velocities, and distances (“stop”; “time”; “140000 miles”; “NONSTOP”; “48”;

“1400 miles”). It is likely that this work had its origins in an untitled collage from 1968 [TR72], in which a reproduction of a drapery study from Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks (labeled “VEIL”) is placed high on a large sheer of paper; under it, one of three semi-horizontal lines is measured at “140 miles” (in the collage, the Leonardo picture is rotated 90 degrees).

It has been suggested that Twombly’s interest in the Apollo 11 space flight, which culminated in the safe return of three NASA astronauts from the moon in July 1969, helps explain such works, as well as the fourteen large, untitled paintings he completed that summer. The so-called “Bolsena” paintings (named after the lake north of Rome where Twombly lived during those months) demonstrate the artist’s response to a technical achievement that many considered a cultural capstone for human civilization. Grids, equations, measurements, and diagrams collide on the surface of numerous paintings that share a name—*Untitled (Bolsena)* (1969); *Untitled (Bolsena)* (1969) [TR75]; and *Untitled (Bolsena)* (1969) [TR76]—where tubes, cylinders, and rectangles launch themselves (or drop) amid a familiar battery of Twombly’s personal ideograms. As ever, we find the irregularities of the hand in danger of being tabulated by the systematic graphs of mathematics and science. Ever astute to Twombly’s “expressionist calligraphy,” Robert Pincus-Witten resisted too easily connecting these works with the contemporary vogue for conceptual art and epistemic abstraction, with its emphasis on “diagrams, the graph, modular and serial structure, delineations made against measuring devices and templates ... [and] the universals of mathematics and linguistics.”<sup>51</sup> Against them, Twombly’s idiosyncrasies remain unruléd.

### ■ *Nini’s Painting* (1971)

In 1971, the wife of Plinio De Martiis, Twombly’s first gallerist in Rome and close friend, died. He responded to the event with five canvases, each called “Nini’s Painting.” While they exhibit subtle variety in color

and tone, each one is characterized by multiple layers of repetitive lines set in horizontal registers. The lines pattern the surface with an all-over, illegible script; in its indecipherability, the writing evokes a loss that cannot be expressed in words. At the same time, the repetitive procedure of mark-making sustained throughout seems to be driven by a need to ritualistically expunge the sorrow of bereavement, and thus functions, perhaps, curatively.

The creation of *Nini's Painting* and its companion pieces can reasonably be understood as an act of mourning.<sup>52</sup> In some ways, this is formally evident in that each canvas is repetitively marked, a feature that from a psychoanalytic perspective suggests a process of working through loss. Of course, inferring the theme (mourning) from an event (the passing of a loved one) is also made possible by our knowledge of Twombly's biography. But how might we understand the painting itself to manifest or exemplify that theme—or even the state of being—called mourning, independently of Twombly's circumstances? Note that he took great care to demarcate both the upper left and lower right corners of the work. The resulting triangular areas are significantly free of incident. In addition, the “hypotenuse” of each triangle establishes the dominant angle of the marking as a whole, a right-tilted script that seems to drift from lower left to upper right, conveying a sense of ascension. Yet the triangles, bracketing the interior as if forming a frame-within-a-frame, perform an even more important function. They suggest another (larger) frame, another view, beyond the one we see. Imagine, for a moment, that the corner lines are segments of the edges of this other frame, from which the quadrant of *Nini's Painting* has been ‘excised,’ then rotated forty-five degrees counterclockwise, to hang on the wall as the painting we see. Yet the pictorial salience of the larger, imagined field persists. By mentally rotating the painting back to its ‘original’ orientation, the limits of the canvas we are looking at seem to expand: we see the painting in front of us, *and* sense the more expansive field from which it has been ‘taken’. Moreover, when skewed in this way, Twombly's script produces a sense of falling, or declination,



from upper left to lower right. The pairing of fall and rise is perhaps appropriate to the theme of mourning, a process that involves both remorse and release.

### ■ Continuity of Drawing

Drawing was always an important part of Twombly's practice. Relatively brief but concentrated stints of drawing often inaugurated ambitious campaigns of painting. This had been the case in 1953, when the artist drew blindly in his Augusta hotel room on weekends; in 1957, when he dedicated a series of small works on paper (the *Grottaferrata* drawings) to Stéphane Mallarmé; in 1959, when his sparse drawings made while listening to Vivaldi inspired his Lexington series [compare TR42 and 43]; and again in 1959 when he completed *Poems to the Sea* in Sperlonga [TRFigs.24 and 25]. The late 1960s and early 1970s mark a period of renewed interest in working on paper in the form of collage. In 1968, as we have seen, Twombly had worked with images from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. Pasting reproductions of Leonardo's drawings at the top of a large sheet of paper, below them he constructed various zones (sometimes with overlapping paper) in which his marks appear to respond to the initial image (for examples, see *Untitled (Deluge)* (1968) [TR67], and *Untitled (Veil)* (1968) [TR72]). In *Untitled* (1971), the intricacy of Twombly's manipulations is clearly evident. In this case, he reoriented the Leonardo piece—a facsimile of a journal page with text and image concerning the muscular and vein structure of the human arm—positioning it upside down so that hand and arm point to the bottom of the collage. Blunt, heavy, pencil lines tracked over the veins carry the visual energy (blood flow?) downwards, where it is reiterated and intensified by a spread of lines spanning out in long vertical stretches from the journal image. That page is framed by sturdy paper which has been folded down at the top, then cut and folded back up. *Untitled (White Collage)* (1971) also relies on folding, overlap, and zones. It is as if the involved repertory of actions allows Twombly to handle,

both literally and figuratively, art from the past—making it live again, as Francesco Clemente had put it. Further dedications to the fecundity of past artists and poets are found in a series of collages Twombly made in 1973: *To Valéry* (1973), *To Tatlin* (1973), and *To Montaigne* (1974).

### ■ Return to Sculpture

Although Twombly's production slowed significantly after 1971, it was in that decade that the public view of his career was significantly consolidated. The Kunsthalle Bern in Germany mounted a retrospective of his paintings in 1973. It was followed by a large show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 1975, and then by a retrospective of drawings at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1976. Finally, in 1979, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened *Cy Twombly: Painting and Drawings, 1954–1977*. A substantial increase in the quantity, and perhaps seriousness, of criticism devoted to Twombly followed. The catalogue for the Whitney show, for instance, featured an important essay by the well-known French literary critic Roland Barthes (discussed in the next section).

Twombly complemented the flurry of exhibition activity with a return to sculpture, which he had abandoned seventeen years before. The Menil Collection's early *Untitled* (1954)—an assemblage of wood, glass, mirrors, twine, fabric, wire, and wooden spoons that is painted and marked with wax crayon—reveals the artist's scavenger tactics. From these simple yet diverse found materials, Twombly managed to construct suggestive yet curiously unknowable objects seemingly resistant to interpretation, even to naming. As Kate Nesin has nicely put it, these works are “difficult, obdurate, not blank yet often silent, even recalcitrant.”<sup>53</sup> The critic David Shapiro explained of these poetic things: Twombly's icons are “an effigy to rituals that can no longer be comprehended.”<sup>54</sup> As we have seen, a similar fascination with what Twombly called the “primitive, the ritual and fetish elements” was discernible in his sketchbooks and paintings from the early 1950s. In

*Untitled* (1955; on the right in the linked image) [TR24] he wrapped four thin wooden planks (perhaps paint stirrers) with fabric, tying on the cloth with string, and bound them all to a vertical support. The solemn, hieratic object seems imbued with a sacramental power despite its simple materials and construction. The same is true of the Hirshhorn Museum's *Untitled* (1959) and the Menil Collection's *Untitled* (1953). The latter is a six-foot wood stud mounted vertically on a square wooden box, thinly coated with plaster and then painted in cool white. Two smaller planks are suspended from wires attached to nails and a bracket on either side of the main pole, the top of which has been wrapped in paper that is tied in place with string. The bodily animation given to the vertical dimension by the potential swing of the object's "legs" might suggest a link to Alberto Giacometti's sculptures of elongated figures, but the overall impression fails to sustain the initial connection. By contrast, Twombly's sculptural entity remains distant, a presence that is more remotely sentinel than empathically sentient.

The sculptures Twombly began constructing after his long hiatus from the medium maintain his use of simple materials (cardboard, wooden boxes, house paint, plaster, and wire), but the epic impact of the resulting assemblage differs sharply from the fetishistic play of the earlier work. *Untitled* (1976) consists simply of cardboard tubes of different diameters stacked one on top of another, yet the columnar effect is one of classic monumentality. Likewise *Aurora* (1981)—named for a battleship used during the Russian Revolution to assault the Winter Palace in Petrograd, although given Twombly's predilection for myth, the double connotation of the Roman goddess of the dawn cannot be ignored—is composed of a slender wooden plinth on top of which is set a simple construction of wooden planks, a vertical pole (suggesting a mast), and a wire attached to a plastic flower. The ensemble conveys a slow cadence of setting out to sea, or perhaps the imagined stillness before the break of day brings conflict and violence. The motif of the flower, either blossoming or closed, is especially important in this regard. It is a symbol Twombly utilized repeatedly

in his sculptures to signify either death or creativity (or perhaps their simultaneity).

Two collages from 1975, *Apollo and the Artist* (1975) [TR82] and *Mars and the Artist* (1975) [TR83], feature diagrams of blooming flowers beneath the names of the gods of poetry and war, respectively. In the Menil's bronze sculpture *Untitled* (1983), a long-stemmed flower is attached to a tall pole. Its closed bulb falls at the base of the piece, a declension that counteracts the rectitude of the standing vertical (we should be reminded of Agamben's assessment of Twombly's "falling beauty"). In both plaster and bronze versions of *Thermopylae* (1991) [TR115]—named for the site of a famous battle between Greek city-states, led by Sparta, which, against overwhelming odds, delayed for seven days the Greeks' conquest by an army of Persian invaders in 480 BC—four tensile flowers spring from a relatively massive mound, perhaps suggesting a funeral site or rebirth after devastating destruction. Twombly inscribed lines from a poem by C. P. Cavafy, a modern Greek poet, on the plaster version of this piece, commemorating the Greek heroes of the battle: "Honor to those who / in the life they lead / Define and guard / a THERMOPYLAE." In a youthful statement, Twombly had invoked, perhaps naively, the "reality of whiteness" as a neo-romantic trope, maintaining that "one must desire the ultimate essence even if it is 'contaminated.'" In his mature sculptures, this "contamination" of the ideal is more resignedly acknowledged. Yet, in recognizing that compromised purity—and the poignancy of inevitable death—his works both prepare us for loss and galvanize us to attend to the life we lead.

## 6

### FEELING HISTORY

Of course, Twombly continued painting. In 1977–8, he returned to a subject first broached in 1964 with his triptych *Ilium (One Morning Ten Years Later)* (1964) [TRFig.45]. For *Fifty Days at Ilium* (1977–8) [TRFigs.38–40], installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the painter dedicated ten large canvases to the theme of the Trojan War as recounted in Alexander Pope’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. The set provokes questions, some of them decades old, about the relationship staged in Twombly’s art between “history”—conceived publicly as myth, literature, or poetry; or privately as biography, psychology, affect—and its representation. It is an issue that is endemic to any significant engagement with his practice.

Some critics think Twombly lambasts myth, taking an ironic stance toward Western cultural heritage. Margaret Sheffield contends that the artist “treats myth mockingly” and shows “the death of culture and history.”<sup>55</sup> Robert Rosenblum similarly attends to culture’s decline and fall in Twombly’s work (fitting for an artist so consumed with Roman life and history). For him, there is an “an aura of historical accretion” that shows us the “waning vitality” of classical myths.<sup>56</sup> Others see Twombly’s attraction to tradition as an attempt to resist the leveling effects of a homogeneous consumer culture. Benjamin Buchloh understands Twombly’s citation of myth as an “act of refusal, a desperate attempt to escape the rise of a monolithic American postwar consumer culture.”<sup>57</sup> Still others concede that Twombly must have believed in the authenticity of his present-day evocations of myth. But they point out, all the same, that the effort to preserve such a past failed miserably. Donald Kuspit states pithily: “[O]ne can print ‘Ovid,’ but the

poet is dead, and one can't bring him back with the flick of a pencil."<sup>58</sup> Rosalind Krauss scolds "all those for whom the Latin is serious, to be taken at face value, consumed as erudition, as classical humanism somehow magically surviving amidst the barbarism of the late twentieth century, [as] a talismanic flower sprouting from a decaying Roman wall."<sup>59</sup>

Still, less skeptical critics find Twombly's appropriations of the past to be genuine homage, tinged at times with nostalgia, at others, with heroic passion. His art, writes Susan Larson, revives the "tired and remote imagery of classical Western culture" and lets us "return again and again ... to the significant and universal images of any culture."<sup>60</sup> Kirk Varnedoe has written that Twombly desired to "obliterate any opposition between the life experience encapsulated in the high tradition and the visceral experience of the immediate present."<sup>61</sup> And Richard Hoppe-Sailer claims that the artist "succeed[s] in bringing myths into the present and integrating their residues in art ... thus underscoring their ongoing significance and topicality."<sup>62</sup> (Yet, he continues, "in Twombly's mythological works th[e] memory [of tradition] appears as a lost memory, as no longer something that can be seamlessly continued."<sup>63</sup>) On these points, Twombly's art pits one side against the other, permitting no ultimate conclusion.

Perhaps the most widely known critical commentary on Twombly's art is that of Roland Barthes. The French literary theorist wrote two essays on him, "Non Multa Sed Multum" (1976) and "The Wisdom of Art" (1979). In the latter, Barthes begins with this disarmingly simple observation: "something is happening." Yet the conventional categories within which the nature of this "event" can be understood are as elusive as they are ineluctable. Twombly, he claims, makes materials exist as "stubborn substances." Certain habits help him make "matter appear as fact," including scratching, smudging, and smearing. So do chance techniques, which allow the artist to convey the impression of an "initial decision and a final indetermination." Chance is a way to keep things moving, open-ended. Why look beyond or away from the surface

to find meaning? Titles, Barthes claims, do not illuminate things. They even mislead the viewer, stimulating us to find out what his references are (maybe by looking in a dictionary). Instead, we should understand that Twombly is opening us to surprise, “operat[ing] transformations” on our habitual feelings and thoughts by “jolt[s]” or “shocks.” It is as if his art locates “meaning” within the body of the viewer, who—despite the fact that he or she may or may not know the specialized history of culture and art—is fundamentally constituted by the embodied play of pleasure and memory. Fittingly parallel to their subject matter, neither essay comes across as strictly analytic. Reading Barthes’ essays is like looking at Twombly’s surfaces, where marks that seem to engender one other suddenly aggregate to form a node, cluster, or constellation. The critic writes organically, as if he himself is drifting, like the artist, from one thing to another. Both proceed gesturally, as Barthes would say: through an “indetermin[ate] and inexhaustible sum of motives, pulsations and lassitudes that surround the act with an atmosphere.”<sup>64</sup>

### ■ Inundating Painting

Between 1981 and 1984, Twombly executed the major *Hero and Leander* (1981–4) [TR91], inspired by Christopher Marlowe’s poem on the subject. The protagonist, Leander, drowned while swimming during a storm toward his lover, Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite. The despairing Hero threw herself into the sea in remorse. The left panel of the four-part painting buoys the name “Leandro” above a palpable wave of deep greens, bright reds, subtle pinks and whites. The sheer tangibility of this devastating upsurge bears comparison to works by Joseph Mallord William Turner, an artist Twombly admired. The strategic use of contrasting colors dramatizes the oceanic swell, while the middle and right-hand panels, relatively devoid of incident, fade by steps to become a blank veil of cream. A final part concludes the piece: a sheet of paper on which is written the last line from John Keats’s sonnet “On a Picture of Leander”: “He’s gone, / up bubbles / all his amorous breath.” Here,

the theme of oceanic dissolution, which goes back to the 1970s, is reflected in the subject of this tragic story.

Two major painting cycles appeared in the 1980s, *Untitled (Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair, Parts I–V)* (1985) and *Untitled (Parts I–IX)* (1988). Both groups are now housed in the Cy Twombly Gallery. The first is composed of five canvas-on-wood panels, set into shaped frames reminiscent of polyptych altarpieces. Each panel is surmounted by a zone containing citations from various sources: the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi, and the Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi.<sup>65</sup> The crimson, scarlet, and pink blooms set within melting whites are apocalyptic suns that infuse the works with a sense of luminous decay. The cadence of the poetry contributes to this waning effect. A line from Leopardi over Part I reads, “In his despair he drew / the colours from / his own heart.” Rumi’s words over Parts II and V also carry a tone of mystical deterioration: “In drawing and drawing / You his pains are delectable / his flames are like water.” The second cycle, a series of predominantly green paintings in acrylic, takes Rilke’s poem “Moving Forward” (1900) as an origin. The first panel in the group presents the last two lines of Rilke’s poem: “And in the ponds / broken off from the sky / my feeling sinks / as if standing on fishes.” The viewer, surrounded by the watery ensemble, feels the sinking sensation evoked by Rilke’s words. The poetic effect would be heightened for those who, like Twombly, were familiar with Rilke’s first two lines: “The deep parts of my life pour onward, / as if the river shores were opening out.” But even for those who have not yet encountered the poem, the visual effect of the green paintings conveys the resonance of the poetic line—a citation that Twombly had perhaps carried with him for many years, during which it gained in power, depth, and resonance, and that he is now ready to share with us. “I like poets,” he once said, “because I can find a condensed phrase.”<sup>66</sup> The image or line accrues profound meaning, yet affords simple directness.

As his career progressed, Twombly tended to produce more cohesive



cycles, the elements of which are meant to be exhibited and experienced collectively. Labor on two versions of the *Quattro Stagioni (Four Seasons)* (1993–4 and 1993–5) [TR121–124] coincided with his 1994 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (one cycle of the seasons is housed at MoMA; the other at the Tate Modern). Inscriptions of poetry loosely integrated into atmospheric fields punctured by images of boats, phalluses, and flowers painted with heavily saturated crimson reds, sun yellows, and wine purples intensify the viewer’s sense of the artist’s poignant meditations on vitality and its dissolution, memory and forgetting, joy and sorrow. The mixed emotions that pervade some of this later work are nowhere more evident than in the largest piece Twombly ever produced, *Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor, A Painting in Three Parts)* (1994). Begun in Lexington in 1972 but not finished until 1994, the 52-foot-long, 13-foot-high painting was also called “On Wings of Idleness,” “Orpheus,” and “Anatomy of Melancholy” (both the ancient musician’s name and the final phrase appear multiple times to the left of center). Precise identification of the proliferating of references in the work—to Robert Burton’s 1621 treatise on melancholy; to poetic and literary references from Rilke, George Seferis, Archilochus, Keats, and Catullus; to the myth of Orpheus; to Twombly’s own obsession with images of boats as symbols of passage—is rendered nearly irrelevant by experiencing the visual qualities of the expanding, breathing surface. As ever, those qualities convey a content that is independent of the learning and erudition necessary to pinpoint the sources of Twombly’s citations. Look, for instance, at the way Twombly’s words repeat themselves: the phrase “shining white” on the left panel is joined, as if by an echo, with another inscription of “shining white” above it to the right, veiled under a thin layer of paint. Likewise repeated are the words “once” and “sea,” the phrase “Anatomy of Melancholy,” and, most importantly, the name “Orpheus,” the mythological figure of infinitely beautiful poetic song. Of these aural and visual qualities, Twombly said, “It’s so beautiful ... The sound of ‘Asia Minor’ is really like a rush to me, like a fantastic ideal.”<sup>67</sup> The

repetitions create a sense of visual as well as sonorous echo, tired sounds or voices or images fading from ear and eye, making the work a fitting representation of departure and loss—but also, one hopes, of future reverberation.

## VISIONS OF ANTIQUITY & ETERNITY

The 1994 MoMA retrospective travelled to Houston in the winter of 1995 for a second installation at The Menil Collection. The exhibition coincided there with the inauguration of the [Cy Twombly Gallery](#). In the spring, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles staged a third installation of the show. Never before had the public had the opportunity to experience such a comprehensive overview of Twombly's career. Not surprisingly, the exposure afforded viewers, critics, artists, and historians the opportunity to consolidate (or at least to reevaluate) their opinions and arguments about the artist—a figure whose significance to the development of art in the twentieth century had seemed peripheral or even marginal for much of his career, yet now appeared central (it is telling that since the grand re-opening of the Museum of Modern Art after its major renovation in 2002–04, visitors have regularly been greeted in the central atrium by Twombly's *Quattro Stagioni*).

During the first decade of the new millennium, the artist continued to produce major cycles, such as [Coronation of Sesostris](#) (2000); [Lepanto](#) (2001); [A Gathering of Time](#) (2003); *Bacchus, Psilax, Mainomenos* (2005); [Three Notes from Salalah](#) (2005–7); and the [Peony Blossom Paintings](#) (2007). They are infused with a nearly apocalyptic mannerism. Capacious fields are saturated with vivid colors in acrylic or oil and serve as the ground for a simplified but liquid imagery (dripping bulbs, flowers, ships, and loops). In *Coronation of Sesostris*, named for an ancient Egyptian king whose expeditions into Europe were recorded by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, David Shapiro sees both “catastrophic sunlight” and a “gorgeous dissolution of the self.”

Descriptively precise, he continues, “These paintings release their charm slowly, like radioactivity.”<sup>68</sup> *Lepanto*, a series of twelve acrylic-on-canvas panels, overwhelms the visual field with schematic boats and oars, flaming colors and melting suns, suggestions of water and blood—fitting motifs for the titular subject of the work, the naval battle won by a coalition of European Catholic nations (the Holy League) against the Ottoman Empire in 1571. These later groups of paintings convey by turns desperate agitation or delicate lyricism. Prismatic, sometimes hazy surfaces sustain iridescent optical effects that solicit emotional responses wavering between euphoria and melancholy, never settling. Or perhaps it is the ability to represent the simultaneity of those contradictory states that is the essential feature of Twombly’s work. As Barthes observed in 1976:

One could imagine [Twombly’s work] to have the task of creating some one single state capable of containing both what comes into being as well as what fades away ... Utopia ... would be to produce but one single feeling ... Life–Death as a unified thought, as one sole gesture.<sup>69</sup>

Twombly continued to receive important commissions and had major shows. In 2003–5, *Cy Twombly at the Hermitage: Fifty Years of Works on Paper* travelled from the St. Petersburg to Munich, Paris, London, New York, and Houston. Since 2004, the new Gagosian Gallery in New York has featured Twombly’s works on numerous occasions, and in 2008 the travelling exhibition *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons* could be seen in London, Bilbao, Rome, and Houston. Scholarly studies concerning Twombly have appeared at record rate, and exciting research has emerged on previously underappreciated aspects of his practice, with catalogues and essays dedicated to his sculptures, photographs, and drawings. Finally, the Musée du Louvre in Paris asked Twombly in 2010 to paint the [ceiling of the Salle des Bronzes](#)—now a 3,750-square-foot vault of Aegean blue and Mediterranean sunlight inscribed with the names of Hellenic sculptors. The alignment

of aesthetic and cultural priorities between a relatively conservative cultural institution and an artist who represented, for some, the most radical avant-garde tendencies of the twentieth century seems to merit some contemplation.

In retrospect, and poignantly so since his death in July 2011, Twombly's career appears remarkable not only for its length, but also for the range of exciting pieces emerging from it. The diversity of media, the scope of reference, the variety of techniques, and the array of imagery to be found in his body of work evidences a diligent—if not relentless—confrontation with the problems of modern expression as felt by an individual artist. It has not been easy to classify Twombly, or to associate him with a particular group or movement. He was and remains an idiosyncratic painter, an evaluation that, far from being derogatory, is meant to applaud the work of an eccentric temperament. Twombly never cared to fit comfortably within the categories that have come to dominate the schematic understanding of art history since the war. While his generational peers were quickly absorbed into mainstream art-historical narratives, from neo-avant-garde strategies to pop, minimalism, and conceptual art, Twombly remained peripheral—as if he were a disobedient schoolboy: someone who never mastered handwriting, and whose obstinate work refused to settle into explanatory frames.

Ultimately, it is incumbent upon each viewer of Twombly's work to justify to him or herself *why* he should be considered an artist of consequence for the twentieth (and now the twenty-first) century. Is it because Twombly, facing a perceived degradation of Western humanist values, insists on keeping those values alive and fresh by making artworks that venerate the classical and romantic past? Alternatively, is it because his art, even as it commemorates that past, does so critically, revealing our present distance from it, and thus our obligation to establish new terms around which contemporary social values can be generated, debated, and accepted? The answer no doubt lies somewhere between the two options.

Perhaps the fecundity of Twombly's art is a consequence of his ability to frame and thus express multiple dimensions of experience, extending from the supra-personal (history, culture, knowledge) to the sub-personal (memory, process, drive). In between lies the personal, momentarily directed when looking at Twombly's material surfaces toward the imbrication of sensation, feeling, and thought. The pictorial immediacy of that encounter stages history as a matter of desire: Twombly presents history not as a set of dead facts against which human life has taken place, but instead as created by a vital but inchoate energy, fueled by directionless impulses and uncontrollable urges. Surely, the individual is constituted by these basic instinctual drives as much as by "higher," reflective, mental processes. Twombly channels those elusive, paradoxical, dynamic, and embodied energies into his art. In doing so, he represents their continual and powerful interplay. That, perhaps, is the lasting lesson of his art.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Burg 1951 [in Del Roscio 2002, 15; *hereafter cited* DR 2002].
- 2 Twombly 1957; Sylvester 2000(a); Serota 2008(b).
- 3 Hoppe-Sailer 1983, 127.
- 4 Norden 1993, 151–2.
- 5 Sheffield 1979, 41.
- 6 Bastian 1992, 23.
- 7 Schjeldahl 1994, 74.
- 8 Quoted by Varnedoe 1995, 167.
- 9 Sylvester 1995, 373.
- 10 Krauss 1997, 148.
- 11 Leeman 2005, 15.
- 12 Motherwell 1951 [in DR 2002, 14].
- 13 Olson, “Projective Verse” (New York: Totem, 1959), 7.
- 14 Olson 1952a [in DR 2002, 9–12].
- 15 Preston 1951 [in DR 2002, 16], and Fitzsimmons 1951 [in DR 2002, 17].
- 16 Fitzsimmons 1953, 33.
- 17 Twombly 1952a [in Varnedoe 1994a, 56].
- 18 See E. A. Jewell, “‘Globalism’ Pops into View,” *New York Times* (June 13, 1943), X9.
- 19 Leja 1993, 69.
- 20 Twombly 1950 [in Varnedoe 1994a, 55].
- 21 Twombly 1952b [in Varnedoe 1994a, 56].
- 22 O’Hara 1955, 46.
- 23 Twombly 1956 [in Varnedoe 1994a, 61].
- 24 Cage 1961, 100.
- 25 Varnedoe 1994a, 22.
- 26 Sawin 1957, 57.
- 27 Frankfurter 1967, 65.
- 28 Buchloh 2006, 25.
- 29 Twombly 1957. Penultimate sentence order modified for clarity.
- 30 Vivaldi 1961 [in DR 2002, 45].
- 31 Twombly 1959 [in Varnedoe 1994a, 63–4, n. 38].
- 32 Sylvester 2000b, 73.
- 33 Barthes 1979, 12.
- 34 Bois 1999, 62.
- 35 Pollock 1999, 24.
- 36 Cullinan 2008, 84.
- 37 Varnedoe 1994a, 33.
- 38 Agamben 2006, 15.
- 39 Restany 1961 [in DR 2002, 47]; Vivaldi 1961, 189; Dorfles 1962, 65.
- 40 Varnedoe 1994a, 36.
- 41 Barthes 1979, 9.
- 42 Campbell 1964, 13.
- 43 Judd 1964, 38.
- 44 Varnedoe 1994a, 38.
- 45 Campbell 1967, 55–6; Nemser 1967, 55; Kozloff 1967, 54.
- 46 Kozloff 1967, 54.
- 47 Pincus-Witten 1968, 60.

- 48 Pincus-Witten 1968, 56.
- 49 Rosenblum 1984, 24.
- 50 Varnedoe 1994a, 43.
- 51 Pincus-Witten 1974, 61.
- 52 Cullinan 2008, 137.
- 53 Nesin 2008, n.p.
- 54 Shapiro 1987, 277.
- 55 Sheffield 1979, 40.
- 56 Rosenblum 1984, 24 and 26.
- 57 Buchloh 2006, 26.
- 58 Kuspit 1986, 129.
- 59 Krauss 1994, 71.
- 60 Larsen 1981 [in DR 2002, 114 and 123].
- 61 Varnedoe 1994b, 22.
- 62 Hoppe-Sailer 1983 [in DR 2002, 131].
- 63 Hoppe-Sailer 1983 [in DR 2002, 138].
- 64 Barthes 1976 [in DR 2002, 90].
- 65 The lines are assigned to each panel as follows.  
 I: In his despair he drew / The colours from / his own heart.  
 II: In drawing, and drawing / You his pains are delectable / his flames are like water.  
 III: Analysis of the Rose / as sentimental / despair.  
 IV: Rose Oh Sheer / contradiction [joy] / [of being No-one's sleep, under so / many lids].  
 V: In drawing and drawing / You his pains are delectable / his flames are like water.
- 66 Serota 2008, 50.
- 67 Sylvester 2001, 176.
- 68 Shapiro 2000, 13.
- 69 Barthes 1976 [in DR 2002, 94].



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