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## RÉFÉRENCE

Leeman, Richard. *Cy Twombly*, Paris : Ed. du Regard, 2004

- 1 It should not surprise us that the first major monographic study of the work of Cy Twombly would come to us from France: after all, Twombly's reputation and reception have been developed earlier and more exuberantly in Europe than in the United States (for example, Pierre Restany wrote on Twombly as early as 1961). We will probably never know whether the reason for the American disregard, or the delayed reception, was primarily the artist's decision to leave the United States for the shores of Italy in 1957. Or whether Twombly's extremely provocative synthesis between poetic learning and an intrinsic penchant for concepts of painterly desublimation and *bassesse* irritated an American audience that by the early 1960s had become habituated to think of New York School painting in terms of the sublime and of triumphs.
- 2 Steps towards a serious, yet belated recognition of the artist's centrality in American painting of the 1960s (one that would finally place him as *primus* among his *pares*, his former companions and closest friends Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns) were only initiated ten years ago. At that moment the late Kirk Varnedoe dedicated a careful catalogue to Twombly on the occasion of the artist's first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.
- 3 An earlier exhibition in New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978, had turned out to be a critical fiasco. Typically, for the most part, it seems to have only cemented the prejudice among Americans that an artist's decision to leave the United States for Italy could only lead to his decline (remember the fatal story of Ezra Pound?). Additionally—so it must have seemed to Americans—Twombly's European exile would brought in its trail the calamity of seemingly interminable, if not illegible interpretive efforts by former poets turned art dealers, such as the prolific German Heiner Bastian. The extraordinary second essay by Roland Barthes on Twombly, entitled “The Wisdom of

Art” that first appeared in English in the catalogue of the Whitney retrospective, was probably misread by American audiences at the time as belonging to that same category of European obfuscation (Barthes’s first essay, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper”, had been published the year before by yet another Frenchman to whom the Twombly reception is deeply indebted, Yvon Lambert).

- 4 Yet, we would argue that it is not only the complexity of French theoretical approaches to contemporary artistic production (as we know, these encounters between philosophers and artists were not always as successful as those between Barthes and *TW*, as he called him) that laid the ground for Richard Leeman’s outstanding study *Cy Twombly* (the book is based on the author’s doctoral dissertation in 1999). It is equally likely that in order to understand Twombly’s historical status, one must be initiated equally in the particular dialectics of Post War painting, American *and* European.
- 5 On the one hand, the seemingly universal impact of Jackson Pollock with all of its connotations ranging from violence to spectacle (on both sides of the Atlantic), and on the other the damaged and fractured painterly gestures re-emerging in Europe in the aftermath of the war (from Dubuffet to Fautrier, from Fontana to Manzoni). That duality was not only integral to Twombly’s formation as a painter, but it was certainly foundational for the relatively early and enthusiastic critical reception of his work by European critics of the Sixties and Seventies, specifically in Italy and France (while Americans ignored all of these artists (with the exception of Dubuffet), practically up to the present day).
- 6 Paradoxically, however, the ambition of Leeman’s monographic study, is aiming in the opposite direction: it neither privileges French theory nor does the author want to provide us with a comprehensive historical account of Twombly’s situatedness within painting after Pollock, either in Europe or the United States.
- 7 Rather, Leeman has conceived his project as a grand monographic study of Twombly in the most traditional sense. If we believe in the feasibility and desirability of such a traditional format (as undoubtedly the majority of Twombly’s admirers at this time would do), we could not have hoped for a more accomplished book. Leeman delivers the most detailed accounts of the subtle and at times sudden transformations in Twombly’s practices throughout the entire career of the master, from the time of his extraordinary early work at Black Mountain College to his more recent output at the Gagosian Galleries.
- 8 Yet, one of the many saving contradictions of this study is the fact that in spite of its traditionalist monographic approach, the author positions his chosen master from the beginning within an interpretive framework that is as profoundly defined by the diverse strands of psychoanalytic theory from Freud and Jung to Lacan, as Leeman excels at all times, and even more convincingly, in his subtle and consistent competence when it comes to the application of structural-linguistic and semiological models in the discussion of Twombly’s writerly painting.
- 9 At the end of the book one feels almost convinced that this study, as a most traditional art historical monograph with its fusion of biographical account, chronological development, with its insistence on a model of a singularity of author and *œuvre*, a format that takes aesthetic autonomy and the independence of artistic practices from all other forms and problems of cultural and ideological representations for granted, has won the day after all. Leeman’s rigor of commitment to one artist alone (except for mentioning Twombly’s initial voyages in Rauschenberg’s company to Africa and Italy, not one attempt is made to

see the artist as a central figure in the formation of a new aesthetic that was born from the fusion of Duchamp and Cage, and that brought him and Rauschenberg and Johns into a new post Greenbergian group formation that was at least as coherent as the group of Cubists were in 1912).

- 10 Leeman's devotion to Twombly's extremely differentiated *œuvre* and its infinite details, seems at first salubrious when compared to some of the most recent work on the period such as the various studies of the artist's peers Rauschenberg and Johns emerging from Anglo-American art history, (monographs ranging from Fred Orton's *Figuring Jasper Johns* [1994] to Branden Joseph's recent *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avantgarde* [2003]). They seem contorted by so many conflicting theoretical demands (e.g. Marxist social art history, psychoanalysis, post-structuralist theory, gender theory and gay studies).
- 11 But *hélas*, the salvation that the monograph promises, is somewhat deceptive. Not only because these theoretical models pointed to the extreme limitations of traditional art history, but more importantly because arguments against the monograph as the most reliable art historical account, originated first of all from the work of post war artists themselves.
- 12 Ironically, it was of course the work of European scholars who emigrated to the United States (e.g., Yve-Alain Bois, T.J. Clark and Serge Guilbaut, for example) that first argued with incontrovertible evidence that the writing of post war art history could no longer sustain itself within the narrowly defined parameters of a conventional art historical monograph based on the traditional concepts of identity formation, be they the nation state or the bourgeois subject. Cy Twombly, of course, in response to either social or structuralist art history, would serve as an ideal case and seductive candidate to reverse that evidence. In his case and in Leeman's monograph, biography and history, *œuvre* and identity, poetical formation and pictorial refinement, in short, the cohesion of the traditional artistic subject appear miraculously intact and hermetically sealed.
- 13 These claims to a presumed artistic continuity and an almost organic mediation between the historical and the biographical, or between the morphological innovation and the grand tradition of European culture, become particularly problematical when applied to an artist of the post war period. Twombly shares this predicament with his closest fellow travellers Johns and Rauschenberg whom he left behind in New York as much as with European painters such as Fautrier and Fontana whom he discovered after his arrival in Rome. The chasms between Europe and the United States as a much as that between Avant-garde and Neo-Avantgarde in Post War art in all instances, prove to be almost insurmountable, nevertheless Leeman attempts to give us a monograph as an almost therapeutical response to that dilemma.
- 14 What we gain, undoubtedly, is the fullest and most detailed reading, a meticulous tracing of every tendency and detail in Twombly's poetical and painterly pursuit. Twombly emerges, as we had reasons to assume for a long time, as an immensely learned and traditional artist, whose choice of a secondary European identity appears here as perfectly plausible. It seems that he decided early on that he should engage in a pilgrimage to Rome in the same way that generations of artists throughout the nineteenth century, from the German Nazarenes to the English Pre-Raphaelites had pursued it. The aim of that pilgrimage in Twombly's case, it appears in Leeman's study, seems to have been the same as theirs: to rediscover the legacies of a supposedly classical

and transhistorical European foundation of culture, situated at the intersection between Judeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman traditions.

- 15 That this fiction would resurface in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and in a desperate attempt to escape the rise of American post-totalitarian Consumer culture, seems less surprising with the hindsight of fifty years. What must have seemed at the time of Twombly's departure on the road to Rome as a rather eccentric and elitist artistic project and self projection, appears now as a perfectly plausible, if not courageous act of refusal and resistance.
- 16 Twombly's move at times seems to reverberate, in its latent exoticisms, with earlier artistic departures to provinces or islands of pre-industrial civilizations, even if that move is now conducted in reverse, from the primitivity of a rapidly advancing techno-industrial American Capitalist consumer culture to the refinement and the rubble of the Graeco Roman Empire in post fascist Italy. Leeman gives us an astonishingly scrupulous and detailed account of every turn in Twombly's perpetual manoeuvres to situate his work within that panorama of the shards and ruins of European humanist culture and we benefit immensely on every page from Leeman's exceptionally devoted and exhaustive learnedness of every detail of mythology and philosophy, of poetry and classical knowledge invoked in Twombly's abstract Neo-Classicism. Yet, when it comes to evaluating the actual status and function of Twombly's recitations of those fragments of a culture that—at the moment of post war reconstruction culture—is incessantly disappearing for Italians and Americans alike, both the format and the method of the monograph fail us.
- 17 Leeman's method excels on all of those accounts where the tasks are defined as the identification and the circumscription of the scope of classical learning to be redeemed by Twombly's ambition. But the method does not allow him to theorize Twombly's allegorical project adequately in its heroic failure to resuscitate that legacy with the means of contemporary painting. And "contemporary" means many things in this case, since Twombly is contemporaneous to Pollock's presumed expressivity as he is to Johns' epistemological scepticism, his work articulates the universal withering away of painting as evident as does the work of Manzoni, another contemporary closer to Twombly's newly elected home. Or as importantly, yet less immediately visible, Twombly is also the contemporary of another American, born like Twombly in 1928, whose project it was to finally industrialize painting altogether to and make it the mere coda of consumer and spectacle culture.
- 18 Warhol and Twombly, however, do not only share the same year of birth, they are also linked through the dialectical bonds of affirmation and negation. The latter, is of course Twombly's, but once again we would never learn from Leeman that his painterly project was suspended in that dialectic, since he constructs Twombly in an almost singular and splendid isolation. Therefore, we will never understand from Leeman's study what Twombly's markmaking and Warhol's silkscreening share with Johns' molecular deposits of encaustic paint or Rauschenberg's chemically induced dye transfer imagery.
- 19 Typically, and admirably, we have to admit, in Leeman's learned account Twombly's graphisms originate from the Egyptian *glyph* and other forms of writing and mark making in antiquity. And it does not seem to disturb Leeman that this elegant attempt at situating Twombly's precarious marks in a transhistorical trajectory of universal collective human desires for self articulation in scriptural mark making processes, not only dislodges Twombly from a more recent modernist tradition of anti-aesthetic

impulses that range from George Grosz's celebration of the Berlin public toilets as his induction into drawing, to Brassai's and Dubuffet's 1940s invocation of the graffito as a mark that simultaneously signals primitive origins and apocalyptic ends of the civilizatory impulse of writing.

- 20 Of course Leeman has the testimony Twombly's own rejection of any such association on his side, since understandably Twombly would become increasingly tired of the eternal slurs of critics misreading his drawings and painterly marks as invocations of that singular site of presumably desublimatory, if not debased gestures. Yet the tension in the identification of Twombly's "essential" strategy, i.e. the transformation of the graphic structures of traditional drawing and painting into *psychosomatic* marks, permeates Leeman's own approach. While initially providing us with an account that lucidly positions the 'glyph' at the origin of Twombly's hybrid between icon and logos, at a later point in the study he can give us a perfectly convincing psychoanalytical diagnosis of the anal erotic components of painting in general and of Twombly's work in particular.
- 21 Another example where that rift is blatant is in the re-occurring discussions of Twombly's painterly support. Leeman frequently associates Twombly's whiteness with the architecture of Mediterranean houses, a strange relapse into a conventional model of referentiality, narrative and representation, a model that is totally incompatible not only with Twombly's epistemological project, but equally with the overall theoretical ambition of Leeman's study itself.
- 22 After all, the white grounds of Twombly's paintings and drawings are the grounds of an emerging scripture that displaces the last traces of painting's seemingly inextricable intertwinement with mythical forms of experience. And it is precisely this historical process, namely painting's irreversible tendency towards textuality, a process that leads from Twombly to Robert Ryman and from Ryman to Lawrence Weiner that disappears under the restoration of organic forms of meaning production inherent in such arguments about the mimetic motivation of Twombly's "walls." We suspect that such a relapse is inherently given with the format of the monograph itself, since it is innate to the monographic project to permeate all structures of meaning and representation with an underlying aspiration for causally motivated and organically mediated explanations.
- 23 If the proto-conceptual tendency towards textuality is indeed, as we would agree with the author, one of the most important aspects of Twombly's work, the mere memory of Mallarmé, moving as it might be, will not suffice in that discussion: the task would remain still to clarify not only whether Twombly repositioned painting in the 1960s in the manner that Mallarmé repositioned poetry in the 1880s, but whether the socio-political framework and the ramifications of the rewriting of painting would be comparable to the radicality of Mallarmé's interventions in the domain of textuality.
- 24 Ultimately, what Leeman's admirable book forces us to consider is the value of our intense methodological differences, and the profoundly different conceptions of history and the "historical" dimension of Twombly's work. Leeman seems to argue, and for the most part, splendidly and convincingly, that what makes Twombly's work "historical" is in fact its singularity, its extraordinary refinement, the extreme differentiation of its subjectivity that align it in some kind of transhistorical continuity or elective affinity with the great traditions of the nineteenth century, be they Neo-Classicism or Symbolism. The price we pay for that extrapolation of Twombly into the spheres of transhistorical aesthetic experience, is of course the loss of the almost aggressive specificity of his work, the interventionist urgency with which it appeared in the late fifties in order to

contribute to a crucial agenda of that period : to dislodge the myth of Pollock by transforming gesture into scripture, to reconceive the Surrealist unconscious and its belated American automatisms in an almost proto-Lacanian conception of the unconscious as textuality, and to transform painting itself into an allegorical incantation of a disappearing classical world of mythical experience, both mourning its loss and celebrating the transcendence of painting's seemingly eternal bonds with the somatic and the cult.