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> And let poetry be, let it dwell and remain, by the echo that painting can make of it ...
> (Hubert Damisch[1])

Prologue

My interest in the work of Cy Twombly and in how we might understand its particular appeal and significance – what critical terms and descriptions would be adequate to account for his practice – originated in an argument. Some years ago in New York, possibly the mid-1990s, I was in the initial stages of planning a large exhibition of the paintings of Leon Golub, a project which eventually became his retrospective.[2] I had, on occasion, visited shows with Golub – an activity that could be rewarding and exasperating in equal measure, depending upon his interest or respect for the work we were viewing. In this particular instance, the latter was the case as we found ourselves at the Gagosian gallery and the display of a single, very large painting by Twombly. (I think, in retrospect, it must have been 'Untitled' 1994.) This was at a time when Golub was very conscious of his own historical place in (or, rather, exclusion from) the narratives of post-war American art, and the operations of a gallery like Gagosian, and the success and celebration of an artist such as Twombly, were not at all to his taste. We discussed, argued and agreed to disagree about Twombly and I felt frustrated in that I had been unable to answer his criticisms with convincing counter-arguments. I cannot now remember the precise terms of our debate, or even the general nature of his critique, but I do recall thinking that some of Golub's paintings shared certain formal and textual characteristics with Twombly, and that there were certainly thematic interests in common. Golub's early works, particularly the classically derived Heads and Figures of the 1950s painted in oil and enamel depicting Prophets, Kings, Shamans, Priests and Philosophers emerging from brutally agitated surfaces (often these were painted on board), using a technique verging on the awkward and edging towards the grotesque, share an affinity with the scratches, scribbles and erasures of Twombly. (Indeed, in a catalogue essay for Golub's 1957 exhibition in Chicago, the critic Lawrence Alloway concluded that 'Golub's images are battered and corroded and, as we can infer from their original state of wholeness, we read paint as signs of interference', an assertion that could equally apply to Twombly's works of the same period.)[3] However, a stronger connection comes from their shared interest in Antiquity, although where Golub found a tragic masculinity in the struggling giants depicted in the high reliefs of the Great Altar of Zeus at Pergamon, Twombly's classicism is directed more towards the sensuous image and its hedonistic qualities. It is only in Golub's late works, particularly the drawings that occupied his final years, that Bacchanalian revelry asserts its presence.

1. Hubert Damisch 'As to the Title: Painting Under Cancellation', in *Cy Twombly* exhibition catalogue (Galerie Karsten Gere: Koln, Paris, Milan 1997), p. 96.

2. *Leon Golub: Paintings 1950–2000*, opened at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, July 2000.

3. Lawrence Alloway, catalogue essay for *Leon Golub, paintings from 1956–57* (Alan Frumkin Gallery: Chicago, 1957).

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So began a process of thinking about and looking at Twombly – another key encounter being the display of the Lepanto series of works at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. Finally, the exhibition 'Fifty Years of Works on Paper' at the Serpentine Gallery in April/May 2004, and the symposium I was invited to co-organise, provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon Twombly's art and the critical writings that have addressed his practice over the years, and even to follow Roland Barthes's example to try and replicate a drawing as a way of seeing.

Part 1

> A few drops of ink, a sheet of paper as material for the accumulation and co-ordination of moments and acts, are all that is required. (Paul Valéry[4])

> Before everything else, there happen . . . some pencil strokes, oils, paper, canvas. (Roland Barthes[5])

Both Barthes and Valéry make it seem so simple. Encouraged to take up paper and ink after looking at some Twombly drawings (he even gives us the date and time of day – 'still dark' on 31 December 1978, and 'still raining'), Barthes soon discovers, however, that, in the actual practice of mark-making it is a far from straightforward endeavour to 'go about drawing a line that isn't stupid'.[6] The critic turns artist in the forelorn attempt to comprehend what his critical tools have failed to provide – an interpretation adequate to its object: 'I realize that I shall never be able to reproduce this background . . . I don't even know how its done'.[7] Despite this lament over his failure at (re)production, he had earlier asserted that 'Twombly's art consists in making us see things'. But what is there to be seen is not a question of subject matter, always an elusive quest with Twombly anyway ('look not for the Italians' warns Barthes, despite that painting's nomination), but resides in the *materia prima* of painting: the trace of graphite across a surface, the presence of colour – 'this touch of pink, this brown smudge', of the responsibility in any reading to also pay close attention to the signifier.[8] Some of this can be described as a practice which, through repetition and the body's habituations, becomes accessible to the inquiring eye. Twombly, Barthes asserts, employs a working method in the service of 'dirtying' the virgin surface, be it paper or canvas. For this artist, dirt is not the abjected substance once described by Mary Douglas as 'matter out of place', but, rather, a truth of painting.

There is an extensive literature on Twombly and an artistic career that now spans over half a century, an archive that, given his range of intellectual and artistic interests, includes contributions from artists, writers, poets, philosophers, critics and art historians: Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara, Robert Motherwell, Marcelin Pleynet, Roland Barthes, Hubert Damisch, Katharina Schmidt, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Stephen Bann and Simon Schama in the catalogue for the Serpentine exhibition and, most recently, a critical monograph by Richard Leeman. Charles Olson – the poet and Rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 to 1957, wrote one of the first texts on Twombly and discerned, even at this formative stage, characteristics of his practice that recur in much of the subsequent critical writing: 'honor and elegance are here once more present in the act of paint'. Add to this O'Hara's impressionistic account of Twombly's first

4. Paul Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, trans. D. Paul (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1960).

5. Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art' (1979), in Nicola Del Roscio (ed.), *Writings on Cy Twombly* (Art Data: Munich, 2002), pp. 102–13.

6. Roland Barthes, 'Non Multa Sed Multum' (1976), in Nicola Del Roscio, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, pp. 88–101.

7. Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', p. 105.

8. Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', p. 112.

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major exhibition of wall-sized, graffiti-covered paintings at the Stable Gallery, New York in 1955: 'A bird seems to have passed through the impasto with cream-coloured screams and bitter claw-marks', and we have examples of a significant tendency in Twombly appreciation, an emphasis upon sensation and sensibility that Barthes, somewhat later, did nothing to negate and Schama takes to rhetorical extremes.[9]

Barthes's essay 'The Wisdom of Art', commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for the catalogue for the artist's mid-career retrospective, 1979, favours poetic metaphor over historical or biographical detail. Given Barthes's consistent attentiveness to the semiotics of the image it is perhaps surprising that he so rarely directed his critical gaze towards painting, although the choice of Twombly for not one, but two essays, does clearly make a kind of sense. ('Non Multa Sed Multum' was written for Vol. 6 of the Catalogue Raisonné of Works on Paper, 1976.) In both essays Barthes is extremely selective in the works he cites (mostly from the early 1960s) and extremely generous in extrapolating from details of facture and figure to an 'ecriture' of style and expression founded on gesture, event and the body. In 'Non Multa Sed Multum', Twombly's drawings and paintings are interpreted as a scene of writing: 'Twombly tells us that the essence of writing is neither form nor usage but simply gesture – the gesture that produces it by allowing it to happen'. This imaginative gesture – 'something on the order of the supplement to an act' – is then likened to the Japanese term for a Zen state, 'satori', an interruption to the sequence of cause and effect that awakens the subject to 'a radical negativity': 'I think of Twombly's "graphisms" as so many little satoris'.[10]

'The Wisdom of Art' opens with Barthes drawing attention to the primary signifiers of pictorial meaning – the *materia prima* (the alchemical reference connotes the transformational aspect of the creative process): just as the universal access to language is codified into literary style in the particularity of sentence structure and composition, so the visual artist works with the materials of art: 'Before everything else, there happen some pencil strokes, oils, paper, canvas'. Despite the will to form, for Barthes it is Twombly's emphasis upon the materiality of his art – a 'being there' – that precedes and succeeds any secondary representational property. This is, then, an art of embodiment, of a corporeal presence transmitted via instrument (brush, pencil) and matter (paint, graphite) to surface: enunciatory gestures that can be categorised as 'scratching', 'smudging' and 'smearing', although each category includes a complex and diverse variety of exemplars such as direction, weight, rapidity of movement – all the possible motor-reflex operations contributing to the nature of a mark-making process that can best be described as rhythmic. Barthes, however, suggests that there is a generic quality to each sub-set of gestures: 'we would say that the essence of things is not in their weight but in their lightness'.[11] Here, perhaps, his insistence upon Twombly's as an art of poesis and sensation leads him to ignore aspects that imply a more analytic or systematic aesthetic.

Twombly's use of proper names and forms of writing raises for Barthes the central question of representation. The viewer follows the interpretive suggestion offered by a name – 'The Italians', 'The Sahara', 'Adonais' – and is frustrated. Looking, we find nothing except 'the painting itself'; a transformation has been performed and the viewer 'has an intimation of another logic', the logic of painting. The relevant paragraph can still frame

9. Frank O'Hara, 'Cy Twombly' (1955) in Nicola Del Roscio, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, p. 34.

10. Barthes. 'Non Multa Sed Multum', p. 106.

11. Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art'.

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any current discussion of contemporary painting. 'Although abstract painting has been in the making for a long time . . . each new artist endlessly debates the question again: in art, linguistic problems are never really settled and language always turns back to reflect on itself. It is therefore never naive . . . to ask oneself before a painting what it represents . . . It is all the more legitimate to tackle again and again the question of meaning, that it is precisely this question which prevents the universality of painting. If so many people have the impression of "not understanding" a painting, it is because they want meaning and this painting does not give them any'.[12] Letters, words, names and phrases appear in Twombly's paintings and drawings from the mid-1950s and the graphic dimension of text is a constant – the gestural aspect of writing as an identifiable linguistic sign emerges painfully, but also sensuously, from the chaos of scribble.

In the genealogy of expressive figuration, Twombly's art, despite the debt to Pollock, describes hand/eye coordination; even across the expanded field of his largest canvases what is suggested is, in Hubert Damisch's term, 'restrained action', calligraphy rather than choreography. What the viewer beholds are the encoded memories of the body's experiences and potentiality interwoven with, and figured through indexical traces of actual movement. Even in the early works, apparently random or semi-chaotic passages co-exist alongside order and regulation – a Hericlitean flux that simultaneously registers the body's pulsions and the mind's cognition. Thus four of the 'Bolsena' works (1969) look like something and nothing, suggesting notations made in the process of some form of assemblage, maybe a carpenter's measurements or an architect's jottings: rectangles, numbers, vague forms, words, all apparently made hurriedly and with an eye to something else (Fig. 1). The kind of semi-intentional, semi-abstracted doodles made whilst attention is focused elsewhere – making a phone call, a meeting, a situation of slight boredom where the mind wanders from the immediate present allowing other thoughts, images, the texture of reality to impress upon consciousness and leave their trace. We tend to overlook the everydayness and matter-of-factness of the work of the work of art – all the devices, tricks, deferrals and delays that either combat boredom or pass for reverie. It is worth noting that Twombly initially experimented with Surrealist techniques of 'psychic automatism' (Breton) when he produced the Augusta drawings at night, in the darkness, while completing his military service at Camp Gordon, Georgia and Leeman also connects this procedure with Olson's equating of poetic verse with the breath of life.[13]

There is much to be said on boredom and failure – or, the avoidance of the former and fear of the latter in the making of art. This is other than the artist's intention of engaging the viewer's interest, rather of the interest of the work for the artist. The aim of not making boring art arises from the desire to avoid being bored, and yet many of the processes and procedures of art-making are boring: laborious, repetitive, wearisome and, yet, necessary. Perhaps this is more to do with creating a (mental) space where nothing much happens in order that something unexpected might occur, an essential stillness through which the peripheral, the overlooked, the liminal, might inform the imagining consciousness. Or, pace Freud, the function that unconscious intentions perform in the aesthetic imagination, the 'symptomatic acts' described in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* that give rise to neurosis can, in another register, signify the deliberate errors that maintain a tension between control, risk and uncertainty that is the

12. Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', p. 148.

13. Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, trans. Mary Whittall (Thames & Hudson: London, 2005), p. 31.

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Fig. 1. Cy Twombly, 'Bolsena', 1969, pencil and colour pencil on paper, 70 × 100 cm. © Cy Twombly.

most productive state. (There is another history of Modernism to be written on the dialectic of boredom and failure, from Malevich's 'Black Square' to John Cage's Composition *4′33″* supposedly composed as a direct response to viewing Twombly's and Rauschenberg's exhibition at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery in 1953, to Warhol's 'Brillo Boxes', Nauman's studio videos, etc.) Many of Twombly's drawings suggest this, which has also led to associations with the mark-making of children, which is characterised by an uneven attention span and a sense of the contingent, and to the art of Paul Klee. Two early drawings, 'Untitled' (1954) suggest a feverish activity as the hand appears intent upon simply obliterating the blank space of the paper ground, the lines tracing an agitatedly active movement, a repetitive circling and up-and-down scratching of pencil and crayon. What reveals an aesthetic intention, the coordination of hand and eye, is the variety of mark, of intensities across the surface, of the suggestion of an order and direction motivating the expressive dynamic. (Barthes expresses this thus: 'In short we don't see anything, except perhaps a kind of intelligibility'.[14])

Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* enumerates the events that commonly interrupt the flow of daily life and experience, the slips of the tongue and the pen, the misreadings, bungled actions and errors that reveal the unconscious at work. In a section exemplifying his observation that 'nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined', he considers the use of numbers, apparently selected at random, but which, on closer examinaton, are revealed as symptomatic of a determination from the unconscious. From these and similar cases, Freud arrives at the conclusion that 'the mechanism of parapraxes and chance actions' corresponds to the structural elements in the analysis of dreams and dream-work: 'In both cases we find condensations and compromise-formations (contaminations)'.[15] If this seems like a detour in our analysis, my defence is that it is a way of addressing the frequent observation of writers on Twombly of the play of

14. Barthes, 'Non Multa Sed Multum'.

15. Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Alan Tyson, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 5, 1976, pp. 303–42. Penguin Books, London.

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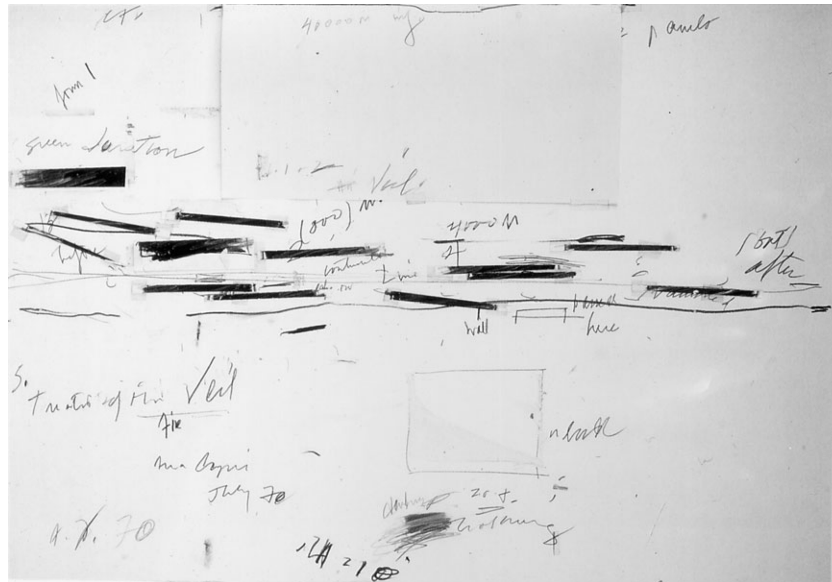

Fig. 2. Cy Twombly, 'Study for the Treatise on the Veil', 1970, wax crayon, pencil, colour pencil, scotch tape and collage on paper, 70 × 100 cm. © Cy Twombly.

intention and chance, deliberation and accident, mark and erasure, that characterise his work, and the assumption that something more than idle doodling, scribbling or pattern-making is going on. Many drawings and paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s abound with numerical jottings, corrections, repetitions, some connoting measurement and distance, others proportion or duration, a spatio-temporal (anti)logic that opens the field of reference to the time of myth and the space of the cosmos. Thus the four panels forming 'Veil of Orpheus' (1968) offer a linear chart of immesurable distance and temporal flow, interrupted by arbitrary intervals marked by a word: 'stop', 'time', 'infinite'. Similarly, the later drawing 'Study for the Treatise on the Veil' (1970) combines legible and indeterminate inscriptions above and below a broken line bisecting the paper (Fig. 2). The word 'before' is written to the left, 'time' in the centre and 'after' to the right; the number '40000' occurs at the top of the collaged paper rectangle, and the date and location of the drawing – 'Capri, July 70' – are scrawled beneath the drawing's title. Also legible are the words 'green duration', 'wall' and 'veil'; the rest, however, is inference or erasure. (In *The Judgement of Paris*, Damisch's enquiry into the philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse on the relation of the beautiful to visual pleasure, he develops a theory of 'analytic iconology' to account for matters of representability, linking 'art-work' to 'dream-work', recognising that what connects them are questions of transformation: 'The rule of structural thought ... applies here as it does elsewhere: what counts is less what a work – whether of art or philosophy – represents or manifests as what it *transforms*.'[16])

Damisch, in a catalogue essay for Twombly's exhibition at the Galerie Karsten Greve, Cologne (1997) reinterprets Barthes's 'prima materia' as an 'instinctual archeology' – an exploration of the relationship of painting to poetry whose visual tropes are 'cancellation, blurring and erasure', a visual rhetoric figuring 'iteration, repetition and overlay'. Paying close attention (unlike Barthes) to the specifics of pictorial meaning, Damisch

16. Hubert Damisch, *The Judgement of Paris*, trans. John Goodman (University of Chicago: Chicago, IL, 1996).

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observed the reccurence of operations that suggest a kind of geometry; of lines becoming planes, measurements, and a marginalia of numbers, scales, coordinates: 'the digits (or ciphers) sometimes follow each other in simple numerations or in enigmatic progressions; they scatter, line up, superimpose, and are occasionally joined by the signs for addition, multiplication, or subtraction and function as the residual witnesses of an operation or demonstration whose meaning escapes us.'[17] Furthermore, the act of erasure carried a certain ontologial weight in the early 1950s as a process of both correction and negation given the accretion of meanings around the gestural mark as the signifier of authenticity, spontaneity and 'freedom'. The critic Robert Rosenblum linked Twombly's incessant erasures to the iconic work of Rauschenberg when, in an act of 'patricidal exorcism', he meticulously and laboriously rubbed out a drawing given to him by de Kooning. ('Erased de Kooning Drawing',1953.[18]) However, Rauschenberg's anti-gestural performative action makes more sense in the context of his 'White Paintings' of 1951, and 'Black Paintings' of 1953, the influence of John Cage via his time at Black Mountain College, and the temporary rupture in his close relationship with Twombly. Rauschenberg had painted 'Should Have Come First' in 1951 shortly after meeting and becoming involved with Twombly, an event coincidental with his wife's pregnancy. Charles Olson commented on the emotional intensity of the relationship between the two artists in a letter to fellow poet, Robert Creely: 'I had noticed, a few nights ago, Twombly's concern for this boy . . . that sort of attention, and warning one takes as feminine, guarding the beloved'.[19] Rauschenberg subsequently overpainted 'Should Have Come First' following his return to America from Europe in 1953, transforming it into one of the Black Paintings.

Part 2

Twombly's interest in Paul Klee is frequently alluded to in the critical literature. Indeed, his North Africa drawings parallel both the orientalist recordings made by Klee during the brief period he spent in Tunisia in 1916, and Dubuffet's sketches of the Sahara made a few years earlier. (In a letter sent to his friend, Leslie Cheek, from Tangier, Twombly enthused 'I can't begin to say how Africa has affected my work (for the better I hope)'.[20]) Twombly was also following a long line of artist-travellers to North Africa and was certainly aware of the sketchbooks of Delacroix. However, there is another connection through the trace of the Bauhaus at Black Mountain College, where Twombly attended in 1951, and the influential role of Klee's *Padagogisches Skizzenbuch*, the second of the fourteen Bauhaus Books edited by Walter Gropius and Lazlo Maholy-Nagy and first published in 1925. The exercises described and illustrated by Klee in *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (published in an English translation in 1944) became a cornerstone of art education across Europe and North America and Twombly must have been familiar with Klee's instruction to take 'An active line for a walk', particularly as the tutor in drawing was that veteran of the Bauhaus, Josef Albers. (Although, after sixteen years, Albers left Black Mountain for Yale in 1950, his influence persisted during the period of Twombly's attendance.) *Pedagogical Sketchbook* is divided into four sections: 'Proportionate Line and Structure', 'Dimension and Balance', 'Gravitational Curve' and 'Kinetic and Chromatic Energy'. Along with the Jena Lecture (January 1928), later published as *On Modern Art* (1945), Klee

17. Damisch 'As to the Title', p. 86.

18. Robert Rosenblum, 'Cy Twombly', catalogue essay for *Art of Our Time: The Saatchi Collection*, vol. 2 (Lund Humphries: London and New York, 1984).

19. Jonathan Katz, 'Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg', lecture for Dartmouth College, 1998. www.yale.edu/lesbiangay/Pages/Academic/JK-vrs.html

20. Kirk Varnedoe, 'Inscriptions in Arcadia', in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1994), p. 56.

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outlined the creative imagination's processes as a series of problem-solving activities, from simple to complex, adding elements to art's *prima materia*, from line and tone to colour, form and content. In his Introduction to *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, Maholy-Nagy described it as 'the abstract of Paul Klee's inductive vision', with each section advancing a paradigm case of 'the path from the particular to the universal'.[21] As an interpretive model, Twombly's pictorialism seems more accessible via Klee than Barthes. What sense can we make of Barthes's assertion that 'It is in a smear that we find the truth of redness; it is in a wobbly line that we find the truth of pencil' other than Klee's observation that chromatic intensity is revealed in tonal variation, and a 'wobbly line' is perhaps better understood as 'an active line . . . circumscribing itself'? In fact, the opening instructions of *Pedagogical Sketchbook* could serve as directions for reproducing Twombly's graphic meanderings: 'An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal . . . A walk for a walk's sake . . . The same line accompanied by complementary forms . . . Two secondary lines, moving around an imaginary line'.[22] In a short statement published in the journal *Esperienza Moderna*, Twombly himself indicated that line functioned in his work to articulate and organize experience and sensation: 'Most painting defines the image. It is at this point that I break with the more general process of painting. Each line is now the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate, it is the sensation of its own realization. The imagery is one of private indulgences, rather than an abstract totality of visual perception'.[23]

If Barthes poetics of line, gesture and event map one section of the landscape of commentary on Twombly, another frequent approach privileges the signified, tracing classical sources and their respective epic mythological narratives derived from his titles and pictorial inscriptions. Katherina Schmidt, who has had a long-term working relationship with the artist as both curator and critical interpreter, best represents this response, uncovering the literary sources and references derived from the paintings and drawings. In one such essay written for the catalogue to the Menil Collection: 'The Way to Arcadia: Thoughts on Myth and Image in Cy Twombly's Painting', Schmidt meticulously documents his iconographic and iconological schemata, from Greek and Roman archetypes to their subsequent transformations in the literature and art of the western tradition up to the present. From *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to Poussin's 'Empire of Flora', and from the poetry of Keats and Dryden to Mallarmé and the Moderns, she describes a process of 'circling Twombly's pictures with our interpretations, following lives, thinking about obscure symbols, spelled names, and becoming involved in stories.'[24] Schmidt's caution over too literal interpretations based upon tracing a classical or literary source implied in the verb 'circling' is also emphasised by Richard Leeman who suggests that 'evocation' and poesis are the primary values to be inferred from words and phrases, thus shifting the interpretive register from definition 'into the realm of metaphor and connotation'.[25]

Then there are the biographical and art historical accounts on Twombly, frequently selecting what are considered the significant moments, conjunctures and connections marking his productive life. Generally these narratives start with his early life in Lexington, Virginia and initial art school training at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, followed by a period in New York at the Art Students League (he probably saw the Gorky retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art at

21. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, 'Introduction', in Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. S. Moholy-Nagy (Faber & Faber: London, 1944).

22. Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, pp. 16–17.

23. Cy Twombly, 'Signs', *Esperienza Moderna*, no. 2, 1957. Quoted in Linda Norden, 'What Painting Can Contain', exhibition catalogue, *Cy Twombly: A Gathering of Time, Six Paintings and a Sculpture* (Gagosian Gallery: New York, 2003), p. 10.

24. Katherina Schmidt, 'The Way to Arcadia: Thoughts on Myth and Image in Cy Twombly's Painting', catalogue essay, *The Menil Collection* (Houston Fine Art Press: Houston, Texas, 1990), p. 16.

25. Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, p. 96.

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this time). It was here that he met Rauschenberg, who soon after persuaded Twombly to enrol at Black Mountain College. Much of this literature places particular emphasis upon the formative period of the early 1950s when, in Marcelin Pleynet's words, 'the New York scene started to move and install itself in an avant-garde college located in the hills of North Carolina'.[26] Under the direction of the poet and critic Charles Olson, many of the major figures of the New York literary and artistic post-War movements passed through, either as tutors, students or visitors. During the summer of 1951, when Twombly was in residence, the painting department was co-taught by Motherwell, Franz Kline and Ben Shahn, music had David Tudor and John Cage, Merce Cunningham led the dance workshops, and Olson took classes in literature, poetry and criticism. A shared experience across all art forms at this time was a re-engagement, via the notion of 'event' and 'gesture', with the Surrealists' experiments with 'automatic writing' and 'psychic automatism' which, in Twombly's case, resulted in a 'field' of inscription determined by the performative encounter of chance and causality, graffito and nomination.

Pleynet's insistence on the formative influence of Black Mountain – 'if you want to understand what was happening in the United States among the generation of artists and intellectuals who were twenty years old in the 1950s, it is necessary to understand what was being established, and how, in that little North Carolina college' – derives from his belief that this marked a decisive shift between the immediate post-war generation of American artists and those whose aesthetic language was generated from Abstract Expressionism's mediation of the Surrealists' experiments in automatic writing.[27] Central to these younger artists' concerns was a subjective relation to the world inscribed in the relationship of painting to writing, of gesture not (only) as the trace of the body imprinted as a semi-automatic state of being, but as the interplay of sensation and sensibility mapping a pictorial field of possibilities. What, for Pleynet, is specific to Twombly's figuring of the body/world relation is the ensemble of factors framing the context for enactment ('cultural, ideological'), a context through which automatism was received and understood, and 'a body of work based on the unique moment of a personal syncretism'.[28]

Black Mountain College exerted a considerable influence on all who attended the various studio programmes and workshops, partly through the formidable tutorial teams assembled by Olson. (To give an indication of the ambition and inclusiveness of the programme, Pleynet lists all those invited to participate during 1950, although not all were able to attend that year: 'William Carlos Williams, Lionel Trilling, Paul Goodman, Alfred Kazin, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Mark Tobey, Robert Gwathmey, Jackson Pollock, Clement Greenberg, Adolph Gottlieb, Yves Tanguy, Mark Rothko, Karl Knaths, Loren McIver, Theodoros Stamos, Ben Shahn and I. Rice Pereira'.)[29] Founded in 1933 and based upon the philosophy of John Dewey as an experiment in communal living and educational innovation in the creative arts, the college was temporary home for many of the American Avant Garde. The year that Twombly attended coincided with a collaboration between Ben Shahn and Olson, an exchange of work on the theme of Maya 'glyphs' (from hieroglyph), with additional contributions from the dancer Katherine Litz and the musician Lou Harrison. For Olson, this project represented the paradigm-case of Black Mountain's cross-media, trans-cultural investigations. Following this, Shahn's painting underwent a

26. Marcelin Pleynet, 'Designs in Letters, Numbers and Words or Painting by Ear' (1976), in Nicola Del Roscio, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, pp. 74–87.

27. Pleynet, 'Designs in Letters', p. 77.

28. Pleynet, 'Designs in Letters', p. 78.

29. Pleynet, 'Designs in Letters', p. 77.

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dramatic stylistic shift to what he described as his 'palimpsest' images. Although retaining the figure as a central and organising motif, his work became increasingly gestural and a document of the corrections, alterations and revisions that traced the process of image formation. A later account of this period by his wife, Bernada Shahn, could also stand as a description of Twombly's drawing process: 'He had found in the markings and tracings that were left upon the picture ... as he might wash out and rework an image, an effective pictorial element. He called such an accumulation of traces a "palimpsest"; he had, at earlier times, expunged such marks, but now he studied their qualities, preserving the effect as part of the completed work'.[30]

Following Pleynet's account, Daniel Belgrad argues that creative experimentation across the American Avant Garde during the immediate postwar period exhibited the 'defining characteristic ... (of) spontaneous composition in conjunction with unfinished "open" forms'.[31] Added to this was a shared interest in Native American symbolisation and the construction of a visual or 'ideographic' language – a visual semiotics rooted in the material referent but rich in connotational possibilities, an approach exemplified in the pages of the journal *Iconograph*, published in New York between 1946 and October 1948. Olson's particular investment in the 'glyph' was partly inspired by his studies into Mayan culture and also his discovery, in 1945, of the earlier writings of Ernest Fenellosa on Chinese ideograms, all of which informed his teaching at Black Mountain. 'For Olson, the lesson of the Maya glyphs was to point poetry toward a philological project that involved recovering (and in the process, disclosing) the material histories of word-concepts'.[32]

The paintings Twombly made during his stay at Black Mountain were exhibited at his first solo show at the Seven Stairs Gallery in Chicago, organised by Aaron Siskind and Noah Goldowsky. Motherwell, in his statement for the catalogue, described Twombly's process as both 'orgiastic' and 'rational, often surprisingly simply symmetrical, and invariably harmonious'. For Motherwell, Twombly's aesthetic heritage derived from Picasso, 'the massive, decadent surface ... of Dubuffet, the deliberate abandon and sensuality of the ... New York School of abstract expressionists'.[33] Although not specifically mentioned in Motherwell's essay, it was Pollock's interpretation of André Breton's notion of a new expressivity derived from automatism (which, for Pollock, manifested in the dripped line as trace and location of the subject) that enabled his personal language of figure/ground relationships: a layering of graphite and coloured line and maculation that were cancelled almost at the moment of their emergence, a process which, with accompanying poetic inscriptions, lent an aura of historical accretion at both the material and the mythic levels of signification. Damisch argues that what Twombly took from Pollock was 'a spreading out, a distribution or dissemination over the canvas or paper of residual traces, presented as betokening the stages of a process which cannot strictly be called painting, but which still lends the picture ... its meaning as such', whereas, for Rosalind Krauss, it was his reading of Pollock's marks as 'fundamentally violent' that initiated his break from a form of gestural abstraction that indexically traced an artistic identity.[34] For Krauss and others (e.g. Benjamin Buchloh), this connected Twombly's practice to that of the graffitist for whom 'absence' rather than 'presence' is the defining characteristic: a surface is despoiled in an act of violent, and frequently sexual, ruination.[35] Twombly's awareness of the

30. Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, IL, 1998), pp. 34–5.

31. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 39.

32. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, p. 91.

33. Quoted in Varnedoe, 'Inscriptions in Arcadia'. The Chicago show was closely followed by Twombly's first New York exhibition at the Kootz Gallery – 'New Talent: Gaudy and Twombly', December 1951.

34. Damisch, 'As To The Title', p. 94.

35. See Rosalind Krauss 'Cy's Up', in *Artforum*, September 1994, p. 71.

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graffitied and eroded surfaces of buildings, from the Ancients to the sub-cultural outpourings of Italian youth, is evident in both the form and content of word and image – of marks which are, in their repetitive intensity score (and scar) the pictorial ground, and in the style of the lettering, suggestive of a furtive, hurried, slightly inept guiding hand; of a performative act interrupted midway, trailing off into formless scribble.[36] In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss reads Twombly's drawings of the mid-late 1950s as an extension of the violent gestures initiated by Pollock, but directed through a material semiosis – the graffitiist's enactment of a performative linguistics: 'the desecration of a field . . . through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring, jabbing'.[37] For Krauss, Twombly destroys 'good form', a corporeal attack ('so many wounds and scorings'), an echo of Bataille's commentary in the short-lived Surrealist journal, *Documents*, on *L'Art Primitif*, Georges Luquet's text on the developmental schema of our formal visual language from random marks to accurate representation. Bataille argued against this logic of order and for a 'destructive drive as the motor of the creative impulse – the "informe"'.[38]

This, then, was the cultural arena in which Twombly was developing his own pictorial language and against which, like Johns and Rauschenberg, he could react, preferring in the 1950s a sparse, linear and textual vocabulary, blurring the distinction between figure and ground and which was in stark contrast to the hegemony of gestural abstraction. In addition, what separated his aesthetic formation from his peers was his decision to reverse the narrative of American modernism and embrace a European classical heritage and Mediterranean culture including a particular quality of luminescence. However, it is important to recognise that he took with him an aesthetic vocabulary predisposed towards a critical engagement with, rather than a celebration of, the tradition that combined Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies; a structure and geometry but also the carnivalesque and the ambivalence of identity: 'Plato' (1974) and 'Apollo' (1975) accompanied by 'Pan' (1975) and 'Proteus' (1984) (Figs 3 and 4). Leeman refers to Twombly's 'complex weaving of mythological, historical, artistic and literary references' which include 'Keats and Mallarmé, but also Rilke, Valéry and Pessoa . . . Greek mythology, Plato, Homer and Theocritus and, thence, Spenser and Marlowe and, thence, the romanticism of Keats and Shelley'.[39] Finally, Stephen Bann and William Allen argue that, despite Twombly's embrace of a 'symbolic community whose historical roots reach very far back', he has, like Jannis Kounellis, always leaned towards Byzantine culture whose otherness constantly puts into crisis a purely Western imaginary.[40]

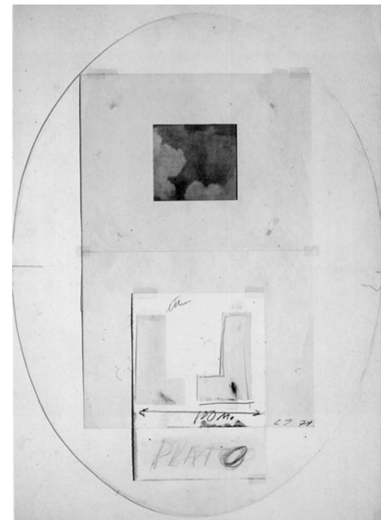

Fig. 3. Cy Twombly, 'Plato', 1974, pencil, colour pencil, wax crayon, scotch tape and collage on paper, 100 × 70 cm. © Cy Twombly.

Fig. 4. Cy Twombly, 'Proteus', 1984, acrylic paint, colour pencil, pencil on paper, 76 × 56 cm. © Cy Twombly.

Part 3

> In point of fact I further believe that the fundamental cases of pictorial metaphor are those where a corporeal thing is metaphorized: the painting becomes a metaphor for the body, or (at any rate) for some part of the body, or for something assimilated to the body. (Richard Wollheim[41])

A rather different consideration of Twombly comes as a by-product of the critical reworking of the history of Conceptual Art, particularly the argument for a counter-narrative to Conceptualism's linguistic turn as a process of analytical reductionism. Thus Benjamin Buchloh links Twombly

36. Brassai's black and white photographs, dating from 1930, of graffiti scrawled over and incised into walls in Paris and Saint-Ouen, were exhibited at MoMA, New York in 1956. These were certainly seen by Twombly and he may have been aware of them from earlier publications, for example in the Surrealist journal *Minataure*. See *Brassai Graffiti* (Flammarion: Paris, 1993).

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Fig. 5. Cy Twombly, 'Untitled', 1961–3, pencil, colour pencil, ballpoint on paper, 50 × 71 cm. © Cy Twombly.

with Nancy Spero as artists interested in reconnecting the Avant Garde's investment in the literary, via the influence of Robert Motherwell, in their own practice, leading to an exploration of 'the status of painterly representation as a linguistic signifier'.[42] In addition, Buchloh suggests that both artists were not only investigating the significance of writing and cultural myth as pictorial constructs, but were also 'reinvesting the painterly mark-making process with a profoundly different type of corporeality'. Similarly, but more prosaically, Yve-Alain Bois summarises Twombly's pictorial investment in the corporeal body as canvases 'replete with sexual ... imagery; phalluses, ass cheeks, vaginas, breasts are the floating inhabitants of Twombly's maelstrom ... But the newcomer is the blob, the turd-like handfull of paint applied to the canvas and unexpectedly remaining there – quite literally excremental when it is brown'[43] (Fig. 5).

The comments of Buchloh and Bois, representative as they are of the critical attention paid to this aspect of Twombly's art, take my thoughts to Richard Wollheim's anti-structuralist (that is, against a semiotic interpretation of the image) study *Painting As An Art*. Across the various chapters and examples, Wollheim advances the case for 'a psychological account of pictorial meaning', which, in the particular context of pictorial metaphor, relies upon the viewer's affective experience of the work, experience which, moreover, is a product of the body as sensory vehicle and receptacle. Comprising the 'affect' are a range of physical and psychological factors – 'emotions, sentiments, phantasies'.[44] Furthermore, Wollheim distinguishes pictorial metaphor from its linguistic counterpart through foregrounding 'the picture as a whole' as the first term in the

37. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA and London, 1993). p. 259.

38. See the discussion of this in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (eds), *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2004), and Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (eds), *Formless: A Users Guide* (Zone Books: New York, 1997).

39. Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, p. 97. See also my review of Leeman in *The Art Newspaper*, vol. XV, no. 166, February 2006.

40. Stephen Bann and William Allen, 'Jannis Kounellis and the Question of High Art', in S. Bann and W. Allen (eds), *Interpreting Contemporary Art* (Reaktion Books: London, 1991), pp. 57–8.

41. Richard Wollheim, *Painting As An Art* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1987), p. 305.

42. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Spero's Other Traditions', in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 429–42.

43. Yve-Alain Bois, 'A Certain Infantile Thing', in Eva Keller and Regula Malin (eds), *Audible Silence: Cy Twombly at Daros* (Scalo: Zurich, 2002), pp. 71–2.

44. Richard Wollheim. 'Painting, Metaphor, Body: Titian, Bellini, De Kooning, etc.', in *Painting As An Art*.

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metaphoric relation. Whereas linguistic metaphor pairs unlike things in order for the one to illuminate the other, in the case of painting, what is illuminated is 'corporeality' (as defined by the *OED*, 'the quality of being, or having, a material body'). How is this quality of the corporeal generated, and how might we read Twombly's work through the metaphor of the body?

The body is present, pictorially, as (1) the represented body; (2) a sense or intimation of the body, that is, how the painting encourages the viewer to engage ideas and/or phantasies of the body, and (3) as the inscribed surface, for instance, the texture (or skin) of the painted surface. As Bois observes, body parts feature consistently and repetitively in Twombly's drawing and painting from the 1950s to the present; secondly, line and colour frequently allude to, or initiate thoughts and recollections of the body in repose and action, or as vulnerable – as acted-upon, as movement, gesture, flesh and blood so that we interpret a mark as trace or residue of an action or event (remember Barthes's description of the varieties of mark-making, 'scratching, smudging, smearing'). Colour plays its part in referencing the body – its interiority connoted in the redness of blood and entrails (the art historical trace of Rembrandt and Soutine), while the pinkness of flesh spreads across surfaces and coalesces into pools of colour with mammarian or penile suggestiveness.[45] Finally, the 'blob' that Bois references (and how can this be specified – when does point become line, line become plane, or blob become smear/smudge?) functions both metaphorically – as 'shit', dirt – and metonymically – as brute matter that arrests the flow of signification, as if Twombly wanted to take us back to art's *prima materia*. (The blob is more than just a chromatic point; for it to function actively it needs extension – Twombly's colour often starts life as an extended point.) This raises a more general issue of representability and interpretation. I want to suggest that there is a constant interplay between recognisability and a blockage or failure of signification, as if the visual clues, including textual trace elements and titles, lead in multiple and contradictory directions. Similarly, Leeman identifies a number of repeated male and female sexual pictographs, including hearts, horizontal Figure 8s, dots and crosses, rough oval or spheroid scribbles (breasts, vaginas, anuses, etc.), and many varieties of penile form, again emphasising that any reading of sexual signifiers has to be within the context of that work's overall pictorial meaning.[46] The undecideability that accompanies Twombly's visual language is perhaps best expressed in a passage by Meyer Schapiro in a key work on abstraction and non-communicability. 'Painting', he writes, 'by becomming abstract and giving up its representational function, has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented. And in many works where natural form is still preserved the object and the mode of representation resist an easy decipherment, and *the effects of these works are unpredictable*' (my italics).[47] Returning to Wollheim, of the paintings he examines to support his argument – Titian, Giovanni Bellini, Thomas Jones, Willem de Kooning – it is his analysis of the post-war American Abstract Expressionist de Kooning that most proximates to Twombly in the treatment of the corporeal body, or, more precisely, of the painting as a container for bodily sensations. (Twombly remembers, on being asked by Ben Shahn at Black Mountain College which painters he liked, replying 'de Kooning and Ingres').[48] Wollheim's de Kooning resonates with the pulsions and drives of infantile life: 'sucking, touching, biting, excreting, retaining,

45. See also Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, pp. 129–41.

46. Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, pp. 55–65.

47. Meyer Schapiro, 'Recent Abstract Painting', in *Modern Art 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* (Braziller: New York, 1978), pp. 222–3.

48. Varnedoe, 'Inscriptions in Arcadia', p. 55, f. 30.

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smearing, sniffing, swallowing, gurgling, stroking, wetting.'[49] Clearly this list of the oral, anal and olfactory coincides with the figural characteristics attributed to Twombly by Barthes, Bois and Leeman. However, despite wanting to use some of the same terms for the metamorphising of the body for de Kooning and Twombly (excreting, smearing, stroking, wetting) there are significant material and compositional divergences. Wollheim describes de Kooning's canvases as 'enormous shallow saucers' in which the articulations and 'lusciousness' of the paint 'slops around, but is kept back by the rim', whereas Twombly has a much greater emphasis upon line, is sparser in his distribution of inscribed areas to spatial zones, and is less concerned with the 'drama between the mark and the edge'.[50] In this respect his 'primitivism' is of a different order: not the trace of the subject's transition from the imaginary to the symbolic, Twombly's metaphorics of the body are placed in the register of the symbolic/real. (There are many *petits morts* in works by Twombly: a line, smear or trace expires, suddenly, in the midst of frenetic activity; a looped line arabesquing diagonally across space collapses in upon itself, or fades into obscurity through overpainting; pricks are flacid in post-coital repose, breasts sag, buttocks slump, cunts yawn and bite.)

There is one more significant feature in common, particularly in the larger paintings by Twombly (de Kooning mostly worked on large canvases) worth commenting upon; the relation between overall size and passages of detail which funtion to create a scene of intimacy, even across the largest, wall-scale works. Wollheim suggests that de Kooning achieved this through a process of layering and the different drying times for his paint mixes which, through spotting and cracking, render a surface which 'simulates the palpitating, mottled breast of a very small bird'.[51] (Here perhaps it is worth recalling O'Hara's likening of Twombly's line to the traces of a bird's passage 'through the impasto'.) Twombly's intimacy comes from the line or mark that repeats upon itself – looping, spiralling, crossed out and overlaid, and the semi-legible writing and numerical notation which draw the viewer closer either into frustrated acts of visual interrogation, or, upon successful decipherment, reconfigure the image as a distant echo of an episode from classical mythology.

49. Wollheim, *Painting As An Art*, p. 348.

50. Wollheim, *Painting As An Art*, p. 349.

51. Wollheim, *Painting As An Art*, p. 350.

52. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1969), p. 248.

Part 4

> in aesthetic experience the emotions function cognitively. (Nelson Goodman[52])

Part of the allure of Twombly's art to which Barthes succumbed is the apparent simplicity of mark and line, figure and ground, an invitation to (re)discover a childish delight in the application of pencil and paint to a flat surface, a further stage in the processes of symbolisation after *fort*/*da*: of making a mark on the world. However, as Barthes quickly realised, drawing in the shadow of Twombly is a lure for the unwary, whatever hand/eye skills might already be in place. This is also a self-realisation after my own unsuccessful attempts to reproduce a Twombly drawing from 1983, 'Anabasis', which appears, at least in reproduction (and in the memory of an actual viewing at the Serpentine gallery) deceptively straightforward (Fig. 6). 'Anabasis' combines Twombly's familiar format of image and text, a title ('Anabasis'), a proper name (Xenophon), the artist's signature and a date (C T Nov 20 83), placed above an image: a

Fig. 6. Cy Twombly, 'Anabasis', 1983, oil pastel, oil, pencil on paper, 100 × 70 cm. © Cy Twombly.

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roughly drawn circle divided into sections, partly obscured by horizontal over-scribbling, a smeared area of indigo pigment and a blob of crimson. I had determined to try and mimic this drawing as accurately as possible to access something of Twombly's working procedure whilst also paying attention to the drawing as a rebus: to follow both line and referent.

So, to make a beginning – which I decide is the circular form. This is pure supposition, maybe Twombly starts from a name, the ideas and emotions evoked by a fable, an intimation of the antique, a *genus loci* – Bassano, where he has a house and studio. (In fact, he has said as much – that a poetic phrase or word can initiate or influence the origination and development of a work.[53]) But as this is primarily an exercise in translation – copying (not a search for ontology) – my circle is drawn, crudely and somewhat compressed and straightened on one side as if flattening itself against an impending collision with the paper's edge. Even this basic act confirms a truth about Twombly – that his is an art of movement and the body, implied and actual. One side of the circle is more pronounced than the other, increasing pressure on the oil stick makes a stronger, thicker and bolder line – the left circumference is only faintly described and goes slightly squidgy at the bottom. (Another realisation: the descriptive terms I am searching for to account for what is formally apparent constantly evoke a sense of the corporeal, the body's pulsions and location within the world.) I am fairly confident that this is how this image originated as the line describing the mis-shapen circle is overlaid at points by the other elements of the drawing. Next the circle is bisected by four rapidly drawn lines – again the greater pressure, and thus intensity, falls towards the right side, and each line alters direction slightly as it passes through the centrepoint of the circle – creating eight divisions, although, as the circle is not really circular but lumpy and enlarged on one side, the sections are unequal in size. Now my drawing shifts from the register of geometry to the domain of representation: it begins to look like 'something', recognisable proporties that suggest a wheel with eight spokes.

Twombly has had a long-term and recurrent interest in the chariot form of classical antiquity and the iconography of processions and battles; of ritual, honour and death. This can traced to Giacometti, who introduced the chariot form into modern art (e.g. 'The Chariot', 1950) and continued with the American sculptor, David Smith, for whom the chariot was a recurrent motif. Reduced to its simplest formal expression – a disc and triangle with their mythic associations of accelaration and attack – the chariot appears in Twombly's art from the late 1970s, initially as a small cart-like processional vehicle bearing a painted blue tree ('Untitled', Rome 1977), then in the archetypal castings, possibly derived from a fourth century Etruscan chariot, 'Untitled' (Rome, 1979) and 'Untitled' (Bassano in Teverina, 1979), and in the sculpture that prefigures the 'Anabasis' drawing (1980). The chariot as the symbolic representation of conflict is also a key element, depicted as a stylised triangular shape, in the ten-part cycle of paintings, 'Fifty Days at Ilium' (1977–8).

The process of reproducing 'Anabasis' gets more complicated as the image of the (chariot) wheel is cancelled, partly obliterated by a repetitive effacement made through irregular horizontal sweeps of oil stick of a darker tone, probably raw umber (comparitively, it appears close enough), my arm and hand moving from left to right (this does appear to be the dominant directional flow in Twombly's art), back and forth across the

53. See Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, p. 96.

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lower half of the wheel. (This also confirms that the systematic action originates from the shoulder.) Trying to repeat the direction and rhythmn of Twombly's line which is not exactly frenzied, nor overly controlled, more a determined or excited gesture as the line redoubles on itself, not entirely obscuring the underlying drawing, but serving to emphasise the impression of movement and direction: a wheel in motion, under duress.

I am beginning to suspect that Twombly builds the image through phases of activity and repose in which figure and ground are in constant struggle for pictorial supremacy as ground invades figure and figure penetrates ground. (What might count as a 'mistake' or 'error' in this process? When does erasure – as painting over [with white] or reconfiguring an image record a correction to, or an amplification of, the overall composition. Indeed, is 'composition' a useful term to describe this process of making, unmaking and remaking?) Further patterns of movement are traced in sienna: meandering lines irregularly spiralling within the circumference of the wheel, altering hue to a light pink, possibly picking up tone from the umber, at one point – the bottom of the wheel – breaking the circle in a smear of a lighter brown ending at the paper's edge (perhaps this was originally a larger drawing as lines end at the edge in several places). Finally two larger areas of smeared and smudged paint, a violet arabesque which I can only get near by using a finger to rub the pigment across the paper, and crimson, a bloody trace (ejaculation) originating from just within the circumference at the wheel's apex and moving diagonally upwards and to the right. Faint spatters of both violet and crimson appear across the image. In the end, I am left with the traces of a range of repetitive and compulsive movements of arm, hand and wrist, a sense of haste, but also deliberation, and an image that is suggestive of both circular and lateral motion.

The upper third of the paper's surface is given to the word, ANABASIS inscribed in red capitals, each A written as a triangular form, not in the halting (child-like) and uneven character of other Twombly writings (an 'effect' of writing wrong-handed), but so that each letter suggests a struggle over its formulation, a hard-won and deliberate process of enunciation. Underneath the title a proper name – XENOPHON – only faintly legible as if the word had been written (in pencil) and then an attempt made at erasure. A final inscription, the artist's initials and a date, also in pencil, clearly and precisely delineated.

A subject, then, 'Anabasis' – an account of a battle and hazardous journey written by Xenophon, friend of Socrates, who narrates (in Books 1 and 2) the events of the military expedition of Cyrus, Governor of Persia, against his brother Artaxerxes, named King of Persia after the death of their father Darius, and of Cyrus's death in a battle at the intersection of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Following Cyrus's downfall, Xenophon, who was serving in Cyrus's army at the time, led the Greeks back from the gates of Babylon to the coast, the journey nominated in the title *March Up Country*. That this narrative had particular meaning for Twombly is evidenced not only in the two works bearing the title, 'Anabasis', but also in the word games that are a feature of his interest in language and etymology. Anabasis, although derived from a classical source, also means a 'going up, a military advance', and 'the course of a disease to its climax' (*OED*). I imagine these different definitions would appeal to Twombly and could, without too much interpretive licence, frame the works under discussion. Furthermore, Cyrus also references the artist's father, a notable baseball

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Fig. 7. Cy Twombly, 'Bacchus, Psilax, Mainomenos', installation shot, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2005. © Cy Twombly. Left, 'Untitled', 2005, acrylic on canvas, 316.2 × 403.9 cm; right, 'Untitled', 2005, 325.1 × 487.7 cm. © Cy Twombly.

player who was known as Cy, a tribute to Cy Young, one of the greats in the history of American baseball. The artist perpetuated this genealogy when he named his own son Cyrus Alessandro. In *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Philip Slater interprets Xenophon's account as 'a self-justifying effort, the hero of which is the author, continually under attack, always unjustly so, but always extricating himself with honour from every situation'?[54] What can be extracted from this exercise in copying? Perhaps simply the confirmation of the extent to which meaning in the visual arts derives from a way of doing things – of an immersion in the matter of art, its materiality and facticity, as a way of annexing sensation to experience. In *Languages of Art*, Nelson Goodman (a philosopher who, like Wollheim, always paid close attention to the artist as maker) argues for the interplay of emotion and intellect in the aesthetic apprehension and understanding of works of art, expressing something that is crucial for the encounter with Twombly: 'that what we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles as well as grasped by our minds'.[55] This was reinforced for me when, in New York (Autumn, 2005), I saw Twombly's recent paintings at the uptown Gagosian gallery, a series of eight large works with the generic title 'Bacchus' (Fig. 7). It was impossible to view these wall-sized canvases without pondering their method of execution – how the brush was wielded (possibly attached to a stick or other extension in order to cover the total area), the degree of control exercised over the gravity-induced paint runs, the rhythmic movement of the whole body creating circles and arabesques as if a giant hand had been dipped in wine and then wandered purposively over the surface, lingering at moments in order to allow the colour to pool and coalesce. In a review of the exhibition for *Artforum*, Yve-Alain Bois is reminded of Matisse 'sketching the composition of his Barnes "Dance" of 1933 with a piece of charcoal affixed to a long bamboo stick'. However, Twombly is working with brushes between 2 and 4 inches thick laden with heavy liquid paint.

54. Philip Slater *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (Beacon Press: Boston, MA, 1968), pp. 41–2.

55. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 259. See also Wollheim, *On Art and the Mind*, pp. 290–314.

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56. *Artforum*, February 2006, p. 194.

57. Theodor Adorno, 'Late Style in Beethoven', first published in 1937, in *Der Auftakt: Blatter fur die tschechoslowakische Republik, 17/5–6.*

58. In 1967 the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, exhibited large all-over grey paintings whose surfaces were interrupted with simple geometric forms and numerals inscribed in white chalk.

59. Malcolm Bull, 'Fire in the Water', catalogue essay for Cy Twombly (Gagosian Gallery: New York, 2005).

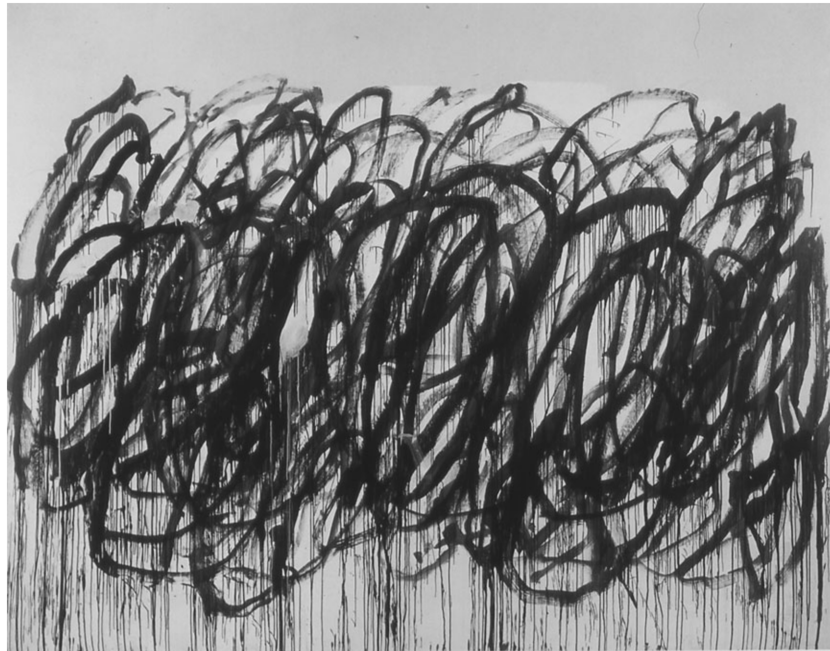

Fig. 8. Cy Twombly, 'Untitled', 2005, acrylic on canvas, 317.5 × 401.3 cm. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, London. © Cy Twombly.

'How' Bois wonders, repeating Barthes, 'does one do that, really, and with so much control?'[56]

Looking at these works I was again reminded of my conversations with Leon Golub, not only our disagreement over Twombly (and I wondered what he would have made of these new paintings), but also of the essay by Adorno that he first drew to my attention some years ago and which preoccupied him during his final years, particularly Adorno's notion of late works as the 'catastrophes'.[57] There is something catastrophic about the Bacchus paintings, something unsettling in their rhythmic sensuality and pictorial organisation. They are all in the same colour range – red on a cream linen ground – and are compositionally reminiscent of the 'Blackboard' works with which Twombly announced his 'return' to exhibiting in America in the late-1960s.[58] Some of the central motifs from his oeuvre are restated in these late works: the blurring of the boundary between writing and drawing (the graphic and the textual), the scribble as both a trace of the body's rhythm and as the origination of an intentional marking of surface and delineation of figure/ground relationships, of a classical reference opening the interpretive field to cultural meaning, of colour as both mimetic – the red of wine and blood – and symbolic – the Dionysian bacchanale – and of the repetitiveness of both style and theme (earlier works bear similar titles – 'Bacchanalia – Winter (5 Days in January)' [1977], the triptych 'Bachus' [1981] and Leeman sees a connection of these works with the symbolism of seasonal change and the four panel 'Quattro Stagioni' [1993–4]). (In a contextualising essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at Gagosian, the classical scholar Malcolm Bull makes the comparison of Twombly's method with the duality of the drunken madness of Bacchus and the rage of Achilles[59] [Figs 8 and 9]).

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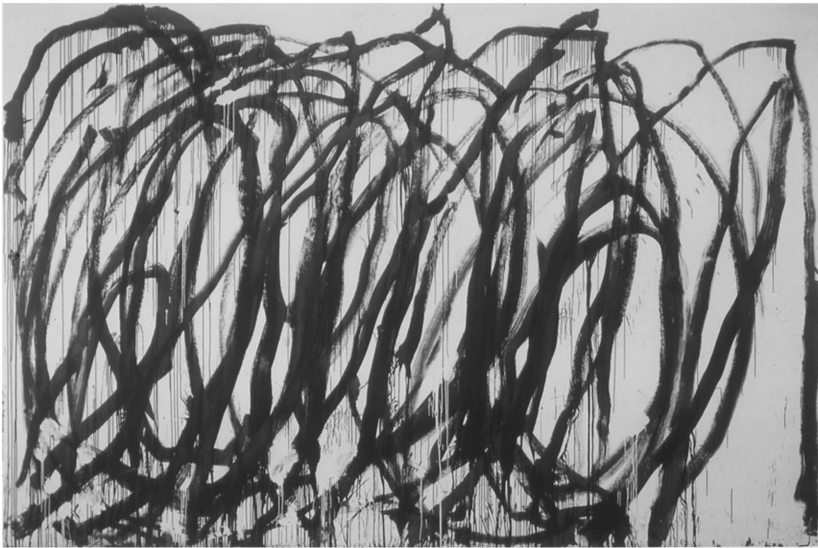

Fig. 9. Cy Twombly, 'Untitled', 2005, acrylic on canvas, 325.1 × 494 cm. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, London. © Cy Twombly.

Surrounded by this series of paintings, what absorbed this viewer was the emotional intensity of colour and line, and the interplay between the intentional and the accidental accumulation of marks across their surfaces. Occasionally there is evidence of erasures and corrections – whitened out areas that clarify the directional trace of the brush – but, mostly, the line remains as the evidence of a captured movement suggesting that each canvas was executed rapidly, but not in haste. The overall effect is elegaic, visceral, fluid and, despite the hot palette, almost melancholic – as if the coloured line might suggest both the flow of life blood, but also its draining away, the downward pressure of gravitational force returning the *materia prima* to the earth from which it came, a reminder, perhaps, that at the culmination of every Dionysiac ritual there has to be a reckoning.[60]

60. Leeman attributes Twombly's 'Bacchic' aspect, a repetitive feature of his creative imagination, to his 'Dionysian melencholy'. *Cy Twombly*, p. 277.

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