

Cy Twombly: Writing after Writing

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Abstract

This paper theoretically explores the work of Cy Twombly by analyzing a web of interrelated texts by authors such as Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rosalind Krauss, and others. By focusing on the reception history of Twombly, as well as the larger critical discourse to which this reception owes much of its tenor, Twombly's work is revealed as an unexpected locus for contemporary theoretical debates concerning the nature of writing. Through an analysis of paintings such as *Olympia* (1957) and *Herodiade* (1960), Twombly articulates the act of scripting as one of indolence rather than violence.

Foreword

Perhaps it is appropriate that when I set out thinking about the paintings of Cy Twombly some time ago, I was quickly routed into a labyrinth of literature that kept me busy reading as opposed to actually looking at the paintings. The fundamentally intertextual and poetic nature of Twombly's works resulted in a domino-effect of prose-heavy reception from the start of his career in the post-war period. So it was nothing new that I was caught up in this series of distractions—arrested at first, like nearly everyone else in the past few decades, by the illuminating commentary of Roland Barthes in particular. Yet, the more I followed the trail of texts to their various detours and destinations, the farther I travelled away from the point where I had started: Twombly's enigmatic paintings—to the extent that nothing quite conclusive had been gained in my analysis of Twombly, it seemed.

Was this errant path an effect of the profoundly inter-communicative tendency of the Twombly reception itself, and the sheer abstraction of the question that kept coming to my mind regarding the phenomenological nature of human mark-making? Or, was it more intimately related to the status of Twombly's paintings as a curious form of *writing after writing*—so that my activity of cumulative

reading and text-chasing became, in fact, rather fitting to Twombly's own elusive processes?

Within the voluminous literature, which has expanded greatly over the last decade, I found myself drawn primarily to Francophone strain of the dialogue on Twombly. Barthes's meta-reading of Twombly led me to consider his historical allusions to Georges Bataille and Stéphane Mallarmé, which in turn invited a review of Rosalind Krauss's important art historical account of Twombly, and finally a glimpse at Jacques Derrida's related philosophical mediations on Mallarmé. These various types of texts—critical, poetic, philosophical—relevant to Twombly both directly and indirectly—seemed to feed into one another in a way that was circular and overwhelming, to the extent that any traditional account of these simultaneous parallels appeared ungainly if not impossible. My analysis, therefore, became peripatetic; purely associative, reception upon reception. Twombly referenced Mallarmé, which led Barthes to reference Mallarmé and Bataille, which led Krauss to a related set of references, and so on, vectorially.

Moreover, the tidal drift that these texts inspired out and away from my initial object of study in Twombly appeared to be inevitable and seismic. Eventually, I conceded to this innately dispersed character of my analytical experience, chalked it up to my inability (for whatever reason) to confront the paintings directly, as well as (more apologetically to myself) the intensely deinstrumentalized position of the paintings themselves (as works that staunchly refused to perform). In the end, rather than a summarizing conclusion, I was left with a simple one-to-one comparison: Twombly vs. Mallarmé; the excess of writing. Following is a record of that critical endeavor, in order of its consecutive, though not necessarily progressive, unfolding.

1. Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', 1979

One suspects from its pulsatory succession of ideas and raw language that Roland Barthes wrote 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper' first, and then composed the more philosophically constrained 'The Wisdom of Art' as his polished, professional response to the Whitney Museum's commission for a catalogue essay.¹ Indeed, Barthes confesses the nascent quality of his thoughts in 'Works on Paper'—an effortless schema of observation which adeptly fits the casually delinquent feel of Twombly's works themselves. His meandering exploration of a Cy Twombly monograph produces sketchy contemplations, each turn of the page offering another blurry optic through which to speculate about TW—Barthes's appropriately cryptic shorthand abbreviation for Twombly.²

Yet, over the course of Barthes's desultory meditation, 'Works on Paper', two names are conspicuously summoned and stand out from the casual string of associations woven there: Georges Bataille, in allusion, and Stéphane Mallarmé, in appellation. Rarely linked in critical literature before the past three decades, these names appear in harmonious conjunction in Barthes's 1979 essay via the accompaniment of Twombly as mediator. There, Barthes constructs an intricate web of theoretical innuendo that serves as a support structure for this trans-temporal triumvirate.

The allusion to Bataille appears first in the essay, within the section labeled 'Writing'. Stating that Twombly's painterly gesture is 'the surplus of an action', Barthes chooses to evoke the excessive rather than transgressive ethos of Bataillan Materialism in relation to his thesis that Twombly merely *alludes* to the act of writing in his paintings: '...writing no longer abides anywhere, it is absolutely in excess. Is it not at this extreme limit that "art" really begins, or the "text"—all that man does "for nothing," his perversion, his expenditure?'³ Barthes is evoking Bataille's crucial essay of 1933, 'The Notion of Expenditure', and its later development into the three volume collection of essays, *The Accursed*

Share.⁴ Through this comparison of Twombly's quasi-scriptural mark-making with Bataille's concept of an anti-utilitarian expenditure, Barthes suggests that if Twombly's gestural marks can be labeled linguistic at all, they stem from a useless language that exceeds all instrumentalization.

The reference to Bataille is striking and follows a passage wherein Barthes delicately begins to construct a discourse around excess, evoking surplus and inexhaustibility—but at the same time continually returning to words grouped around the signified 'loss': 'negligence', 'displacement', 'destruction', 'futility', 'uselessness' . . .

Of course excess and loss are the two sides of the Janus-faced process of Bataillan expenditure: the orgiastic, anti-cathartic, anti-utilitarian release is necessarily followed by a state of total exhaustion. Such 'limitless loss'⁵ can be said to be the only 'aim', if any, of non-productive expenditure. However, what Barthes is seemingly at pains to communicate in 'Works on Paper' is that Twombly's work does not indicate a drive toward the ejaculatory celebration of destruction that is the excessive act itself, but rather, it avoids the present time of the 'act' altogether, inhabiting instead the timeless zone of the ruptured afterward. This is why, for Barthes, Twombly only *alludes* to the physical act of writing: his scriptural gestures result in 'displaced' garble, 'careless, lazy, indifferent' as a pair of pants left on the floor after coitus—a quintessentially *used* remainder of language.⁶ Twombly can be said to engage in non-productive expenditure, indeed—but it is a languishing expenditure, begun at the plane of depletion and concluded at another, identical plain of depletion (resulting, paradoxically, in a surplus of depletion). The excessive-transgressive act itself, as an archetypal violence, is implied only in memory: hence the inherently tautological structure of Twombly's line, the absentminded attenuation of a proto-verbal glyph or the compulsive, knee-jerk repetition of a lolling curve. Barthes's assessment, voiced several places in the essay: nowhere is violence apparent, *indolence* is Twombly's mode.⁷

Twombly's inscriptions cannot be violent, Barthes says, because they inhabit a space that is already transgressed at a meta-level. 'No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal.'⁸ Thus the act of the graffiti, the key to Twombly's contemporary reception as a canny transgressor of the metaphysical Modernist pictorial space, is instead configured as a traumatic repetition of originary acts of destruction and desublimation.⁹ 'We know that what constitutes graffiti is in fact neither the inscription nor its message but the wall, the background, the surface (desktop); it is because the background exists fully, as an object which has already *lived*. . .'¹⁰ The Modernist abstract canvas, so often seen as 'mirror' or 'window' of the artist's privileged subjectivity by its idealist proponents, clouds over in Barthes's reading of Twombly and becomes 'notebook page', 'wall' or 'tabletop,' spaces which suggest instead the opacity of the subject to itself and others. As the literal and theoretical background for Twombly's inscriptions, the Modernist canvas, recognized as both material and virtual surface, the ultimate metaphysical space—has previously been defaced, literally and metaphorically, by Pollock, Dubuffet, de Kooning, and so on. Any intrusion upon that surface is in belated excess of a presumed prehistoric *Ur*-transgression of unitary being.¹¹ Therefore, among his contemporaries, Twombly in particular revels in the leveled and wasted playing-field that results in the aftermath of the violent creative act.

Barthes more obligingly ascribes the formulation of the artistic act as violent to the likes of the symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, framing the poet's late nineteenth-century experiments on language as an 'attack' which sought to 'deconstruct the sentence.'¹² Mallarmé appears in Barthes's essay following the overt allusion to Bataillan excess—again, boldly suggesting a direct genealogical relationship between the poet and André Breton's 'excrement philosopher'.¹³ Barthes here draws upon one of the several deeply entrenched theoretical tropes that surround a century of scholarly discourse on Mallarmé: the sullyng of the white page as the essential act of transgression. In his 1895 essay 'The Book: A

Spiritual Instrument', Mallarmé rhapsodized that the page of poetic conception is a leaf from the folded pages of the mythic Book, a 'pure space' of unblemished narcissism.¹⁴ The reader, however, necessarily assumes a sacrificial role in the violent cutting of the Book's pages with a paper knife, 'the virginal foldings of the Book are unfortunately exposed to the kind of sacrifice which caused the crimson-edged tomes of ancient times to bleed.'¹⁵ The reader's reluctantly destructive relationship to the folded page is made doubly disconcerting by the two-faced vulnerability of the virginal page which harbors castrating powers in its enveloping space. The desire of the reader to interject into the space of the page is quickly truncated by overwhelming performance anxiety (castration) and fear of absence (penis envy).¹⁶ The 'intricate organism' that is the Book multiplies virtual folds where physical ones lack: 'the folds will have a mark which remains intact.' With requisite fiery aplomb, Mallarmé juxtaposes his notion of the metaphysically virtual page—as a physical space with its own being—with the lowly newspaper folio, a degraded construct for Mallarmé because it lacks the mysterious folds created by a book's binding, and therefore also the mythical status of the Book. Opening and closing with a mere evening breeze, the newspaper in its textual harlotry exposes its enfolded contents publicly to any willing reader.

Mallarmé's belief in the sacrificial role of the poet corresponds directly to Bataille's declaration that poetry itself is close in meaning to sacrifice.¹⁷ To be sure, there are fruitful lines of thought in the parallels shared between Bataille's statement that poetry is, 'synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss'—and Mallarmé's ubiquitous cry of 'nothingness'. Here, the entwining of the two names is enough to suggest that Mallarmé's 'nothingness' might be reinterpreted as an expression of the loss catalysed by the expenditure of artistic creation, an expenditure that Bataille differentiates from other forms of non-productive expenditure as specifically symbolic.¹⁸

Yet, the pertinent question for philosophers of the twentieth century was not so much whether Mallarmé reveled in the artist's transgression of a mythic, sacrificial space of creation. Mallarmé's writings readily indicate that he played the part of both the celebrant and the mournful elegist of the metaphysical matrix at different times. Rather, the question was whether Mallarmé deplored the inevitable depletion and dissolution of the mythic page and the poetic word into the machinations of mass-produced journalistic language. Such overproduction of the printed word resulted in the eradication of the myth of a transgress-able poetic space. The whiteness of the page that threatens to swallow the poetic word like a shipwreck is transformed into a bottomless palimpsest, an abyss of excessive language, which absorbs and camouflages any new marks or creations.

As a result of these equations, in the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism claimed Mallarmé for the camp of negative theology, labeling him a victim of 'nausea' who nostalgically lamented the death of god and myth. In sharp contrast, writers such as Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Phillippe Sollers and Maurice Blanchot adopted Mallarmé's disseminated poetics as an example of revolutionary and proto-Deconstructionist practice—the willful overthrow of unitary meaning.¹⁹

In 'Works on Paper,' Barthes not surprisingly accedes to Derrida, Kristeva, and Sollers that Mallarmé's project was a linguistically revolutionary one, seeking to deconstruct the notion of a transcendental language and a metaphysical arena of creation. However, at the same time Barthes aligns Mallarmé with his assessment of Twombly's art as indolent rather than violent. This is a crucial distinction:

Mallarmé wanted to deconstruct the sentence, that time-honored (for France) vehicle of ideology. In passing, in loitering (one might say), TW deconstructs writing. To deconstruct does not at all mean to make

unrecognizable; in Mallarmé's texts, the French language is acknowledged, it functions—in fragments, it is true. In TW's "graphisms," writing, too, is recognized; it proceeds, it presents itself as writing. Yet the letters formed no longer participate in any graphic code, just as Mallarmé's large syntagmas no longer participate in any rhetorical code—not even that of destruction.²⁰

In other words, Barthes implies that Mallarmé was not so much gleefully destroying the integrity of the sentence, the page, or the mythic word—as he was capitalizing upon—and thereby further catalyzing—the already dilapidated structure and evacuated signification of language, itself the inevitable result of the impact of technological commerce upon linguistic communication.

Thus, in such a reading, deconstructive act is rendered, rather anticlimactically for some audiences perhaps—indolent. It is a gradual deformation, rather than decisive destruction as such. Excessiveness enters here not as a post-transgressive state, then, but as a supplementary process by which change (as deformation) occurs as a constant, additive motion.

Barthes does not attempt to align Twombly's economy of loss with a specific reading of Mallarmé's politics of the poetic. Instead, he renders Twombly's apparent recognition of the post-transgressive state neither as jubilatory nor as nostalgic, ' . . . neither a violent art nor an icy one, but rather, to my taste, by TW's, unclassifiable. . .'²¹ Yet, Barthes seems to need to codify what he sees as the inexplicable neutrality of Twombly's work. Toward the end of 'Works on Paper,' he proceeds to give some definition to Twombly's apparent lack of conscious or unconscious desire for aggression in the aesthetic act by invoking Zen Buddhism, pertinent for Barthes because of the playful way in which Twombly approaches the painterly gesture, the 'elegance' with which he intersperses white space with his marks: his *rarus*. This insertion of the notion of

the indifferent Zen mastery of the line clashes noticeably with the awkward 'dysgraphia'²² that Barthes confesses seeing again and again in Twombly's graphic mien—the listless impotence that prevents his insistent attempts, gestures and markings from becoming wholly word or picture. Rather disappointingly, then, it could be argued, Barthes shies away from the stark negativity and frankly anti-humanistic implications of Twombly's habitation of such a broken, dysfunctional artistic zone.

Nevertheless, Barthes's emphasis on the qualities of play and elegance—elsewhere phrased in the essay as the airy quality of Twombly's tenuous line and the spontaneous nature of his markings—serve to reinforce his overall thesis that for Twombly the aesthetic mark is both non-motivated and non-violent. For Barthes, then, Twombly's indolence is ultimately read as a lyrical dandyism, excessive listlessness that approaches decadence in its insistence upon the temporal status of an 'afterwards' of cultural consumption.

Yet, something of the negativity of Twombly's 'dysgraphia' in Barthes's essay stubbornly lingers on and begs to be addressed. Barthes calls the languid, neither-nor state of indolence a 'tactical' move on Twombly's part because it 'allows him to avoid the platitude of graphic codes, without yielding to the conformism of destructions. . .'²³ This suggests that it is the transgressive act itself that has come to function as myth, in that it longingly imagines the existence of an idealized space which can and should be desublimated. The apotheosis of pure space and thus transgression to the distant plane of myth leaves behind only a 'perverse palimpsest',²⁴ upon which all signification, imagistic or phonetic, appears as superimposed excess upon a pre-existing residue of primal transgressions.

2. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Herodiade,' 1864-7²⁵

Twombly was reading Mallarmé 'seriously' by the winter of 1957 according to a letter he wrote to Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery in New York shortly after his

departure for Rome that year.²⁶ In an essay that Twombly published in the Italian journal, *L'Esperienza* in August-September 1957, Twombly meditates upon the significance of the monochromatic white canvas and evokes the 'symbolic whiteness of Mallarmé.'²⁷ Ironically however, Twombly's first and only painting to refer overtly and without question to Mallarmé is the pivotal *Herodiade* (1960) (fig.1), the earliest example of the artist's shift from the predominate use of white house paint to the application of heavy-hued oil-paint onto the canvas with his hands.

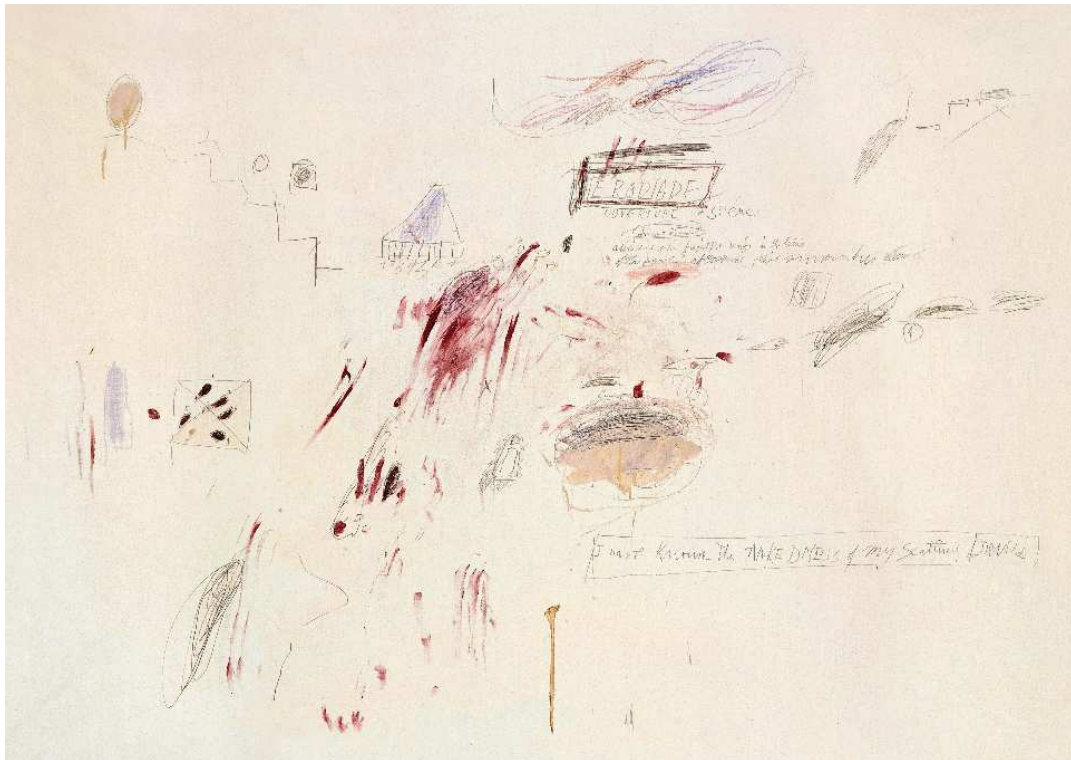


Fig 1: Cy Twombly, *Herodiade*, 1960 Oil paint, lead pencil, wax crayon, and oil based house paint on canvas, 200 x 281.9 cm © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Other indirect references to Mallarmé bookend the production of *Herodiade*. For instance, the now-missing painting *What Wing can be held?* of 1960 queries in response to Mallarmé's plea in 'Another Fan' (1884), 'Learn by a subtle lie / To keep my wing in your hand.'²⁸ Additionally, *The First and Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* (1961) are paintings that might be thought of as referring to Mallarmé's relationship with the poets involved in the journal *Parnasse*

Contemporain.²⁹ Studios observers could no doubt locate further correlations, such as Twombly's two monochromatic paintings, *Treatise on the Veil* of 1968 and 1970. However, overt signs of the intensity that may have existed within Twombly's engagement with the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé are apparent only in *Herodiade*, wherein Twombly suddenly breaks free of his previous artistic paradigms to address the canvas aggressively with his hands.

As is common in many of Twombly's paintings referring to mythic characters, the title 'Herodiade' is inscribed onto the canvas in graphite and set off with a surrounding box. Beneath this inscription, the phrases, 'Overture + scène,' and 'Incantation' are written, providing rare clues from Twombly about the nature of his interest in the poem—a literary engagement that Richard Leeman terms, 'very extensive.'³⁰ Initially, for Mallarmé, 'Herodiade' was intended to be a multi-act play with an accompanying score, but all that survives of this project is the poem—in reality just a fragment of the failed manuscript. Twombly emphasizes the status of the poem as a working manuscript in his painting by reactivating Mallarmé's strophes in his own cursive and then submitting them to a process of correction and erasure. Twombly quotes from the poem, adding personal emphasis with capital letters and drawn boxes, 'I have known the NAKEDNESS of my scattered dreams.' Twombly then freely associates in his own voice, with words based upon Mallarméan themes: 'abolished (her?) frightful wings in the tears / of the pool abolished (. . .) that mirrors her dreams.' Sewing together the theme of wings from Mallarmé's poems written on ladies' fans with the abolishment of chance and necessity from 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (1895) and Herodiade's obsession with mirror-reflection, Twombly creates an unusual, amalgamate document of Mallarméan poetics.

Twombly also reasserts the original scenic structure of *Herodiade* by engaging in a theatrical evocation of synesthetic motifs from the poem: namely, he evokes the preoccupation with touch in the poem. Although *Herodiade* blanches in comparison with the bombastic arenas of color filling the *Ferragosto* series (I-V)

(fig.2) a year later, it is in *Herodiade* that the somatic immediacy of Twombly's painterly index first takes on blazing significance as color. Contrary to analyses seeking to explicate Twombly's earlier monochromatic white canvases as painterly fulfillments of Mallarmé's concepts of 'absence' and 'the blank page'³¹—Twombly states instead with *Herodiade* that it is the presence of the corporeal and theatrical that he reads within Mallarmé's poetry. Indeed, along with the explicitly sexual and violent account of rape in 'L'Après-Midi d'un Faune' (1865), Mallarmé's other dramaturgic poem—the characterization of the tragedian Herodiade, with her 'blond torrent' of 'hair' and the 'indolence' of her robes,³² is a testament to Mallarmé's preoccupation with the insertion of the body and its excessive physicality into the white space of the page.



Fig 2: Cy Twombly, *Farragosto IV*, 1961, Oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 165.5 x 200.4 cm, © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

The poem's scenario is as follows. Herodiade, in a flurry of anguished lust, pleads with her elderly nurse to help her battle the 'sparse dream' of terror, ice,

shadows and nothingness that plagues her in her virginity. She stares into a speculum in horror at the contrast between the unmanageable presence of her physical beauty and the 'futile mystery' of her being, which she narcissistically wishes to keep for herself rather than divulge to future lovers.³³ She is the epitome of somatic excess, a putrid femininity that promulgates itself, fiercely shunning the penetration/insemination paradigm of transgression: 'I love the horror of being virgin and wish / To love amid the dread my hair makes me feel, / So that, at night, withdrawn into my bed, reptile / Inviolable I feel in my useless flesh. . .'.³⁴ It is sexual touch that Herodiade both desperately craves and feverishly abhors, a paradox that drives her at the close of the poem to indeterminate convulsions of either self-induced orgasm or death.

Twombly's painting seems to rehearse the field of semantics around the possibility of enacting this desired yet repulsed touch upon the surface of the canvas, applying first tentative fingertips, then progressing to light caresses, and finally advancing to lavish, gestural invasiveness.³⁵ Shadows of graphite flit across the dirty-white ground, tracing scrawls, illegible symbols, numerical graphs and crossed-out boxes. The wispy lines of these shapes, however, render them merely semi-present. They are seemingly preliminary attempts at tactility, or perhaps afterthoughts thereof—so fully do the smears of red dominate the painting in their contrasting immediacy.

The power that Twombly's handprints have over the written and drawn symbols in *Herodiade* results from the proximity of the referent to the index—the close sensory relationship of the actual hand to the trace of that hand—as compared with the mirage-like status of the referent with regard to the symbols and quasi-symbols represented. However, even at the introductory stage of Twombly's exploration of the bodily index in *Herodiade*, it is arguable that much more than the simple fact of Twombly's physical engagement with the canvas, the trace of his body, is suggested by his gestural practices. While the entrance of the body and specifically the artist's body into the artwork is certainly a landmark in itself,

representing a shift away from optical Modernism in postwar American art, Twombly seems to take the body's presence in a painting and stretch it to its most extreme signifying limits. Twombly's index not only represents his body, but also its intimate desires, idiosyncrasies, repulsions, and myriad associations beyond the corporeal. The index is here in excess of its traditional deictic abilities, and we read a language of touch that surpasses the question of the physical presence of a referent.

3. Rosalind E. Krauss, chapter six, *The Optical Unconscious*

Rosalind Krauss's genealogical tracing of the paintings of Cy Twombly to the all-over canvases of Jackson Pollock in chapter six of *The Optical Unconscious* has laid the foundation for many subsequent analyses of Twombly's work.³⁶ Within this essay, Twombly is reconfigured as one of several inheritors of Pollock's legacy of transgression against the Greenbergian credo of the 'presence' of being in the Modernist pictorial space—he is posed as a victim of what Harold Bloom has identified as the 'anxiety of influence'. Although like Roland Barthes in his essay 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', Krauss positions the theories of Georges Bataille as a ground for interpretation of the art of Twombly, her thesis stands in direct opposition to that of Barthes. As opposed to lyrical indolence, it is violence and transgression that are the catch-words in Krauss's analysis of Twombly.

In Twombly's 'strong misreading' of Pollock's gestural process, to use Bloom's specific terminology of anxious influence, the spatial field of abstract Modernist painting is not the only construct violated. The transcendental notion of the pure, present time of the creative event is also irreparably eradicated. Pollock achieves this twofold destruction of Greenbergian conceptions of the unity of Modernist time and space by demonstrating the indexical nature of the painterly mark, its status as mere clue or trace of a divided subjectivity that exists outside of an identifiable present, past or future. For Krauss, Pollock's imposition of the

indexical mark onto the sublimated Modernist canvas is inarguably an act of violence, the reenactment of the archetypal severing of the subject from its subjectivity and reality. This species of index serves as a type of reminder on two levels: it recalls the ephemeral physical presence of the body, and it insists upon the destruction of a unitary conception of being.

In turn, Twombly's affliction of influence urges him to carry the transgressive mark of Pollock to the excessive states of formlessness and scatological rendering, translatable in Bataillian terminology to *informe* and *basesse*. Whereas Pollock's inscription of the movements of his body in paint remains abstract, apart from the occasional appearance of readymade forms such as a palm print or a cigarette butt, Twombly's mode of notating his somatic specificity on the canvas is neither fully abstract nor figurative. In the paintings pre-1960, sloping lines morph into letters, never forming solid word-images—while dispersed geometric shapes almost take on properties of represented objects. However, in the post-1960 production, blobs of color suggesting figurative symbols such as phalli and stray breasts teeter on the unrecognizable, the formless. Thus, Twombly's reading of Pollock's indexical mark liquefies the rigid binary of abstraction and figuration, forming an alternate category for the artistic mark: that of the indeterminate and unmotivated.

More drastic than the introduction of pseudo-figuration into the Modernist paradigm, Krauss analyses Twombly's violent engagement with the materiality of the canvas and the corporeal connotations of paint as indexes of the scatological, abject urges of the divided subject. Undeniably, the bare fact of Twombly's early practice of building up a stucco-like surface of gesso and house paint and slicing lascivious words into it—his assault of the fabric of the canvas with sharp pen-points and pencil lead, and his later application of luridly hued oil paint that recalls the consistency of blood and excrement—are in themselves the most convincing arguments for Krauss's reading of Twombly's radical transgression of the Modernist pictorial space. The sexual connotations conjured

by Pollock's flinging of paint with the hard end of the brush pale in comparison to the smorgasbord of grotesqueries that Twombly so often proffers up in his work.

However, as Krauss herself has repeatedly shown, the Bataillian concepts of transgression, formlessness, baseness, and excess are semantically linked. Scatology and formlessness can be grouped under the heading *excessive indolence* as readily as they can beneath *transgressive violence*. They are characteristic of both the transgressive act and the resultant economy of loss. Thus, as read within the structure of influence proposed by Krauss, Twombly is portrayed as reenacting, celebrating and completing the violent act that was initially carried out by Pollock, and so appears as an imitator of the original source of transgression of a supposedly 'purely' optical space. His repossession of Pollock's abandoned canvas is the claiming of an already-polluted zone, wherein opticality has transmogrified into tactility, and the corporeal presence of the artist/viewer has asserted itself beforehand.

In this sense, it can be said that Twombly is tracing Pollock's trace, mimicking his index repeatedly, in excess of transgression, in order to reform it as his own. This is surrealist automatic writing rendered as a physiologically impulsive *after-writing*—the repetitive muscular twitch of an alert but disengaged regurgitation of both asemic and semantic textual drives—what Benjamin Buchloh has called the 'libidinal compulsion of the pictorial mark-making process'.³⁷ This is the essence of the act of writing as a convulsive human habit, wherein the search for meaning is placed in abeyance in the face of the somatic reflex.³⁸ Thus, from the outset it can be concluded that for Twombly the indexical mark is not a radical invasion of his own subjectivity and its temporal disjunction into the mythic aesthetic space, but represents instead the dross of previous subjectivities and bodies, the digestion process of cultural production. Twombly's compulsive mark recalls a whole history of indexical marks and transgressions against a conjectured mythic space. In a word, the bodily index is for Twombly a residue, left not as a product

of the individual body's presence, but as excess of bodily presence and corporeality in general.

The most prominent aspect of Krauss's reading of Twombly is that he interpreted Pollock's gestural strokes as indexical marks of bodily presence, and then reinterpreted the import of that indexical mark as graffiti sprayed across the aesthetic surface. This movement from indexical trace to the mark of the graffito is, as Krauss notes, not a seamless transfer, for Twombly shifts Pollock's index into the arena of graphic symbols with the introduction of the modes of graffiti. Such a bipartite formulation at once admits the indexical nature of the mark of the graffito (the physical presence of the graffito as the mark is made), but also the status of that mark's existence through time as written symbol that must be read in absence of the graffito. Krauss agrees that there is rift within the mark of the graffito:

Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over; entering the scene as a criminal, he understands that the mark he makes can only take the form of the clue. He delivers his mark over to a future that will be carried on without his presence, away from himself, dividing it from within into a before and an after.³⁹

Enduring as image or linguistic sign, the mark of the graffito simultaneously represents the past presence of a subject who is now absent and the future presences of those who will 'read' the mark.

Graffiti is therefore, if we follow Krauss's lead, not a true index of the graffito. Instead, graffiti can be equated with writing in general, as writing (and by extension its counterparts drawing and painting) always *suggests* the indexical impression of the entity that made the mark, but at the same time remains bound in its secondary relationship to the phonetic sign and its signified. The written sign is already a trace, and is therefore not an index of any one body. The

surreptitious machinations of the graffito then cannot be defined as transgressive acts against a conception of unadulterated Being, for the space they impinge upon is not a mythic space of purity, and the mark that is left is not an insertion of a present subjectivity. The graffito does not mark so much as trace the trace of a pre-constituted subjectivity and signified: the name of a name.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1967

Krauss cites Jacques Derrida's concepts of *différance* and *trace* in her discussion of the disjointed temporality of the indexical mark of the graffito in *The Optical Unconscious*, suggesting her concordance with the notion that the mark of the graffito is a conflicted field with a problematic relation to the subject; part index, part symbol.⁴⁰ This understanding of the mark of the graffito as trace (constituted by difference) rather than index (resulting from the divided-presence of the subject) is pivotal in Krauss's analysis. For Twombly, the canvas is an always already transgressed field, and any mark upon it signals *différance* in excess of ur-transgression.

As elaborated within the larger proposition for a science of writing to be entitled 'grammatology,' Derrida proposes the motion of the trace, a never-ending deferral of meaning without origin, as a manifestation of the 'archetypal violence' that he has termed *différance* (the ur-difference).⁴¹ The proposition of an originary violence as such precludes the possibility of unitary meaning, being or space. It does so by declaring that the subject is by nature vulnerable to the malaise of a fractured sensibility. Thus, *différance* destroys the metaphysical binary of absence and presence of being and establishes the impossibility of true transgression for lack of a 'transcendental signified.' Comparably, the trace, a nameless, formless, and timeless⁴² machination resulting from archetypal *différance*, does not reenact the originary violence, but rather demonstrates in its motion of deferral the lack of any foundational unity or origin.

One of Derrida's main tasks in *Of Grammatology* is to argue against the grain of the history of philosophy and linguistics that it is not written language that inflicts violence upon 'innocent'⁴³ language by rupturing the signifier from the signified, but rather that language itself, both graphic and phonetic, is founded upon a violent separation of meaning from form. Writing is the prime example of the trace at work, for writing subjects language to a process of effacement which Derrida calls language *sous rature*—presence under erasure. In this process of cancellation, the word or *gramme* is nullified but left standing as a metaphorical ideogram for the slash of difference, incessantly filled and emptied with itinerant signifieds that lead nowhere.

5. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Olympia,' *Formless: A User's Guide*

Appended to Rosalind Krauss's discussion of Cy Twombly's painting *Olympia* (1957) (fig.3) in *Formless: A User's Guide* is an analysis of George Bataille's review of G. H. Luquet's book *L'Art Primitif*, and its exploration of the term *altération*.⁴⁴ In Bataille's critique of Luquet's thesis that primitive man made images of himself to reaffirm his subjectivity, alteration is employed in the argument that the mark— be it painted, carved or drawn— is at root sadistic in its violation of the integrity of surface and likewise the gestalt of the human body. Whereas Luquet hypothesized in his book that the destructive nature of the mark laid the grounds for naturalism, Bataille counters that all representations of the human body seek to deform. In such a system, sadism equals masochism, for it is the ruptured self that performs violence upon its own image, defacing the human form in order to efface subjectivity. This takes place in what Bataille calls a *series* of destructions— each successive mark is another slash to the unity of the gestalt.⁴⁵ Like the trace of the written word which carries signification off in several directions at once, alteration is the process by which the drawn mark deteriorates the appearance of the image, faithful to the archetypal violence of difference.

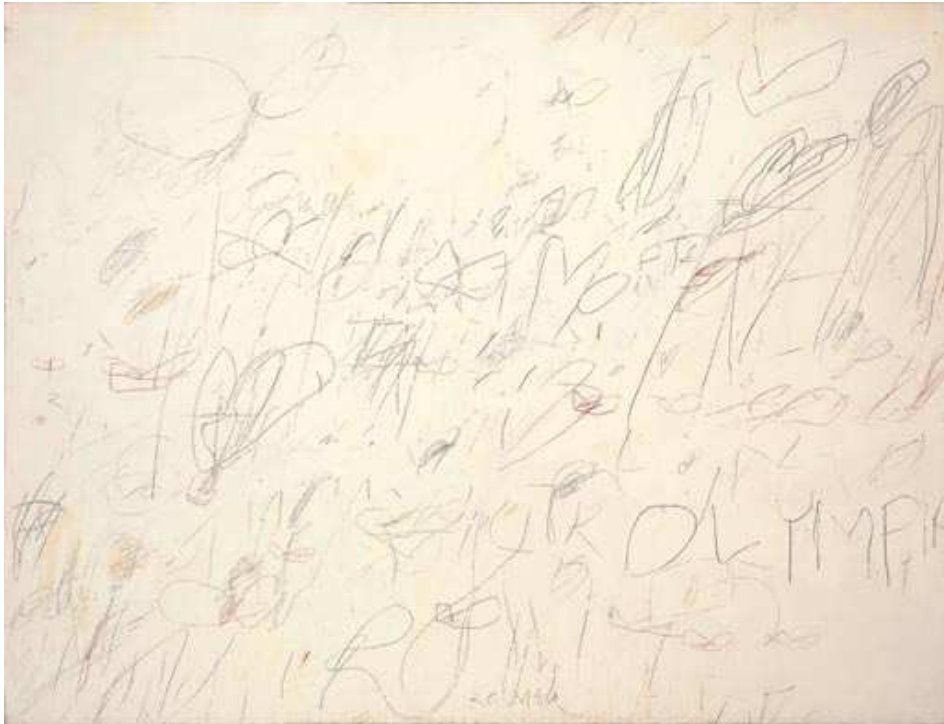


Fig 3: Cy Twombly, Olympia, 1957, Oil-based house paint, wax crayon, colored pencil and lead pencil on canvas, 200 x 264.5 cm, © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Interestingly, Bataille likened this piecemeal dissolution of the human body to the organic decomposition of a corpse—suggesting not so much the fracturing of the body's form as its gradual dissipation into other. This formulation aligns alteration with the continual motion of the trace rather than the more aggressive canceling out of language *sous rature*. Also significant for Bataille, the disappearance of the material form signaled the appearance of the immaterial form: the ghost. Hence the paradoxical nature of alteration that Krauss underlines in her essay, the simultaneous reversal of form and its renewal as other in a chain of supplementations and eradications.

Although Krauss extensively recounts Bataille's employment of the term alteration in the review of Luquet's book, her ultimate assessment of Twombly's mark-making process highlights the workings of 'negation' rather than the trace. Here negation exactly parallels the concept of language *sous rature* in that it cancels the legitimacy of a term without destroying the term altogether. Left

standing as an emptied matrix, the negated term is useless to convey cohesive meaning and yet totally excessive in its ability to assume other, itinerant significations at random. For Krauss, Twombly negates the disappearance of the subject position of the viewer in abstract Modernist painting, wherein the perpendicular axis of perspective is abandoned in favor of a transcendental, equalizing horizon—in other words, he negates a space already negated.⁴⁶ The ‘presentness’ of optical space becomes the ‘presence’ of bodily space as Twombly reinserts his performative subjectivity into the appropriated Modernist pictorial space. Twombly's looping lines, X-ings, and erasures—what Barthes fondly calls his ‘gaucherie’—are read by Krauss as an aggressive deconstruction of the myth of Modernism, *sous rature*.

Krauss's example of this negation is Twombly's painting of 1957, *Olympia*. In this reading, the myth of Edouard Manet's painting as the birthplace of Modernism is one of a series of myths killed by the inscription ‘morte’ hovering near ‘Olympia,’ but is at the same time resurrected in a scatological correlation with Twombly's subjectivity—made present by the word ‘fuck’ scrawled adjacent to Olympia's name. In Krauss's reading the performative declaration ‘fuck’ negates at once ‘Olympia’ and ‘morte,’ for it denies the transcendence of ‘Olympia’ as a space of myth and the Modernist usurpation of that myth while refusing the equally transcendent ‘death’ of myth. Thus scrawled, ‘Olympia’ and ‘morte,’ negated but not deracinated, remain standing in place like tombstones. For Krauss, it is the blunt fact of Twombly's subjectivity that transgresses the field of symbolization again and again, negating myths with the slash of a broken pencil tip.

Yet, as Derrida argued in his explanation of writing as a manifestation of the deferring movement of the trace, all language, especially written language, can be said to be automatically *sous rature*. The inscription of names, moreover, is an action that particularly signals the difference between the signifier and signified, for a name is already an arbitrary and meaningless representation of the subject or entity it identifies.⁴⁷

The same question, however, remains. Is Twombly's production characterized by a violence echoing the fractured sensibility of the subject *sous rature*, or can his art be declared indolent, completely in excess of the transgressed subject, a continuous *alteration* away from the stability of even a divided subjectivity?

6. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Le Livre'⁴⁸

In 'The Double Session',⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida suggests that Mallarmé's page (as hymen) is never fully pierced, and that the writer never achieves the insemination of his or her essence within the page, but rather disseminates symbols interspersed with white space in a useless, surface-bound spray. Derrida spells it out clearly: the folded space of the page is infinitely more complex and significant than the puerile jottings suspended above it; no touch or penetration of the 'subject' stands a chance against such depthless and manifold layering. This is not a mythical conception of the page as infinite, but rather the dissolution of the mythical violence of writing and its empowered status, the very project that Derrida adopts in *Of Grammatology*. The violence of writing is the violence inherent in language itself, Derrida tells us.

Derrida draws widely from Mallarmé's poetry and prose to make his point in 'The Double Session,' but nowhere is the process of textual dissemination more delineated than in the random pile of Mallarmé's discarded papers that Jacques Scherer assembled together in 1957 and called *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé*.⁵⁰ Though fascinating to ruminate upon and revolutionarily 'experimental' in spatial format, Scherer's 'Livre' is the false fulfillment of Mallarmé's failed lifelong promise to produce a book of mythical proportions to serve as a 'counter-model to mass media.'⁵¹ Almost everything that Mallarmé wrote was intended as a portion of this virtual book, envisioned as encompassing poetry, theater, music and art in a panoply of genres. In particular, 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard' (1895)—with its spatialization of the page and system of interwoven, non-linear

strands which prompt the reader's collaborative involvement—can be seen as the nearest approximation of Mallarmé's aspirations for the book (fig.4). At the same time, however, 'Un coup de dés' is the recognition of the ultimate failure of Mallarmé's project and the general defeat of the possibility of such a mythic construct by the powers of chance and necessity.

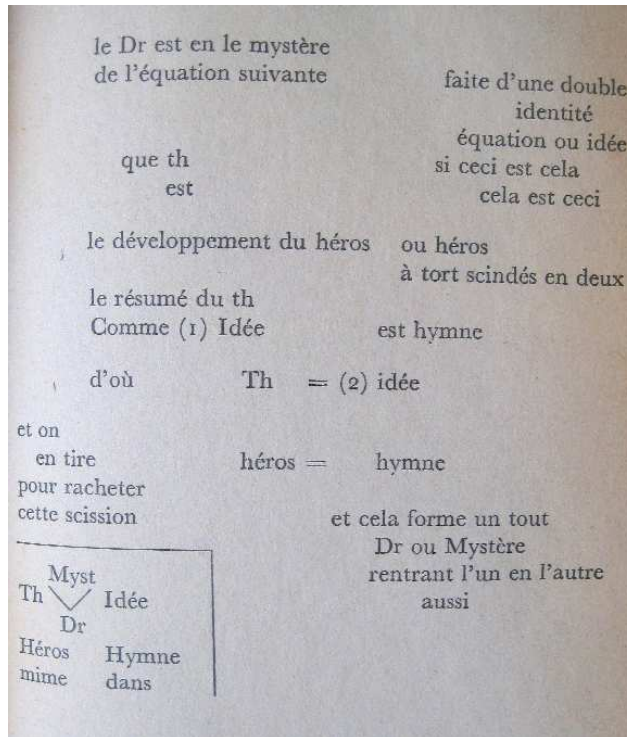


Fig 4: Detail of, Jacques Scherer, Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits (Paris: Gallimard, 1957): 4(A). Gallimard

Perusing Scherer's 'Livre' results in both numerous eureka's and disappointments. For the radically anti-narrative pages, rife with mathematical symbols and diagrams, represent nothing more than the desire of Mallarmé's posthumous audience to realize the myth of the book at all costs—even to the extent that genius is ascribed to the poet's banal notes for ticket prices, auditorium seating and publishing formats—a syntax of the occasional. Appropriately, all that is left of Mallarmé's mythic book is a disheveled manuscript, the epitome of the excess of writing: indolent waste language thrown across the page (fig.5).

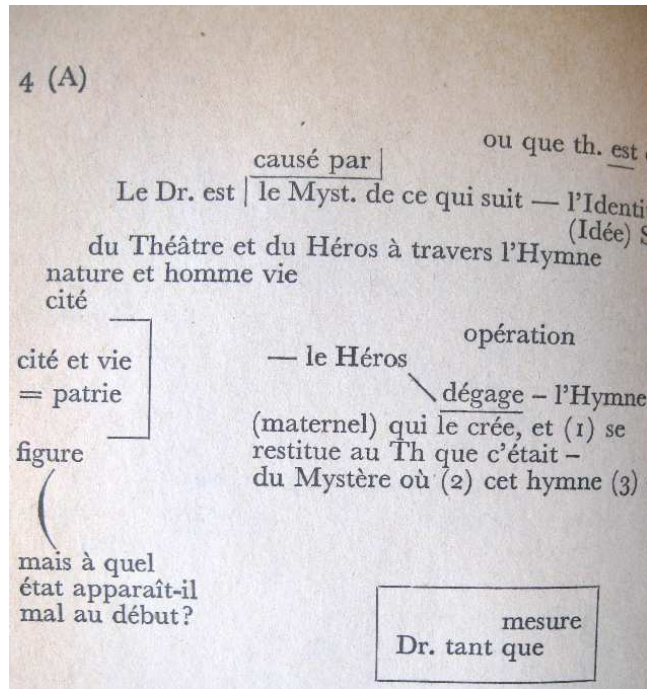


Fig 5 : Detail of, Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957): 5(A). Gallimard.

¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', in *Cy Twombly: Paintings and Drawings 1954-1977*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979.

² Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper' and 'The Wisdom of Art,' in Richard Howard (trans.), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1985): 157-194. These two essays have been featured in many subsequent texts on Twombly, an extensive bibliographic record which I will refrain from detailing here.

³ Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 160-161.

⁴ 'The Notion of Expenditure' was first published in *La Critique Sociale* (1933). Here, it is taken from, Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed., trans. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985): 116-129. Also see, Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Robert Hurley, trans., 2 vols, (New York: Zone Books, 1991-1993).

⁵ Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure,' *Visions of Excess*: 123.

⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 158.

⁷ Richard Leeman has also commented upon Barthes's usage of 'indolence' in relation to Twombly in his excellent study, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005): 88. Also see pages 181-182 for further commentary on Barthes's Twombly essays. Perhaps it is of significance in relationship to Barthes's term 'indolence' that in a 2007 interview with Nicholas Serota in Rome, Twombly admitted the 'indulgent' nature of his work as well as his discomfort with that indulgence. 'History Behind the Thought,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, Nicholas Serota, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2008): 51, 53.

⁸ Ibid: 162.

⁹ The question of Twombly's mark as that of the graffito is contested by Twombly himself in the 2007 interview with Serota. Ibid: 53.

¹⁰ Ibid: 167.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid: 161.

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- ¹³ André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism' (1930) in Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (trans.), *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1972): 185.
- ¹⁴ It might be useful here to suggest a parallel between Mallarmé's mythic page and the Modernist canvas as championed by Clement Greenberg in relation to the tradition of Metaphysics. In both formulations, the space of creation is rendered as the fulfillment of the promise of unitary being. However, in Mallarmé's theorization, it is not the artist as a privileged human who enables the existence of such a 'pure' space (as it is in Greenberg's); rather the artist is the 'unfortunate' harbinger of Nietzschean-Dionysian forces that disrupt the Apollonian space.
- ¹⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Book: A Spiritual Instrument,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 83.
- ¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes such an observation in her discussion of Jacques Lacan's formulation of the signifier as a conglomerate of presence and absence. See her 'Translator's Preface' in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): lxxv.
- ¹⁷ Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure,' *Visions of Excess*: 120.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé: La Lucidité et sa face d'ombre* (1953), Ernest Sturm, trans. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Jacques Derrida, 'La Double séance' in *Dissémination*, Barbara Johnson, trans. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981): 173-285; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For a condensed account of her interpretation of Mallarmé, see 'The Revolt of Mallarmé' in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century* (Madison: Associated University Presses, 1998): 31-52; Philippe Sollers, 'Literature and Totality' in *Writing and the Experience of Limits* (1968), Philip trans. Barnard and David Hayman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): 63-85; Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (1952), Ann Smock, trans. (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1982) : 38-48, See also, Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).
- ²⁰ Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,' *The Responsibility of Forms*: 161.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*: 166.
- ²² *Ibid.*: 173.
- ²³ *Ibid.*: 173-174.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*: 165.
- ²⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Herodiade,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 21-33.
- ²⁶ Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: MoMA, 1994): 27. Leeman also details Twombly's preoccupation with Mallarmé throughout his text, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*.
- ²⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*: 27.
- ²⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Another Fan,' in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982): 43. Cy Twombly's painting *School of Fontainebleau* (1960) also includes the phrase, '...how to hold a wing.' Leeman also mentions several other references to wings (and swans) in Twombly's oeuvre. *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*: 114.
- ²⁹ Twombly's painting *Study for Presence of a Myth* (1959) also includes the inscription 'Parnasse.' Leeman has suggested that the references to Parnassus in Twombly's work might also stem from the influences of Raphael and Baudelaire, variously. *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*: 91, 112.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*: 112.
- ³¹ Heiner Bastian makes such an argument in his essay for *Cy Twombly: Poems to the Sea* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1990).
- ³² 'Herodiade' in *Selected Poetry and Prose*: 21.
- ³³ *Ibid.*: 27.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*: 31.
- ³⁵ In the 2007 interview with Serota, Twombly mentions his 'revulsion for the viscousness of the paint,' and makes a reference to a child drawing on a wall with excrement. 'History Behind the Thought,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, 50.

³⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Six,' in *The Optical Unconscious* (London: MIT Press, 1996): 243-308. Other essays by Krauss concerning Twombly include: 'Le Cours de latin,' in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 53 (Autumn 1995): 4-23; 'Qui a peur du Pollock de Greenberg?,' in *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 45/46 (Autumn-Winter 1993): 159-172; and 'Cy's Up,' in *Artforum*, vol. 33, pt. 1 (September 1994) : 70-5. A recent article by John Bird assesses Krauss's contribution to the Twombly literature. Jon Bird, 'Indeterminacy and (Dis)order in the Work of Cy Twombly,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2007): 495-496. Her writing on Twombly is also discussed in passim in, *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*.

³⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Spero's Other Traditions' (1996), *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003): 436. If the surrealists introduced automatic writing into the realm of fine art and Freudian theory from the popular spiritualism of the nineteenth century, Twombly brought that semi-unconscious inscription into the future in the postwar period by rendering it almost totally, asemic, or non-semantic— thereby aligning it all the more closely with the increasingly automated production of mass-reproduced language. Today, such a corpus takes on even further significance given the current potential for a postliterate society as a result of the information age.

³⁸ I agree with Richard Shiff's physiological reading of Twombly's writing at large. However, with this particular point, my analysis stands in opposition Shiff's discussion of 'habit' in Twombly's hand as a way of returning to meaning. Shiff writes, 'This writing is distinctively personal and quite irregular, as if the habit of Twombly's hand was to escape habit. Why does he write? My guess is that handwriting concretizes and re-animates forces of intellect and emotion—hence ideas and feelings— that might otherwise evade his grasp.' Richard Shiff, 'Charm,' *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*: 26.

³⁹ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Six,' in *The Optical Unconscious*: 260.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).

⁴² Ibid: 66-67.

⁴³ Ibid: 37. Derrida writes, 'Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. "Usurpation" has already always begun.' Also see p. 106.

⁴⁴ 'Olympia' by Rosalind E. Krauss, in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997): 147-152. Bataille's review can be found in, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

⁴⁵ Georges Bataille, quoted in Briony Fer, 'Poussiere/Peinture: Bataille on Painting,' in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 79.

⁴⁶ Rosalind Krauss, 'Olympia,' *Formless: A User's Guide*: 149-50.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Battle of Proper Names,' *Of Grammatology*: 107-118.

⁴⁸ Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (eds), *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing* (New York: Granary Books, 2000): 134-5.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session' (1969), in *Dissémination* (Chicago: University Press, 1981): 173-285.

⁵⁰ Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

⁵¹ Jean-François Chevrier, 'To "whomever... !,"' *Art and Utopia: Limited Action* (Barcelona: MACBA, 2004): 16.

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