

Spring 2014

Ut Pictura Poesis: An Investigation of New Humanist Tendencies in the Work of Cy Twombly

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Ut Pictura Poesis: An Investigation of New Humanist
Tendencies in the Work of Cy Twombly

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Art & Art History Departmental Honors Thesis
University of Colorado at Boulder

April 7, 2014

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Abstract

When Cy Twombly defected to Italy in 1957, he left, much to his delight, the scrutiny and criticism of the New York art world behind. But as much as the artist enjoyed the freedom that isolation afforded him, the result has been a strikingly inchoate understanding of the motivations behind his body of work. The artistic choices which characterize his oeuvre—written inscriptions, mythic allusions and an almost orgiastic degree of sensuality—were a far cry from the stark American movements of the time. Scholars have thus often conceived of Twombly's work as separate from the artistic developments of his native country. Recently however, the connection to New Humanism—a doctrine developed and practiced by his former mentor at Black Mountain College, Charles Olson—has led to the belief that Twombly was, in fact, very much in tune to ideas circulating in the postwar United States. In addition to placing the artist firmly within the American canon, the connection to Olson has helped to explain some of the artist's more enigmatic subject matter, from his written inscriptions to his choice of allusions. Over the course of this paper I will analyze Twombly's oeuvre in relation to Olson's practice and, in so doing, enable a more profound understanding of his work as well as of why, historically, it has proven to be so difficult to define.

“There came a man who dealt with whiteness. And with space. He was an American. And perhaps his genius lay most in innocence rather than in the candor now necessary. In any case, he was not understood.”

—Charles Olson (1951)

Introduction

Cy Twombly's enigmatic body of work has puzzled and delighted the art world for more than half a century. His extensive oeuvre—characterized by a dynamic, unpolished aesthetic and a penchant for mythic themes—has consistently eluded classification and polarized viewers. Some have taken the artist's scribbles as a nihilistic tirade against Western culture while others have argued that his graceful arabesques are instead the odes of a wistful romantic. Closer examinations of his oeuvre have only exacerbated the antimony of these opposing views. Indeed, Twombly's work as well as his life, are fraught with what appear to be contradictory impulses. He came of age under the tutelage of the Abstract Expressionists only to rebel against their movement in his mature work, he moved from the newly-appointed capital of the contemporary art world to live thousands of miles away in la Città Eterna and, perhaps most perplexingly, he filled his otherwise abstract body of work with concrete, written references to ancient myths and their purveyors.

Fellow artists have taken these decisions in stride. Twombly's work has been famously popular among creatives, inspiring countless poems and earning the favor of some of the most important painters of the past century¹. Critics, however, have not proven to be quite so kind. The scathing reviews of the artist's first one-man shows in New York City, which reduced his paintings to “scribbles,” “trifles,” and “indecent graffiti,” continued to color critical reception to

¹ Robert Motherwell declared Twombly to be “the most accomplished young painter whose work [he happened] to have encountered.” Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013) p. 159-162. Other vocal fans of Twombly's include Julian Schnabel, Richard Serra, and Francesco Clemente. See Kirk Varnedoe, “Cy Twombly: An Artist's Artist,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (No. 28, Autumn, 1995) pp. 163-179.

Twombly's work for the next several years². Even today, after he has made a name for himself as one of the most important artistic voices of the twentieth-century, the literature surrounding his oeuvre has remained curiously fragmented. Scholars have addressed aspects of Twombly's work independently—his forms, his inscriptions, his interest in the antique—but few have offered comprehensive understandings of the relationship between these elements and how they function collectively within the artist's work.

In recent years, some developments have been made in forming a cohesive picture of Twombly's oeuvre by examining his work in relation to the ideas of his former mentor, the celebrated poet and philosopher Charles Olson. Olson's concept of New Humanism, developed in the early 1950's, offers a solution to "the stagnant European tradition" by calling for the replacement of the world view that had hitherto dominated Western discourse, in favor of a new, experiential-based methodology. His holistic approach necessitates a dismantling of the dichotomies central to "Old Humanism"—body and mind, spirituality and science, individual and society—explaining that these arbitrary distinctions have only served to alienate man from the nature of which he is invariably a part³. Drawing from his experiences in, and perceptions of, non- and pre-Western cultures, Olson crafted a new epistemology which, when applied to Twombly's oeuvre, makes sense of the artist's apparently conflicting inclinations.

Although visual art was not at the forefront of Olson's agenda, he wrote at length about the hieroglyphics of non-Western societies. According to him, these writing systems eliminate

² According to Randy Kennedy, "He avoided publicity throughout his life and mostly ignored his critics, who questioned constantly whether his work deserved a place at the forefront of twentieth-century abstraction." Randy Kennedy, "American Artist Who Scribbled a Unique Path," *The New York Times* (July 5, 2011).

³ Charles Olson, "The Human Universe," in *Collected Prose* edited by Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander and Robert Creeley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997)

the barrier between experience and representation by virtue of their conflation of text and image⁴. Twombly's art, which physically unites words and images can be seen as a manifestation of these same ideas. Seen through this lens, the artist's decision to scrawl the names of mythological heroes across fields of sporadic smears, drips and scribbles, is neither the sarcastic diatribe of an embittered iconoclast nor the dedicatory odes of a nostalgic expatriate. Instead, they are an attempt, in the same spirit as Olson, to impose upon the viewers a new type of historical perception—a perception which does not recognize history as linear and unchanging but as an active process in which the individual himself plays a role. His deliberate integration of indolent markings and complex Classical allusions demythologize the ancient past by asserting his own physical presence upon them. While this could be, as some scholars have argued, Twombly's reaction to first-hand encounters with antique ruins, the New Humanist approach offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding the artist's myriad references and themes. In addition to ancient myths, Twombly draws upon figures and ideas which span the entirety of human culture from Beat poets to Buddhist mantras and countless references in between. In so doing, he maps a new, personal understanding of human history while asserting his own presence within it.

By stepping outside of the traditional art historical compendium—in much the same way that Olson disregards the classical understanding of history—one is able to appreciate Twombly's oeuvre not as a charming assortment of incongruous parts, but as a deeply complex, cohesive body of work which speaks to the post-modern sensibility. My aim over the course of my thesis is not to simplify Twombly's body of work, as other scholars have attempted, but, on

⁴ Ibid. p. 159.

the contrary, to explore the various contradictory aspects of his oeuvre and open up a broader discussion about its profound complexity.

Chapter One: “Cy Was Here”

The work of Cy Twombly, like that of most great artists, has consistently defied categorization. By virtue of his emergence onto the American art scene in the early 1950's and his connections to Black Mountain College, Twombly's paintings have often been associated with the New York School, but this superficial claim is undermined by a central component of the artist's oeuvre—his written inscriptions. Twombly's choice of including writing in his work is not merely uncharacteristic of Abstract Expressionism, it completely disregards one of its primary aims as a movement. The first generation of Abstract Expressionists had worked fastidiously to free their medium once and for all from the shackles of academicism—a burden which was perceived to be the result of a one-sided ideological exchange between literature and painting.

This uneven exchange is further illustrated in Clement Greenberg's famed 1940 essay, “Towards a Newer Laöcoon,” in which he lambastes the historical blending of visual and literary art forms⁵. Of course, his essay is only one component of a centuries-long conversation about the proper relationship between poetry and the plastic arts. The first written evidence of the debate can be traced back to Horace's *Ars Poetica* of 19 BCE, wherein he makes the famous assertion: “ut pictura poesis”, literally translated to: “as is painting so is poetry”⁶. In the eighteenth-century Gotthold Lessing offered a rebuttal, maintaining that while the two arts are capable of arousing similar feelings in their respective viewers, their specific means only suffer when forced to fit the

⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laöcoon,” *Parisian Review* (Vol. 7: 1940) p. 295-310.

⁶ Cicely Davies, “Ut Pictura Poesis,” *The Modern Language Review*, (Vol. 30, No. 2: 1935) p. 160.

criteria of the other.⁷ By the time Greenberg was writing in the 1940's, the call for a split between the two media had reached its pinnacle. His essay explains how in the seventeenth-century, literature had become the favored art form of the day and painting, forced to suit the demands of a fundamentally different medium, suffered a centuries-long lacuna in innovation⁸:

When it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper characters and imitate its effects. The dominant art in turn tries itself to absorb the functions of the others. A confusion of the arts results, by which the subservient ones are perverted and distorted; they are forced to deny their own nature in an effort to attain the effects of the dominant art.

With literature resuming the role of the “dominant art” the plastic arts were made to put subject matter and clarity at the forefront whereas, according to Greenberg, the ideal painting focuses on materials and form above all⁹. These unfortunate restrictions stilted creative production until the late nineteenth-century, when innovative artists like Courbet and Manet—the first illustrators of Greenbergian Modernism—began to renew interest in the materiality and, as a result, the innovative qualities of their medium. Their movements set Modern art on a course toward what Greenberg termed “pure painting” that is, painting completely absolved of literary content and criteria¹⁰.

The first generation of Abstract Expressionists embodied Greenberg's vision for the future of non-objective painting. Shunning subject matter, representation, and eventually even titles, the group of men and women known as the Irascibles fancied themselves pioneers of a

⁷ Gotthold Lessing, “Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,” (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman's, 1913) p. xiii-xviii.

⁸ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” p. 563.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” originally broadcast in *Forum Lectures* (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1960) <cas.chicago.edu/workshops/wittgenstein/files/2007/10/Greenbergmodpaint.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 1.

new generation of art¹¹. Although the scholarship that has painted the Abstract Expressionist movement as completely cut off from the artistic traditions of Europe is somewhat romanticized, Greenberg's hypothesized break from literature was, to an extent, achieved. This perceived break from the past earned the American avant-garde a place of recognition among the vanguard European art scene and left behind a legacy to which the next generation of abstract American painters was eager to contribute.

Twombly arrived in New York in 1950, at the height of Abstract Expressionist hype, and the movement's impact upon his work is undeniable. His early paintings, completed both during his summers at Black Mountain College and in his childhood home of Lexington, Virginia consist largely of roughly hewn geometric shapes in a monochromatic palette that are more readily attributed to the New York School than his own mature oeuvre¹². Immediately recognizing a kinship in their work, the forefathers of Abstract Expressionism adopted an almost patriarchal role towards the successive generation of painters (Twombly, Rauschenberg and Johns among others) by helping to get them into galleries and writing flattering reviews for their favorites¹³. Despite these efforts, the young painters' verduous endeavors received an apathetic reception from critics and, especially in Twombly's case, did little besides reiterate the by-then

¹¹ See discussion in: Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and David Joselit, *Art Since 1900*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011) pp. 380-392 and Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Dennis Holler and Helen Molesworth, "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the "Informe" and the Abject," *October* (Vol. 67: 1994)

¹² Twombly began to produce his so-called graffiti pieces—pencil and crayon scribbles on black, white, or gray grounds—in 1955. Before that time his pieces consisted of larger, more graphic shapes composed of black or white house paint, often mixed with earth. Scholars have often attributed his student style to the influence of his teacher at Black Mountain College, Robert Motherwell who was producing remarkably similar work at the time.

¹³ Robert Motherwell, "Stuart Brent Presents Cy Twombly" in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) p. 14.

tired themes and aesthetics of the earlier movement¹⁴. The group soon realized that in order to maintain the standard of innovative art production set out before them, they would not need to imitate their predecessors, but to eclipse them.

In a discussion about this transitional group of painters in *October Magazine*, Benjamin Buchloh, speaks to the strange position Twombly and his compatriots found themselves: “it’s an almost ritualistic process. But isn’t that operation always performed with the intention of redeeming the radicality of the figure one wants to erase—the radicality it has already lost in the process of its acculturation? Pollock is the key figure. He has to be dethroned and debased but his radicality also has to be reenacted”¹⁵. Twombly and his contemporaries wanted, Buchloh argues, to be as revolutionary as their predecessors but in order to do so, they would need to find a means that overthrew the tenets of the new art just as it had overthrown the tenets of the Modern European canon. In order to achieve this, the group had two choices: to perform an even more radical separation from the canon or in some way to take away their efforts, “to debase, smear, erase that thing”¹⁶. In this regard Twombly’s tumbling scribbles of Sappho and Virgil could be considered the ultimate rebellion against Abstract Expressionism—renewing the only recently severed ties between literature and the plastic arts.

As a result of its seemingly ahistorical position, the artist’s cryptic references have provided the primary locus of Twombly scholarship for the past several decades. Strange as it

¹⁴ Twombly’s and Rauschenberg’s joint exhibition at The Stable Gallery in 1954 was deemed one of the two worst shows of the season by a critic from the *Herald Tribune* and the reaction from the public was so negative that it prompted gallery owner Eleanor Ward to remove the guest book from the gallery. See: Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994) p. 19.

¹⁵ Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Dennis Holler and Helen Molesworth, “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the “Informe” and the Abject,” *October* (Vol. 67: 1994) p.10

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.10

was that a talented young artist would knowingly remove himself from the newly appointed capital of the contemporary art world, for him then to revert to the Classical past—the building blocks of the very canon modern painters were working so diligently to overthrow—was incomprehensible. Initially critics took his allusions to the antique at face value, reducing them to the “gracefully presented trifles” of a beguiled expatriate¹⁷. Though American scholars were not, strictly speaking, appreciative of the complexity of Twombly’s work, they were charmed by his pleasantly frivolous scribbles and idyllic Italian lifestyle. Any mention of his Classical inscriptions was abated by the artist’s place of residence, as if living in Rome overtakes one’s subconscious with a constant stream of ancient places and figures¹⁸. This facile interpretation dominated Twombly literature for the first decades of his professional career, that is until the 1970s when renowned semiotician Roland Barthes suspected an altogether more complex purpose for the artist’s texts and developed a fresh means of interpretation thereof. His 1976 essay “Non Multa Sed Multum” asks the viewer to analyze not *what* is being written, but *how*¹⁹.

Barthes starts his analysis with a formal interpretation of Twombly’s script. The scribbles he decides are not childlike, as they appear at first glance, but nevertheless maintain a sort of “practiced indolence”²⁰. It is this “gauche” quality that sets the artist’s work apart from previous attempts at fusing writing and the plastic arts. I have already explained the radical departure the artist’s text represented from Abstract Expressionism, but the fusing of word and image

¹⁷ John Canaday. "All Right, I've Seen It Now, You Can Take It Away." *The New York Times* 17 Aug. 1969: D19.

¹⁸ Max Kozloff, "Cy Twombly," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) p. 54.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, "Non Multa Sed Multum" in *Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, edited by Julie Sylvester (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2003) pp. 23-40.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 23-24

nonetheless places Twombly firmly within a Modern artistic tradition that includes the likes of the Cubists, Futurists, and Dadaists. While all of these figures made use of word-image dynamics it was the Surrealists whose ideas regarding the conflation of text and image most apply to Twombly's oeuvre. According to Isabelle Dervaux, unlike the earlier aforementioned movements, these men and women—starting with Max Ernst—differed in that they approached the phenomenon (the addition of written words to visual art) as breaking down the barriers between the two media²¹. Magritte once wrote: “In a picture, words are of the same substance as images.”²² Images and words enjoy a similarly interchangeable relationship in Twombly's work wherein a word might stand in for a figure or an image might express literary content.²³ Of course, the interest in the intersection of text and image within the Surrealist movement had been born out of a desire by Surrealist painters to match the innovation of earlier writers²⁴. Indeed, a host of avant-garde poets, starting with Mallarmé had, since the late nineteenth-century made a practice out of arranging their texts in such a way that it alters the viewer's perception of the material.

Barthes makes note of the fact that while these other artists and poets—particularly Mallarmé—are focused on deconstructing verbal structure, Twombly, by virtue of the nearly illegible quality of his script, deconstructs the word itself²⁵. Despite the fact that he produces intelligible letters and sometimes even fully comprehensible words, Barthes maintains that any

²¹ Isabelle Dervaux, “Drawing/Writing/Scribbling,” in *Drawing Surrealism* edited by Leslie Jones (USA: Prestel, 2012) p. 106.

²² Ibid. p. 106.

²³ See discussion in Chapter Three of “Hero and Leandro” pp. 38-41 and “Suma” and “Hrih” pp. 50-53.

²⁴ Dervaux, “Drawing/Writing/Scribbling,” p. 105.

²⁵ Barthes, “Non Multa Sed Multum,” p. 26-27.

meaning conveyed by these words is “empty” (able to be “deciphered but not interpreted”) because the artist’s primary focus, and thus the readers’, is on the gesture used to create them²⁶. In the work of the earlier artists and poets, the aesthetic qualities of the text are not of substantial import. Rather, they are transparent vehicles through which to communicate an idea. Twombly’s conscious decision to create nearly indecipherable text (an art form he practiced by drawing in the dark on the weekends during his time in the army²⁷) forces the reader to concentrate on the writing itself, as much as, if not more so, than what is being communicated. He is concerned not simply with the intelligibility (or transparent aspects) of the produced signs, but with its aesthetic, “opaque”, qualities; “the nervous turn of the letters, the flow of the ink, the cast of the strokes, a whole series of accidents that are not necessary for the functioning of the graphic code and that are already, in consequence, a series of supplements”²⁸. In alleging that the aesthetics of the script overpower the words themselves, Barthes arrives at his most novel and contentious conclusion yet: that Twombly is not actually referring to Virgil or Sappho or Homer, he is not trying to recreate Raphael or Poussin, he is simply calling up “the complex of an idea...of classical culture”²⁹.

Barthes’s take, completely contrary to the initial response the artist drew from the New York art scene, has so altered subsequent discourse that modern scholars hesitate even to define Twombly as a Classicist³⁰. However, while Barthes did provide an innovative new lens with

²⁶ Ibid. p. 24.

²⁷ Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994). pp. 19-20.

²⁸ Barthes, “Non Multa Sed Multum,” p. 33-34

²⁹ Ibid. p. 28.

³⁰ Simon Schama, “Cy Twombly,” in *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, edited by Julie Sylvester (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004) p. 15.

which to view the artist's work, to take his opinion at face value is as dangerously misleading as the initial, literal response to Twombly's oeuvre. Barthes's dismissal of the artist's literary content (the section "Culture" makes up only a single paragraph of his 20-page-long essay³¹) as with any attempt to sum up the content of an abstract artist's entire body of work with a few sentences, is problematic. Twombly's choice of references goes far beyond mere attempts at calling up an abstract Classical past. His references are carefully curated, each one imbuing his oeuvre with valuable and distinct qualities. The merits of the former argument will be addressed over the next two chapters but for now let us focus on the less contentious and ultimately more constructive of Barthes's contributions—the conception of Twombly's work, particularly his writing, as performative.

Twombly's texts perform and represent a variety of functions. First and foremost is the manner in which his scribbles present themselves as the product of an act, or "gesture"³². As previously mentioned, Twombly's generation of painters were the immediate successors of the Abstract Expressionist movement, thus many of the ideas that characterize the earlier group still had a profound impact on the latter. Twombly's student work relied on a heavy takeaway from Kline and Motherwell, but his mature work has been likened more often to Pollock³³. The figurehead of action painting also supposedly inspired Harold Rosenberg's essay "American Action Painters" wherein the author describes the canvas of this new class of painter as "an arena

³¹ Barthes, "Non Multa Sed Multum" pp. 27-28.

³² Ibid. pp. 24-27.

³³ Rosalind Krauss, "Cy Was Here: Cy's Up," *Artforum International* (September, 1994) p. 118.

in which to act”³⁴. He speculates that what separates this type of painting from even its abstract European predecessors is the intention behind the painter’s actions. For the entire history of the Western canon, artists have sought to represent a pre-existing image, be that of a figure, a landscape or even a mythological scene; this image may have existed solely in the artist’s mind, but he or she nevertheless approached the canvas with at least an approximate idea of how the finished product would look. In Rosenberg’s words “You don’t get Lucrece with a dagger out of staining a piece of cloth or spontaneously putting forms into motion upon it. She had to exist some place else before she got on the canvas, and paint was Rembrandt’s means for bringing her there”³⁵. Action painters, in contrast, approach their materials with the intention of having an experience. Any outcome of that experience is, by virtue of the artist’s intention, neither premeditated nor representational. The product of action painting by Rosenberg’s definition cannot denote a physical or ideological object because in order to do so would require some degree of calculation. Thus an action painter, in the truest sense of the term, does not set out to represent in paint but rather to give form to something that will exist solely in paint. To be an action painter is to forgo attempts to represent in order to *create*.

Twombly has a unique position in regards to this definition. On the one hand it is tempting to designate his work to the same tradition as Pollock—his quasi-animalistic handling of the paint does not appear to reflect a great deal of circumspection—but once again the artist’s textual allusions renounce any hopes of placing his work neatly in any one category. Twombly *does* privilege the action over the content, but the very addition of legible text precludes him

³⁴ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" in *Tradition of the New*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959) p. 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 25.

from Rosenberg's definition³⁶. If action painting is defined by a disconnect between act and logic, then writing, the transcription of one's thoughts via intelligible letters, is its very antithesis. Furthermore, Twombly's texts are not the type of nonsensical ramblings that spring to one's mind from the depths of the unconscious. They appear to be thoughtful, complex and often interrelated.

So what are we to make of Twombly's apparently contradictory decisions? Barthes and his followers have attempted to downplay the weight of the artist's historical references, claiming that they are not descriptive (i.e. nothing of his references exists in the paintings of those names but the words themselves) but Twombly's way of alluding to the once-thriving civilization that is now only remembered by a series of names and places³⁷. Perhaps they are the remnants of an upper class education? This theory is corroborated by his series of so-called "blackboard paintings" which appear to be exercises of the Palmer Method³⁸. Others still have argued for a

³⁶ In Twombly's words: "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." Originally published in "Documenti di una nuova figurazione: Toti Scialoja, Gastone Novelli, Pierre Alechinsky, Achille Perilli, Cy Twombly," *L'Esperienza Moderna* (No. 2, August-September 1957) p. 32.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) pp. 102-113.

³⁸ The Palmer Method is a method of penmanship instruction popular from the late nineteenth to early twentieth-centuries. It is particularly well-known for a set of exercises wherein students draw a series of over-lapping loops—a pattern which appears frequently in Twombly's work from the mid-sixties to the end of his career. The connection between Twombly's pieces and the Palmer Method has been made by countless scholars and has been corroborated by the fact that it was taught to Twombly as a child. See: Michael Rinaldo, "Breaking The Letter: Illegibility As Intersing In Cy Twombly, Steve McCaffery, and Susan Howe" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013) p. 69.

literal interpretation of his writings, turning swatches of paint into the “blue pool” or “sunset” the artist denotes³⁹. Marginal evidence aside, none of these answers seem quite satisfying.

Perhaps a solution can be found in one of the few commonalities of Twombly scholarship: the comparison of his work to graffiti. When the term was initially applied to Twombly’s scribbles the connotations were surely pejorative—another means by which to reduce his easily misunderstood oeuvre⁴⁰. Defined almost entirely by the forbidden surface upon which it is written—typically by bored school children or delinquents—graffiti is associated with crime, indolence and ineptitude. However, it is important to consider that the definition and connotations of graffiti have evolved dramatically over the past several decades and the origins of the word lack these derogatory associations.

Derived from the Italian graffiare (to scratch), the term “graffiti” was coined in 1851 to describe the colloquial etchings littering the walls of the archaeological site at Pompeii⁴¹. Unlike most ancient Roman sites, the graffiti have been preserved at Pompeii and Herculaneum thanks to the several meters of ash which fell on the cities during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. When the towns were initially rediscovered in the mid-eighteenth-century, the etchings were disregarded, but once Giuseppe Fiorelli was put in charge of excavations in 1863 and more careful, thorough archaeological procedures were put into place, the graffiti began to be recorded

³⁹ Rosalind Krauss derides an interpretation to this effect made by Roberta Smith, saying “It never occurs to Smith that it is precisely this form of semiological overkill, in which she moves from one “looks-like” to another, that has the effect of undoing semiosis, of scattering and disrupting analogy.” Rosalind Krauss, “Cy Was Here: Cy’s Up,” *ArtForum International* (September 1994).

⁴⁰ J.P. Wilhelm likened Twombly’s work to “indecent graffiti on low-life walls,” as quoted by Manfred de la Motte in “Cy Twombly,” from *Writings on Cy Twombly* edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) p. 50.

⁴¹ “Graffiti.” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford Dictionaries Online. <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/english/graffiti>>; *Chambers’s Encyclopedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People Volume V* (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1876) pp. 42-43; Douglas Harper, “Graffiti,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=graffiti>>

and studied⁴². This shift in what was considered historically important coincided with a surge of interest, fueled by Romanticism, in “primitive”, childrens’ and otherwise rudimentary art forms. For the first time in Western history, these unrefined practices were privileged as important historic documents⁴³. The graffiti at Pompeii and Herculaneum were and continue to be of particular value, offering a glimpse into the often overlooked lives of the average Roman citizen. The writings not only contribute to our technical understanding of ancient Rome (e.g. the legal system, the literacy rate, etc.⁴⁴) but to a greater appreciation of the humanness of its citizens. Declarations of love or hate, boastings of sexual conquests, misspelled or misquoted fragments of poems, jokes, insults, and cartoons all convey a tangible human presence, one that cannot be gleaned from the preserved writings of the well-to-do⁴⁵. As a result, these graffiti offer a greater sense of immediacy than any other type of historical document from the time can provide.

Apart from its surface, the assertion of its author’s presence is the most definitive quality of graffiti. All manual graphisms convey to some degree the existence of their creator, but few

⁴² According to John H. Stubbs’s description of early excavation practices, “When Pompeii’s more sensational finds were removed, ordinary artifacts and architectural finishes that were judged to be unimportant were often destroyed.” Such reckless practices formed a rift between the excavation director Roque Joachim de Alcubierre and his more prudent assistant Karl Weber, “Weber’s repeated attempts to document excavated discoveries were carefully thwarted by Alcubierre, who believed his job was to hunt for treasure, not record what was found.” John H. Stubbs, *Time Honored: A Global View of Architectural Conservation*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009) pp. 198-199; Once Fiorelli was appointed director, he instituted several stringent new procedures including one which required that “all wall markings were to be traced.” *Southern Europe: International Dictionary of Historic Places*, edited by Trudy Ring, Noelle Watson, and Paul Schellinger, (Oxon: Routledge, 1995) p. 546.

⁴³ For further discussion see: Aaron Sheon, “The Discovery of Graffiti,” *Art Journal* (Vol. 36, No. 1, Autumn 1976) pp. 16-22.

⁴⁴ Helen Tanzer explains that the large volume of graffiti created by Pompeians of various ages and social status, indicates a very high rate of literacy. Likewise, the content of the graffiti offers information about the education system, the process of electing officials, and much more. For further discussion see: Helen Tanzer, *The Common People of Pompeii: A Study of the Graffiti*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1939).

⁴⁵ Tanzer writes: “the information to be gleaned from the graffiti concerns the common people rather than the well-to-do, the persons of refinement...But this makes them particularly valuable for our present study.” *Ibid.* p. 6.

mediums do so to such an extent as graffiti. The graffitist is intent almost solely upon leaving a trace of her individual presence for future viewers. She can achieve this literally and directly (e.g. Kilroy was here) or indirectly by virtue of what Barthes calls its “opaque” qualities⁴⁶. From the fourteenth up until the nineteenth-century, transparency was the objective of all plastic arts—to paint (or draw, or sculpt) in such a way that any and all traces of the artist’s individual hand are negated. In contrast, both Twombly’s work and graffiti are fraught with opaque, visually distinctive qualities. These inadvertent characteristics of one’s script betray the artist’s identity. They are, in Jon Bird’s words: “the encoded memories of the body’s experiences and potentiality interwoven with, and figured through indexical traces of actual movement”⁴⁷. In this sense, all graffiti is a sort of “signature”. It may not bear the artist’s name, but by virtue of his or her own unique set of experiences the line, script, et cetera, produced are unique to the individual creator.

Twombly’s graphisms, like those of graffiti are intent on exposing the artist’s presence, be that by the physical evidence of his smearing his paint-covered hand across the canvas or the gestural quality of his writing. Like the ancient graffiti at Pompeii, Twombly’s work gives the viewer a greater sense of immediacy and relatability than would a more technically refined work of art. His autographic style is a testament to Twombly’s individual presence but it also appeals to our primal, universal desires to touch, to play, to scribble⁴⁸. However, we cannot simply designate Twombly’s oeuvre to some sort of Neo-Primitivist revival because the primitive

⁴⁶ Barthes, “Non Multa Sed Multum,” p. 33.

⁴⁷ Jon Bird, “Indeterminacy and Disorder in the Work of Cy Twombly,” (*Oxford Art Journal*, 2007) p. 489.

⁴⁸ Manfred de la Motte likens Twombly’s work to the flux evident in humans “between sensitive, sensuous awareness and the intellectual wish to understand, between passive reception and active grasping, prompting us to play with the cord while phoning or to scribble little figures and ornamented numbers on a piece of paper.” See Manfred de la Motte, “Cy Twombly,” *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola del Roscio (Munich; Art Data, 2002) p. 50.

component of his work is complicated by the artist's academic inscriptions. It is truly no wonder that critics have chosen in the past to treat the two (the formal qualities of his writing and its content) separately. Perhaps, though, their connection is less intimidating than it first appears.

In the past, historians have attempted to reconcile Twombly's indolent script and erudite references by suggesting that his allusions are sarcastic: "he cannot write 'Virgil' on a painting and mean it straight. 'Virgil' is there as something a bored or exasperated school-child would carve into a desktop, a form of sniggering, a type of retaliation against the teacher's drone"⁴⁹. But who exactly would the teacher in this scenario be? Had not the Abstract Expressionists already facilitated a break from the Western canon for which Classicism formed a basis? Twombly is part of a generation which no longer needs to debase the Classical past. Instead, he is offering an individualized perspective through which to approach it. There is little doubt now (if there ever was to begin with) that Twombly's definition of Classicism does not abide to the traditional sense of the word. His is not the stoic antiquity of David nor the haven of academia so admired by Winckelmann. Twombly's Rome is exuberant, dirty, and, despite the passing of millenia, curiously relevant⁵⁰.

We might here be able to make the connection between Twombly's work and the ideas of his Black Mountain mentor, Charles Olson. Among his many contributions to postmodern discourse, Olson published a series of essays in which he calls for a type of "New Humanism". As the name suggests, this platform is not an attempt to revive Renaissance Humanism but to *reinvent* it for the modern era (although he and his followers often use Classical language and

⁴⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "Cy Was Here; Cy's Up," *Artforum International* (September 1994).

⁵⁰ "For myself the past is the source (for all art is vitally contemporary). I'm drawn to the primitive, the ritual and fetish elements, to the symmetrical plastic order (peculiarly basic to both primitive and classic concepts, so relating the two)" Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, p. 56.

archetypes in their work). Olson's Humanism is concerned with the immediacy of human consciousness and experience. He believes that modern Western language inhibits this type of immediacy because it acts as a kind of barrier between the experience and one's expression of it. This rupture between experience and logic, body and mind, signifier and signified, is at the root of Olson's ire towards "Old Humanism"⁵¹. His ideology calls for a breakdown of this type of distinction. For this reason, he is more attracted to Mayan culture which he commends for creating a "system of written record, now called hieroglyphs, which on its very face, is verse, [whose] signs [are] so clearly and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images"⁵². In this way, hieroglyphs illustrate New Humanism in their breakdown of the barrier between image and content. Twombly's works, particularly those which physically combine writing and image, exercise this same concept. Thus, while early scholars took Twombly's antique allusions as purely content, and Barthes, as purely form, a Neo-Humanist such as Olson would say (rightfully) that the two are inextricably linked.

⁵¹ In "Human Universe" Olson writes: "'Nor can I let the third of the great Greeks, Plato, go free—he who had more of a sort of latitude and style my tribe of men are to indulge him for. His world of ideas, of forms as extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and they need to be seen as such if we are to get on to some alternative to the whole Greek system.'" Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *Collected Prose* edited by Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander and Robert Creeley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) p. 157.

⁵² *Ibid.* p.159.

Chapter Two: Charles Olson, Black Mountain College, and New Humanism

Twombly's connection to Olson achieves more than just an explanation of his enigmatic inscriptions. It also helps, in part, to place an artist who has previously been considered out of step with his own time, firmly in the context of present movements. By virtue of his choice to write references to the antique in an otherwise abstract body of work, Twombly's oeuvre baffled and alienated critics for the first several years of his career. As discussed in the previous chapter, early literature painted Twombly as out of sync from his time, too caught up in the ruins of his adopted city to make any sort of fresh contribution to contemporary art movements. In reality, this sentiment could hardly be further from the truth. Although modern scholars no longer resort to such simplistic interpretations of his inscriptions, they often fail to acknowledge the ways in which Twombly's work—including, not in spite of, his references—reflects a *continuity*, both of inclinations he had been prone to prior to his move to Italy and themes and ideas prevalent in the post-war United States.

The primary source of fodder for critics and scholars who have accused Twombly of being behind his time are, of course, his seemingly dedicatory written inscriptions to the ancients. Judging by the artist's early Moroccan titles and the works he completed in Italy in which he makes reference to the ancient Mediterranean, it would seem that Twombly's location plays a significant role in the choice of his allusions⁵³. It is perhaps because of the artist's physical move to the birthplace of Western civilization that early critics saw the artist as existing apart from his American contemporaries, describing his work as “testimony of a voice

⁵³ The artist created a series of paintings based on the drawings he made while traveling with Robert Rauschenberg in northern Africa in 1952. Several of these paintings have titles bearing the names of villages the men had visited like “Quarzazat” and “Tiznit” (both 1953). See “Biographical Notes” in *Cy Twombly Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings* edited by Heiner Bastian (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2009) p. 184.

expatriated from the past”⁵⁴. Of course, to assume that Twombly’s inscriptions are solely a product of the artist’s location would be to neglect a several decade long history of Classical, pre-Classical and non-Western mythologies being incorporated into contemporary artistic practices. As any student of Modernism can attest, mythology played a significant role in the visual arts throughout the twentieth-century—long before Twombly’s first emphatic scribbles.

While mythology has always had something of a recurring presence in Western art, it experienced an especially pronounced revival over the course of the Surrealist movement. Early on in its development, the group experimented with several methods of translating the unconscious into comprehensible artworks from automatic drawings to dream illustration and narration⁵⁵. Still, they sought a foundational principle that could unite the entirety of the human psyche in the hopes that the “fusing of all the sources of human creativity—the dream, the unconscious, the conscious, the irrational—into a heightened reality...might alter the shape of the world as well as man’s understanding of that world”⁵⁶. Their search coincided with the development of a new understanding of mythology, thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung whereby myth came to be regarded as the manifestation of a “collective unconscious” which united the human psyche across cultural and psychical boundaries. At the hands of the Surrealists, mythology provided a “more controlled means for systematizing the unconscious”

⁵⁴ Max Kozloff, “Cy Twombly,” in *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, edited by Simon Schama and Julie Sylvester (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004) p. 54.

⁵⁵ Whitney Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Paintings, 1929-1939* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1980) p. 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 3.

without sacrificing the creative freedom that was so central to their cause⁵⁷. As a result, myth quickly became a prominent theme in Surrealist art.

For the Abstract Expressionists, whose movement owes a significant amount to the Surrealists, mythology would continue to enjoy a privileged position. Almost all of the most renowned painters from the group—Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman—experimented with mythological ideas or references at some point in their career⁵⁸. Edith Sachar, Mark Rothko’s first wife, remembers conversations in their home with the likes of Newman and Gottlieb wherein the men would discuss how they had “deliberately [chosen] to concern themselves with myth so that they could break with what they considered stagnant in European tradition and with the provincial American past”⁵⁹. But lest they seem like mere imitators of the Surrealists, the New York School aimed to approach myth from a fresh perspective, to locate within it that which “expresses to [them] something real and existing in [themselves], as it was to those who first stumbled upon the symbols to give them life”⁶⁰

In light of the discussion in chapter one regarding Twombly’s use of mythological references as a break from his Abstract Expressionist predecessors, the idea that he had actually *inherited* some of their interest in myth must seem somewhat contradictory. However, it is important to remember that the New York School would eventually go on to abandon mythology, fearing that it might draw up connections to psychoanalysis or Surrealism which conflicted with

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 7.

⁵⁸ Judith E. Bernstock, “Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Art: An Overview of a Humanistic Approach,” *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 14, No. 27 (1993) pp. 153-183.

⁵⁹ Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 78.

⁶⁰ Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, “The Portrait of the Modern Artist” interview for *Art in New York* (WNYC. New York City, New York. 13 Oct. 1943)

the group's intention of cutting itself off from European movements⁶¹. For Rothko and his contemporaries, it seems that myth had acted as a sort of stepping stone, an abstract idea to which they could readily apply forms without the fear of slipping into zero-content. Although mythology was initially a fruitful enterprise, as the artists began to feel more confident in their abilities to create profound works of art without any discernible degree of representation, the movement's mythological ties were cut, in some cases dramatically so⁶². By the late 1950's, when Twombly's written references begin to appear frequently in his work, myth had been all but eliminated from the Abstract Expressionist lexicon.

The New York School's early preoccupation with myth surely played at least some role in Twombly's artistic development—he has spoken of attending their shows as a student in New York and being particularly enamored of early Rothko and Gorky, two of the most avid proponents of mythological subject matter⁶³—but seeing as his introduction of mythology into his paintings doesn't occur until long after the Abstract Expressionists had abandoned it, we are left to assume that other factors were involved with this development in his artistic practice as well. Of course, the experience which I will argue had the most profound impact on Twombly's eventual turn to mythological subjects was his time at Black Mountain College, particularly his interaction with Charles Olson.

⁶¹ Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, p. 78.

⁶² Clyfford Still went back and eliminated the original mythological titles of several works of art featured in a 1946 show, and from then on labeled his paintings solely with catalogue numbers. See David Anfam's essay "Clyfford Still's Art: Between the Quick and the Dead" in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 37.

⁶³ During a 2008 interview, the artist was asked about his exposure to Abstract Expressionism prior to his time in New York. He responded "Yes, way before I came to New York, in Virginia. I also knew the works of Rothko, but again from photographs or from books, before he did the very simple ones." He also makes a point of expressing his admiration of Gorky: "I was very fond of Gorky, naturally very fond of Gorky." See Cy Twombly, "History behind the Thought." Interviewed by Nicholas Serota. *Cy Twombly*. <http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings5.htm>.

The artist cites his summers at the college as “the first time [he’d] been in an atmosphere of artsy-ness,” despite having “lived in galleries” when he attended the Art Student’s League in New York City⁶⁴. Indeed, all of the first-hand accounts from former students and faculty point to an institution that during its brief lifetime was teeming with artistic and intellectual florescence. To call it simply a school is something of a misnomer, rather it was a hotbed of contemporary discourse bringing together some of the most avant-garde scholars of the day—a tightly knit community whose wide array of disciplines effectively embodied the whole of creative postwar movements in the United States. The traditional student-teacher dynamic was abandoned in favor of a more collaborative approach; proctor and pupil worked in conjunction with one another, often in fairly unorthodox circumstances. Former student Jonathan Williams’s account describes classes that could last for as long as two consecutive days⁶⁵. Although it is often conceived of as being dedicated strictly to painting and poetry, the institute also played host to a few math and science based innovations—like Buckminster Fuller’s first geodesic dome—and boasted an impressive array of guest lecturers that included Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller and Albert Einstein⁶⁶. At the heart of this academic calamity stood Charles Olson, a figure imposing in both stature—at 6’7” he has been referred to as “a bear of a man”—and reputation. According to Twombly’s account, “Everything revolved around Olson. And a lot of people were there mainly

⁶⁴ Cy Twombly, "History behind the Thought." Interview by Nicholas Serota. *Cy Twombly*. <http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings5.htm>.

⁶⁵ Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013) p. 197.

⁶⁶ Mary Emma Harris, “Art as Experiment: From the Arts at Black Mountain College,” *The American Poetry Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3, May/June 1987, p. 9-11. *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons and Impact* edited by William Lawlor (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) pp. 16-18

to see Olson⁶⁷. As a painting student, Twombly never actually enrolled in any of the writer's classes, but even so, the impact of the men's work on one another was profound.

Olson's first teaching stints at Black Mountain started in the fall of 1948 but he wouldn't become a more-or-less permanent presence until 1951, the same year that Twombly first enrolled⁶⁸. Olson arrived that summer fresh off of a sabbatical in the Yucatan—arguably the most formative experience of his career. It was in Mexico that he developed the ideas and formulated the concept which would not only come to color the rest of his work but, as I will argue, played an invaluable role in Twombly's artistic development as well. This concept, referred to in more or less vague terms throughout his oeuvre is essentially, to use his own phrasing, “another Humanism”⁶⁹. Olson's New Humanism calls for a rejection of Aristotelian classification in favor of a more holistic approach to history, to art, and ultimately, to life. In terms of historical understanding this meant adopting a practice similar to the fifth century B.C.E philosopher Herodotus.

The Herodotean approach has earned its founder the title of both “the father of history” and “the father of lies”⁷⁰. It is unique and indeed contrary to modern Western practice in that it does not omit legends, myths or personal histories from understandings of antiquity, instead using these “silly stories” as legitimate tools through which to gain a more profound perception of past cultures and events. Since this method does not discount personal interpretations as

⁶⁷ Cy Twombly, "History behind the Thought." Interviewed by Nicholas Serota. *Cy Twombly*. <http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings5.htm>.

⁶⁸ Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, pp. 182-187.

⁶⁹ Robert Von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Harvard University Press, 1979) p. 90.

⁷⁰ For further discussion see: Donald R. Kelley *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

unreliable—as they would eventually become at the hands of Aristotle—Herodotus would often go to experience different cultures firsthand, using his own encounters as further material on which to base his ideas. Interpreted by Olson, this method turns history into a verb rather than a noun: “I’m using this as a verb, ‘istorin,” Olson says “which means to find out for yourself”⁷¹.

Olson advocated an equally holistic approach to the arts. As Aristotle had upset the pure understanding of history, he claims that Plato is to blame for disjunctive practices in the arts. In “Human Universe” Olson condemns Plato, “he who had more of a sort of latitude and style my tribe of men are to indulge him for” for “His world of ideas, of forms as extricable from content, [which] is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and need to be seen as such if we are to get on to some alternative to the whole Greek system”⁷². In a departure from the Western world, both physically and ideologically, Olson had found a solution to Platonic ideas during his several month long stay in the Yucatan. The people he encountered there, (modern descendants of the Mayan civilization) were, to him, “not estranged from the familiar, [they] lived in the physical world and knew how to attend it closely, to make it a ‘human universe’”⁷³. He cites the system of hieroglyphics developed by their ancestors as an example (or cause) or their perceived connectivity to the physical universe. Olson would have been interested in hieroglyphics in general⁷⁴, but the ancient Mayan alphabet is particularly applicable to Olson’s

⁷¹ Charles Olson, *The Special View of History* (Berkeley, CA: Oyez, 1970) p. 20.

⁷² Charles Olson, “Human Universe,” in *Collected Prose* edited by Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander and Robert Creeley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) p. 157.

⁷³ Sherman Paul, *Olson’s Push: Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) p. 29.

⁷⁴ According to Burton Hatlen, Olson hoped that Mayan hieroglyphs “might serve him, as the Chinese ideogram had served Fenellosa and Pound, as a way to revitalize poetic language.” See “Pound’s Pisan Cantos and the Origins of Projective Verse” in *Ezra Pound and Poetic Influence: The Official Proceedings of the 17th International Ezra Pound Conference*, edited by Helen May Dennis (Amsterdam: Atlanta, 2000) p. 136.

Humanism in that it combines ideograms—symbols which resemble the objects they denote—with purely syllabic glyphs⁷⁵. The key here is the intersection between image and content, signifier and signified, which is in Olson’s mind more adept at conveying the immediacy of an experience.

As a result of Olson’s newfound infatuation with hieroglyphics, there was, in the summer of 1951, an interdisciplinary dialogue of sorts among the various faculty at Black Mountain College, centered around the subject of glyphs. Practitioners of the various disciplines (painting, music, dance) all responded to Olson’s poem, “A Glyph” with an interpretation of the concept in their own medium⁷⁶. Vincent Katz transcribes the account of dancer Katherine Litz as follows: “The Glyph dance grew out of an exchange of ‘glyph-gifts’ among the faculty. Charles Olson presented Ben Shahn with a glyph poem and in turn Shahn presented Olson with a glyph painting. I then presented the community with a glyph dance with music by Harrison and decor utilizing the Shahn painting enlarged. The common idea of a Glyph expressed by the different art forms was simply a compound image contained in a single work”⁷⁷. Not only does this interaction further underline Olson’s idea of glyphs as representative of a breakdown of the divide between form and content, but judging by the interdisciplinary scope of this exchange we

⁷⁵ Sylvanus Griswold Morley, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1946) p. 587.

⁷⁶ According to Vincent Katz, the poem “A Glyph” is not included in any of Olson’s published collected works. He offers the following poem as a possible contender for the poem to which Ben Shahn originally responded: “Romans, my countrymen/your daemons/are neglected, abundance/is what you have, all/that you produce///so you should be surprised/what is left to us/to shut us up in our houses/like fattening birds and gorge/our bellies in the dark until/we burst with fat” see: Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013) p. 186.

⁷⁷ Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, p. 186.

can only assume that Twombly—who was, at this time, enjoying his first summer at Black Mountain College—would have been privy to, if not involved in, the conversation.

As previously mentioned, Twombly was never enrolled in any of Olson’s classes, thus any influence on one by the other would have been the result of interactions outside of the classroom. Given the collaborative environment at Black Mountain this kind of teacher-student collaboration wouldn’t have been too farfetched, especially considering both men’s esteemed reputations. When Olson came to the school in 1951, he had not only inherited rectorship but, with Josef Albers’ departure, he also took over the position of the college’s intellectual nucleus⁷⁸. Likewise, Twombly, though only a student at the college for a short period of time, left a profound impression in his wake. Robert Motherwell was particularly impressed with the young artist, reportedly claiming that “he had nothing to teach him” and that he believed him to be “the most accomplished young painter whose work [he happened] to have encountered.”⁷⁹

Olson, unsurprisingly appears to have been equally taken with Twombly’s work. He wrote about the artist on several occasions both in his letters to Robert Creeley and in entirely dedicatory pieces like the poem, “For Cy Twombly, Faced with His First Chicago & New York Shows” and a brief prose piece which was written in 1951 as a response to visiting the artist’s studio⁸⁰. What is so remarkable about the latter, other than the fact that it is essentially a paean to

⁷⁸ Joseph Andrew Rice, the college’s founder, hoped that the arts would play a prominent role in the school’s future. He sought an instructor who would provide a strong foundation for the art program and he found one in Josef Albers. He recruited Albers in the 1930s and he and his wife Anni continued to be a strong presence until their departure in 1943. See further discussion in: *Beat Culture: Lifestyles, Icons and Impact* edited by William Lawlor (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) pp. 16-18 and Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013)

⁷⁹ Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, pp.159-162.

⁸⁰ See Charles Olson’s “Letters to Robert Creeley,” “For Cy Twombly, faced with his first Chicago and New York shows,” and “Cy Twombly” in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) pp. 9-13, 19-25.

the then twenty three-year-old artist, are its uncannily prophetic insights. At the time the piece was written, Twombly's canvases bore almost no resemblance to his mature work and consisted mostly of Kline or Motherwell-esque shapes scrawled haphazardly across monumental canvases, however, Olson's descriptions of "whiteness," "glyphs," and antique references seem to be describing pieces which are far more emblematic of the artist's mature work⁸¹.

I am not suggesting that Olson could have guessed the direction that Twombly's later artistic endeavors would take him, rather that he recognized within the younger man—both from his artwork and from the conversations between them—something of his own ideas that would later develop into the kinds of pieces with which we are now more familiar. Olson goes as far as to cite conversations with the student artist as the inspiration for some of his own ideas: "It was Twombly" he says, "and wholly in some other reference, in fact to how a lake we know in common afforded him about what Tao Yuan-Ming's east hedge was, who gave me suddenly, as he talked of contemplation, the sense of what architecture now had to do"⁸². The reference to this instance, and indeed the tone of this piece in general, suggests that the relationship between Twombly and Olson was not so much of a teacher endowing a student with his wisdom, but of two men with similar dispositions exchanging ideas. The allusion to Tao Yuan-Ming is especially important in this distinction.

Tao Yuan-Ming, also called Tao Qian, was a revered fourth-century Chinese poet who, though not widely recognized in his own time, continues to make up an essential portion of the

⁸¹ Charles Olson, "Cy Twombly," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Art Data, 2002) pp. 9-12

⁸² Olson, "Cy Twombly," p. 10.

Chinese canon and was also notably popular among members of the American Beat Movement⁸³.

When Olson speaks of his “east hedge” he is referring to a pictorial and poetic tradition which not only deeply impacted his own ideas but would have much to do with Twombly’s later work.

Almost all representations of the poet depict him either holding a chrysanthemum or walking in his garden along his eastern fence (where he famously kept a patch of chrysanthemums). Oddly enough, the flower is only mentioned within Tao Qian’s body of work on a handful of occasions, but those poems wherein it is alluded to are especially important. Susan E. Nelson cites the fifth of the poet’s “Twenty Poems on Drinking Wine” as a particularly emblematic instance⁸⁴. Over the course of the piece, he illustrates a seemingly mundane scene. He describes the landscape surrounding his property for several lines and then ends with a philosophical resignation:

“There’s an essential meaning in all this-/I would explain it, but can’t find the words”. According to Nelson, “What readers understood Tao to have experienced at his eastern fence was a surge of insight into the wholeness of things: here and there, matter and mind, quotidian and absolute”⁸⁵.

Long after the poet’s death, the flower would continue to be used in pictorial and poetic representations as a symbol for Tao, endowing whichever person depicted with the same

⁸³ Red Chan, “World Literature and East Asian Literature” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* edited by Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2012) p. 467.

⁸⁴ Tao Qian’s poem in full: “I built my cottage in a peopled place/Yet hear no sound of passing carts and horses./ Would you like to know how this can be?/If the mind's detached, the place will be remote./Gathering chrysanthemums by the eastern fence I catch sight of South Mountain in the distance;/The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets/And flocks of flying birds return together./There's an essential meaning in all this-/I would explain it, but can't find the words.” Tao Qian from “Twenty Poems on Drinking Wine,” as transcribed by Susan E. Nelson in “Revisiting the Eastern Fence: Tao Qian’s Chrysanthemums,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 3, Sep. 2001, p. 441.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 441.

qualities of his person and particularly with the parts of his psyche alluded to in the poems which feature chrysanthemums. According to Nelson⁸⁶:

Alongside the tradition of chrysanthemum pictures, and frequently intersecting with it, is an extensive corpus of poetry about Tao Qian and his chrysanthemums. Some of these poems were occasioned by the viewing of Tao-inspired pictures, and many of the pictures are informed by the reading of Tao-inspired poems. This interaction of verbal and visual is characteristic of Chinese art—familiar enough in the form of inscribed paintings, but also at work in texts and images that are materially independent of one another.

In many ways the chrysanthemum-as-artistic-device achieves the same degree of immediacy that Olson champions in Mayan glyphs. That Twombly was aware of this tradition points to an affinity for word-image conflation that matched his contemporaries, even before he was actively including words in his paintings.

The significance of the chrysanthemum to both Olson and, by association, Twombly, extends beyond its symbolic potency. The motif would continue to resurface in Olson's psyche throughout his life, as exemplified in the following note from June 17th, 1958, transcribed by George Butterick and later alluded to in the writer's magnum opus, *The Maximus Poems*⁸⁷:

Everything ^{issues} comes fr the
Black Chrysanthemum
& nothing is anything but itself
measured so.

. . . Chrysanthemum
chrysos = gold anthemum = flower

the Black Gold / the Black Sun
The Golden Flower etc

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 438.

⁸⁷ George F. Butterick, *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) p. 240.

Judging from Olson's knowledge of, and the importance he had ascribed to "the east hedge" in "Cy Twombly", we can assume that his use of the chrysanthemum symbol in this instance is being used, as in the ancient Chinese tradition, as an allusion to Tao's sense of "the wholeness of things." This sentiment reflects one of the ideas central to Olson's doctrine: the desire to go beyond logos, and abandon Greek classifications which stifle human perception. In his analysis of *The Maximus Poems*, George Butterick postulates that the phrase, "nothing is anything but itself/measured so" is derived from Heraclitus's statement that "The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one"⁸⁸. This phrase speaks to another, albeit related component of New Humanism which Olson discusses in "The Gate and The Center," in short, the necessity of returning to one's "origins"⁸⁹. It is also important to note that his reference to "The Golden Flower," is itself an allusion to "The Secret of the Golden Flower" the ancient Chinese text translated into German by Richard Wilhelm and famously annotated by Carl Jung⁹⁰. This unruly web of allusions is perhaps elucidated by the content of the section of the *Maximus Poems* in question. It is within this canto that Maximus frees himself from the trap of historiographical consciousness and embraces, in its place, mythology. Sherman Paul explains the reason for this shift in his analysis of the *Maximus Poems* saying, "History is perspectival, always limited by the necessary selectivity of the historian, but myth, the memory of the collective unconscious, is ever-present (eternal) and includes all time"⁹¹. Both in the original context of the chrysanthemum

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 241.

⁸⁹ Charles Olson, "The Gate and the Center," in *Collected Prose*, edited by Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander and Robert Creeley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 168-173.

⁹⁰ Butterick, *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*, p. 241.

⁹¹ Paul, *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry*, p. 182.

which Twombly was familiar with as standing as a symbol for “the wholeness of things” and Olson’s use, which is tied up in Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious, the common denominator is the absence of arbitrary classifications which fracture cohesive understandings of the perceivable universe. As Tao Qian reflects on the unified quality of the physical world, Jung proposes a unified understanding of the metaphysical world. By weaving Tao and Jung’s philosophies together, Olson breaks down the ultimate barrier between physical and metaphysical, objective and subjective, logos and mythos⁹². This unification, as we will see in the next chapter, is also apparent throughout Twombly’s oeuvre.

The recognition of the overlap between Olson’s and Twombly’s ideologies, though novel, is not entirely unprecedented. As a doctoral candidate, Carol Nigro published an article in *Tate Papers* outlining what she felt to be the extent of their creative relationship⁹³. While I of course share the belief in Nigro’s central premise, her investigation stops short—she makes a point of saying that the New Humanist lens she proffers is only a “useful one through which to read Twombly’s works of the mid to late 1950s”⁹⁴. According to her argument, New Humanism and the ideas central to it reach a climax in Twombly’s work around 1960, and thereafter his work was more heavily influenced by separate ideas he was exposed to in the Mediterranean. Even though concrete evidence of Olson’s and Twombly’s relationship extends only into the mid-fifties, Olson’s ideas are prevalent throughout Twombly’s body of work and, in my opinion only become more crystallized, more pronounced in the decades that followed. In lieu of

⁹² For a more thorough explanation of Olson’s conception of logos (truth) and mythos (that which is said) see Charles Olson, *The Special View of History* (Berkeley, CA: Oyez, 1970) pp. 20-24.

⁹³ Carol Nigro, “Cy Twombly’s Humanist Upbringing,” *Tate Papers*, No. 10 (October 2008).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

correspondence between the two men, we must turn to the work itself for proof of the artist's proclivities for New Humanistic ideas.

Chapter Three: Twombly the 'Istorian

The Aristotelian system of classification, which is at the root of Olson's dissatisfaction with contemporary Western methodologies, offers an orderly, objective approach to examining and describing human experience. But according to Olson: "It is not sufficiently observed that logos and the reason necessary to it, are only a stage which man must master and not what they are taken to be, final discipline. Beyond them is direct perception and the contraries which dispose of argument"⁹⁵. Olson found what he believed to be "direct perception" in the hieroglyphics of the ancient Maya. He describes the Maya as "hot for the world they lived in...hot to get it down the way it was—the way it is"⁹⁶. By replacing written language with forms that "retain the power of the objects of which they are the images," the Maya had effectively eliminated the barrier between experience and representation. A similar relationship between content and image is evident throughout Twombly's oeuvre. Although the accompanying images—and certainly the graphic qualities of the artist's script—are thoroughly abstracted, they engage with the content of the text in such a way that the one provides the viewer with a more thorough understanding of the other.

In 1985 Twombly completed the "Hero and Leandro" series while living in Bassano. The title refers to Ovid's "Hero and Leander," a tale of star-crossed lovers which has inspired Western artists and writers throughout the ages. According to the myth, a young man from Abydos named Leander falls in love with Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite, who lives across the Hellespont Strait. In order to woo her he convinces her that it is unfit for a virgin to worship the goddess of love.

⁹⁵ Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *Collected Prose*, edited by Robert Creeley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 1997) p. 156.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 166.

Eventually she gives in to his advances and every night during the summer he swims across the strait to see her, guided by a torch in her window. One night, a storm blows out the flame and Leander, unable to find his way, drowns in the night. When his body washes up to shore, Hero is so distraught that she casts herself from her balcony plunging to her own death.

Historically, artistic accounts of the story have shown either Hero discovering her beloved's body in the surf or the lovers embracing amidst an ominously foreboding seascape⁹⁷. Surely the object of these specific temporal settings is to make clear to the viewer the content of the story being portrayed. Twombly's interpretation, in contrast, appears to deal primarily with the struggle, and subsequent death, of Leander. The first part of the polyptych consists of a dark green and red tinged wave created with violent, almost claw-like marks (fig. 1). The murky green center captures the haunting mystery of the ocean while the red and pink edges betray the tactile method by which the paint was applied. As we see the traces of the artist's hand scraped across the canvas, it is not difficult to imagine our protagonist's own hands struggling to tread water amid the storm. The single word "*leandro*" (the artist's Italianized spelling of Leander) is scrawled across the central right quadrant of the canvas, becoming fainter from left to right, as if dissolving into a whisper. Is this phrase meant to represent the protagonist himself being overtaken by the impending wave? Or perhaps it is Hero's cry, uttered upon learning the devastating fate of her beloved? Either way, the content of the panel—Leandro's demise—is clear. The following two canvases appear to depict the aftermath of the dramatic first scene.

Reading the piece as a sequence from left to right, from Part II to Part III it becomes

⁹⁷ See: Joseph Mallord William Turner, "The Parting of Hero and Leander," 1837, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London; William Etty, "The Parting of Hero and Leander," 1827, oil and metal leaf on canvas, Tate Britain; William Etty, "Hero, Having Thrown herself from the Tower at the Sight of Leander Drowned, Dies on his Body," 1829, oil on canvas, Tate Britain.

progressively lighter, vacant, and calm until the canvas is almost completely white (fig. 2, 3).

The final element of the polyptych is a piece of paper (a contrast to the canvas of the other three portions) upon which there is no image, only the words: “He’s gone, up bubbles all his amorous breath!” (fig. 4). The powerful last line serves as a hauntingly beautiful denouement but also forges a profound connection between word and image, poetry and painting. Not only has the artist quite literally fused painting and poetry, but these words are a direct reference to John Keats’s 1817 sonnet of the same subject which in turn was made as a response to a gem carving of a drowning Leander by William Tassie⁹⁸.

Unlike the painters of yore, Twombly doesn’t rely strictly on images to convey the content of the story at hand, but instead invokes an interpenetration of text and image, which, like Mayan hieroglyphics, imbue the viewer with a more profound understanding of the content being expressed. The text and title alert the reader of the myth in question, but it is the image—the poignant, visceral portrayal of struggle followed by eerie calm—which imparts the emotional intensity of the drama. Twombly’s primary concern here is not with conveying a mythological story with any sort of clarity. Surely if it was, there would be a more effective means by which to do so. Rather, his piece uses the archetype of Hero and Leandro as a vehicle for examining the

⁹⁸ Keats’s sonnet in full: “Come hither all sweet maidens soberly./Down looking aye, and with a chasten’d light/Hid in the fringes of your eyelids white./And meekly let your fair hands joined be./As if so gentle that ye could not see./Untouch’d, a victim of your beauty bright./Sinking away to his young spirit’s night./Sinking bewilder’d ’mid the dreary sea./’T is young Leander toiling to his death./Nigh swooning he doth purse his weary lips/For Hero’s cheek, and smiles against her smile./O horrid dream! see how his body dips/Dead-heavy; arms and shoulders gleam awhile;/He’s gone; up bubbles all his amorous breath!”

Although the original carving is now lost, we can be certain of its role in inspiring the sonnet as Keats actually referred to it in the title of the poem: “On A Leander Which Miss Reynolds, My Kind Friend, Gave Me”. Far from a rare piece of art, the gem carving would have been a part of the artist’s popular retail line. For a further discussion see: Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006) p. 225.

poignancy of death, love and loss. Every component of the paintings—the images, the text, the script—work collectively to express the emotion and the experience (albeit a fictional one) at hand.

Although Twombly’s written references—both those that are incorporated into the body of the piece and those that exist solely in the title—frequently refer to something apparently outside of his own experience, these places, figures, and myths often have some kind of significance to his own experiences or else reflect a deeply personal interpretation of them. Nigro’s article cites the epic “Age of Alexander” produced in 1960 (the same year as the birth of the artist’s son, Alessandro) for its combination of historical and personal imagery⁹⁹. Although this is a particularly cogent example, Twombly more often constructs “his-story” through a carefully curated selection of artists and writers whose work likewise employs Olson’s historical approach.

Just as Twombly’s creative interpretations of mythological subjects reflect a personalized reading of an archetypal concept, his references to specific figures from throughout the Western canon demonstrates a historical approach like that of Herodotus’s “finding out for oneself,” and Olson’s “istorin”¹⁰⁰; that is, a version of history wherein the historian himself plays a role¹⁰⁰. Twombly’s thoughtfully crafted assemblage of figures and stories, tied together by archetypes, makes up his own personal version of history. Just as “myth, for Olson...is not a frame of

⁹⁹ Carol Nigro describes the piece as “a tour de force, recalling the campaigns of Alexander the Great in impastoed, oil-paint globules and smears, in pencilled and crayoned scratches and graffiti. More carefully read, however, the personal blends into the historical. This painting marks both a beginning – the arrival of Twombly’s infant son, Cyrus Alessandro – and the apex and finale of a decade-long endeavour to establish artistic credentials. It is a mature outpouring that confirms a unique style, forecasts lifelong themes and aesthetic directions, and suggests both personal and cultural content.” Carol Nigro, “Cy Twombly’s Humanist Upbringing,” *Tate Papers*, Vol. 10, 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Olson, *The Special View of History*, p. 20.

reference but a way of participating in process,” Twombly’s selection of various myths and purveyors is his way of “‘making’ history, formed not as a succession of events, but as sets of interpenetrating, active, indeterminate relationships.”¹⁰¹

This interpretation is supported by the fact that Twombly’s approach to history, as gleaned from the evidence in his oeuvre and the few statements he has made pertaining to his work, is, like Olson’s, “spatial,”—a concept that is best summed up by Sherman Paul in his book on Olson¹⁰²:

Millennia is not, he says, ‘the same as...time as history...’ It is not linear history, irreversible time, which Olson recognizes and uses in chronologies to his own ends, but time spatialized, all-history-there-at-once, the fullness of time. Millennia, as the dates he supplies (12,000 B.C. -1955 A.D.) indicate, is the space of all available human history. Such vista of time, perhaps in the way quantity makes for qualitative difference, becomes space, and when time becomes space we are no longer bound to a single, restrictive dimension.

In his many attempts to bring Olson’s theories to fruition, Twombly experiments with a number of approaches, all aimed at breaking down the “linear” structure of history that has hitherto dominated Western historical discourse. He achieves this by eliminating the boundaries between the viewer’s experience and the ancient myth being depicted, and also by exposing the parallels between personal experience and stories and figures from the antique. The former can be seen in the analysis of his take on Hero and Leandro wherein he focuses primarily on the emotion, the human aspect, of an otherwise fantastical story. The latter method, is seen throughout his oeuvre by drawing upon the work of past artists and writers who seem to engage with the ancient past in

¹⁰¹ Paul, *Olson’s Push*, p. 185; Nigro “Cy Twombly’s Humanist Upbringing.”

¹⁰²The artist wrote in a travel grant proposal in 1952: “What I am trying to establish is – that Modern Art isn’t dislocated, but something with roots, tradition and continuity.” *Writings on Cy Twombly*, p. 225.

Sherman Paul, *Olson’s Push*, p. 71.

a similar manner—that is, with a focus on the relevance and humanity of ancient peoples and figures.

The most widely acknowledged of Twombly's sources is Nicolas Poussin, the celebrated Baroque painter of seventeenth-century France. While this relationship seems somewhat gratuitous given the differences between the two men in terms of style and period, their relationship is so well-documented in Twombly scholarship that it was actually the subject of an exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 2011¹⁰³. The unlikely coupling of Poussin's work with Twombly's has been formed by the latter artist via several references in his oeuvre as well as his declaration that "[he] would've liked to have been Poussin, if [he]'d had a choice, in another time"¹⁰⁴. Aside from Twombly's own assertions, there are a few fairly remarkable connections between the two men: both took up residence in Rome at the age of thirty, both actively engage with the Classical past, and both are portrayed in their respective scholarship as existing in a curious flux between Romanticism and Classicism.

Traditionally Romanticism and Classicism have been approached in Western art history as diametrical oppositions. To be a Romantic is to be quixotic, wild, ruled only by one's emotions, whereas Classicists are defined by a sense of order, morality and civic obligations. While Classicism looks to the ancients for guidance, Romanticism champions individual

¹⁰³ The exhibition, entitled "Twombly and Poussin: Arcadian Painters" ran from June 29th to September 25th 2011. According to a statement released by the museum, "the exhibition [was] developed in close collaboration with Cy Twombly himself."

¹⁰⁴ The first of Twombly's allusions to Poussin comes in 1960 with, "Woodland Glade: To Poussin" and, presumably again in "Woodland Glade" of 1964. Other significant examples are his Bacchanalia paintings of 1977 wherein the artist has adhered prints of Poussin's work to the surface of his own canvas and the Quattro Stagioni series of 1993-1994 which is an homage to Poussin's series of the same title from circa 1660.

Cy Twombly. "History behind the Thought." Interview by Nicholas Serota. Cy Twombly. Web. <http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings5.htm>.

experience. In many respects, these two ideologies do seem to be deeply opposed and if the aforementioned conventions hold true, then it should stand to reason that one cannot simultaneously embody both. However—and systematic approaches to history have consistently denied this fact—there does exist a middle ground between the two, and it is precisely at this median that both Twombly and Poussin reside. Both men incorporate Classical ideas into their work but in a manner that errs towards the Romantic. The result are New Humanist representations of the mythological past which, despite their transcendent content, champion “natural physical being.”¹⁰⁵

While it’s relatively easy to accept this idea in Twombly’s case, I anticipate that its application to Poussin will be met with slightly more opposition. Compared to Twombly, Poussin’s work is positively rigid, lifeless—the very epitome of academic painting. However, the designation of Poussin to the Classical tradition is not nearly as definitive as art history has made it out to be. Poussin’s distinctly individual vision—one of the hallmarks of Romanticism—has been extolled by historians and artists alike¹⁰⁶. Indeed, in his time Poussin was considered to be something of a “poetical”, what by modern definitions we would call a Romantic painter, especially at the beginning and end of his career: “Such works are ‘poetical’ in this sense, then, for the romantic viewer: partly by virtue of literary subject-matter; partly because, through the use of warm colours and sensuous treatment, they were seen to appeal primarily to the senses rather than reason, and therefore to be likely to evoke a similarly vital and sensuous response in

¹⁰⁵ Sherman Paul, *Olson’s Push*, p. 5

¹⁰⁶ Richard Schiff describes the view of Poussin by Delacroix and other nineteenth century painters as “romantic” in the sense that his work “not only seems to recall that of the ancients, but also serves as a model for those who desire artistic rejuvenation and independence” Richard Schiff, *Cezanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. 177.

the spectator”¹⁰⁷. In addition to his “sensuous” color palette, Poussin appears to have possessed an interest in the immediacy of certain pictures and methods of picture-making; namely, free-form sketches in which he could capture his original intent with as little editing as possible. While modern scholars don’t typically associate Poussin with a relaxed painting style, the majority of his sketches do possess an uncanny sense of liberty in form. In a description of the artist at work, “With a simple line, sometimes with the addition of a few brush strokes of wash, he was able to express clearly what his imagination had conceived...He was of the opinion that any other method merely held back his genius and slowed up his work”¹⁰⁸. Poussin also, like Twombly, pays heed to the facets of the antique which most pertain to the human experience. The most famous example is “Et in Arcadia ego” wherein a group of shepherds stumble upon an ancient epitaph that, within this context, functions as a memento mori; even here in Paradise, it warns, death is inevitable. Twombly makes use of the same quote in the Autunno panel of the Quattro Stagioni series. The other less morbid humanistic theme upon which the artists dwell is sensuality. In the case of both men this is achieved by portraying mythological events with an overt emphasis on the physical experience of the subjects involved.

Artistic renditions of the myth of Jupiter and Antiope, (with which Poussin dealt at least twice), tend to follow a fairly predictable pattern. A beautiful, sleeping Antiope is unknowingly disrobed by a mischievous Jupiter who has transformed himself into a satyr in order to seduce her. Poussin’s take depicts Antiope reclining, back arched, with her hand placed suggestively on her genitals—an act that is made even more suggestive by the cloth obscuring our view and the

¹⁰⁷ Claire Pace, “Nicolas Poussin: ‘Peintre-Poète’?” *Commemorating Poussin: Reception and Interpretation of the Artist*, edited by Katie Scott and Genevieve Warwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 78.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 85.

equally scandalous placement of Jupiter's hand¹⁰⁹ (fig. 5). The tale in question has an inherent sense of voyeurism, to be sure, but Poussin's depiction is a particularly erotic one. The tangible sensuality which separates this from other interpretations of the myth has something to do with the difference between "nude" and "naked" often applied in the discussion of Courbet's and Manet's nudes in comparison to those of their contemporaries¹¹⁰. Nudity implies a degree of separation, a sense that one can look but not touch; an intangible perfection which can only be admired from afar. Nakedness, on the contrary, is imperfect and it is due to this imperfection that the spectator can more readily place themselves in a sexual context with the subject in question. Ultimately the difference is one of passivity and activity, spectatorship and experience. What makes Poussin's painting so taboo is the implication of sexual activity. Although it is difficult to ascertain what exactly *is* happening in the image—as previously mentioned, there is a cloth obscuring her genitals and the arm thrown over her eyes makes it impossible to determine whether or not she is even truly sleeping—but this ambiguity leaves the viewer with a distinct impression that there is *something* happening. We get the sense that we are not merely looking at a naked, sleeping woman but at an active sexual encounter that is playing out before our very eyes.

Twombly never deals specifically with the theme of Jupiter and Antiope but his treatment of similar stories reflects the same affinity for experience over content. Take his "Venus and Adonis" of 1978 (fig. 6). The myth in question, like that of Jupiter and Antiope, is a sexually

¹⁰⁹ Until recently this painting was largely unknown. In 2011 its current owner, renowned artist Jeff Koons, lent it to an exhibition in Paris and has since offered it as a loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. See: Colin Gleadell, "Jeff Koons Lends Cache to Old Master Fair in Paris," ARTnews (September 13, 2011) <<http://www.artnews.com/2011/09/13/jeff-koons-lends-cache-to-new-old-master-fair-in-paris/>>

¹¹⁰ Gilles Néret, *Manet* (Germany: Taschen, 2003) p. 21.

charged story taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*¹¹¹. As is typical of Twombly's work, the literary content of the story is impossible to glean from the image alone, but hints within the piece give the viewer a sense of the nature of the content. The sensuous application of pink and orange paint and the various suggestions of genitalia—for example, the subtle blue phallus in the “U” of “VENUS”—all infer a sexual theme. Given these hints it is not difficult to imagine the painting as an abstract representation of the sexual gratification central to the myth. As with the “Hero and Leandro” series, the primary objective is not to reiterate the mythology of Venus and Adonis, but to treat a story which has taken countless forms and extract its universal, experiential qualities.

In addition to Poussin, Twombly's oeuvre draws upon a wealth of sources from throughout the Western canon. This wide-ranging collection includes: Stéphane Mallarmé, Rainer Maria Rilke, Johann von Goethe, Christopher Marlowe, Alvaro de Campos, John Keats, Lesley Blanch, Philip Whalen, Kazimir Malevich, Charles Baudelaire, Raphael, Homer, Virgil, Sappho and Ovid, to name but a few. Together, the group spans nearly thirty centuries—the entirety of Western civilization—as well as countless periods, styles and media. The breadth of his sources alone acts as a kind of testament to New Humanism. In choosing to group these figures—as he has, by virtue of their inclusion in his oeuvre—Twombly effectively negates the arbitrary classifications which have hitherto separated them and reinterprets them in terms of

¹¹¹ According to Ovid's interpretation of the myth, Venus becomes infatuated with the mortal Adonis. Their courtship is tragically cut short when Adonis, defying Venus's warning not to hunt boars, is mauled and killed by one. Several interpretations, notably Titian's and Shakespeare's, represent Adonis as uninterested in Venus. In these interpretations it is intimated that the scorned Venus plays a part in Adonis's untimely death. The relatively obscure myth is also, significantly, mentioned in Charles Olson: *The Special View of History*—a book based on the notes from his history lectures at Black Mountain College. See: J.E. Zimmerman, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1964). Georgianna Ziegler, “Picturing Venus and Adonis: Shakespeare and the Artists,” in *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays* edited by Phillip C. Kolin (United States: Psychology Press, 1997) pp. 389-404

present experience. In so doing, he uses myth, as Olson does, as “a way of participating in process”¹¹². What’s more, he concentrates on aspects of their life and work which most appeal to Olson’s New Humanism.

Take, “Hérodiade” of 1960 (fig. 7). According to Abigail Susik’s interpretation, the title and central inscription refer to the play of the same title (as evidenced by the words within the piece like “scene” and “ouverture” that allude to the theater) which had in turn been adapted from Mallarmé’s poem of 1898¹¹³. The painting, essentially Twombly’s own take on the myth, ascribes himself a place within the rich history of its interpretation. Furthermore, the specific allusion to this piece—which was later turned into a theatrical production—emphasizes Olson’s admiration of performance as an example of being in touch with one’s own physical body—further underlined by the artist’s handprints which act as a tangible marker of his corporeality¹¹⁴. Another noteworthy example is Twombly’s epitaph to Alvaro de Campos (fig. 8). The fictitious figure is one of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa’s eighty heteronyms¹¹⁵. Although the figure is not, strictly speaking real, he is real in the sense that he exists in Pessoa’s and apparently Twombly’s experience of the world. Fittingly, the personality and writings attributed to de Campos by Pessoa possess a remarkably similar methodological approach to Olson. He is known

¹¹² Paul, *Olson’s Push*, p. 185.

¹¹³ Abigail Susik, “Cy Twombly: Writing After Writing,” *re-bus*, No. 4, Autumn/Winter 2009. p. 10-14.

¹¹⁴ Sherman Paul on Olson’s affinity for physicality: “He accepts the human condition in respect to natural physical existence, the raging phenomenal world, sea, tide, sand. He glorifies sexuality and proposes the stance of living in the living, of exposing oneself to and momentarily capturing beauty and love from the flux of life.” Paul, *Olson’s Push*, p. 55.

¹¹⁵ George Monteiro, “Fernando Pessoa and Alvaro de Campos,” *Harvard Review* (No. 19, 2000) p. 4.

for his “non-Aristotelian” odes and his favorite saying “to feel all things in all ways” which Twombly has included on the base of the piece ¹¹⁶.

Olson’s conception of history reflects a post-modern sensibility in that it rejects the conventional understanding of time as linear, compounded, and so forth in order to devise a new way of approaching time as fluid, protean and not only capable of change but capable of change at the hands of “actual willful man”¹¹⁷. In choosing references who span several centuries but who nonetheless address the same or similar subjects, Twombly emphasizes the “ongoing process” that is human history while simultaneously asserting his own presence and activity within its fabric. Twombly, like Olson, gives no regard to periodization, eras, or any other constructs aimed at categorizing human experience, including cultures¹¹⁸.

While the vast majority of Twombly’s allusions are taken from the Western canon, there are a handful of instances in which he refers to Eastern cultures which merit further examination. Most significantly are two paintings from the early 1980’s upon which the artist has inscribed the phonetic spelling of the Zen Buddhist mantra “Om mani padme hum (hrih)”. The two paintings in question, “Suma” and “Hrih” (both dated 1982) are otherwise both perfectly in sync with the rest of the artist’s oeuvre (fig. 9, 10). I would go as far as to argue that these pieces represent the pinnacle of Twombly’s engagement with New Humanism. By referring to a practice outside of

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁷ Paul, Olson’s Push, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ When asked during a lecture at Berkeley why he had used a myth from a foreign culture to exemplify a phenomenon in his own, Olson replied: “Well, you knock me out if you say that. I just thought I bridged the cultures. [LAUGHS] I don’t believe in cultures myself. I think that’s a lot of hung up stuff like organized anything. I believe there is simply ourselves and where we are has a particularity which we’d better use because that’s about all we got... I don’t think there’s any such thing as a creature of a culture.” Charles Olson, *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*, edited by Ralph Maud (Toronto: Talonbooks, 2010) p. 132.

the Western canon, Twombly defies the theories of early critics who implied that his work was simply a regurgitation of sights and ideas he had been exposed to in the form of Roman ruins. In point of fact, New Humanism is the only comprehensive explanation for both the artist's Classical and non-Western references.

For one, Olson—like Jung before him—advocates for the presence of certain characteristics in the human psyche that do not heed cultural boundaries. New Humanism—essentially connectivity between man's consciousness and the physical universe—is one such universal idea. The problem with modern Western epistemologies according to Olson is that they have lost sight of this, in his mind, fundamental truth. In "Human Universe" Olson bemoans Western practices wherein "man, at his peril, breaks the full circuit of object, image, action."¹¹⁹ Both hieroglyphics and mantras elude this peril by virtue of the intrinsic interdependence of object, image and action therein.

According to Buddhist tradition, followers issue the mantra repeatedly as a means of clearing the mind in order to achieve "first order bodymind awareness" in which "all distinctions such as body, speech and mind are neutralized and are experienced as mutually inseparable and individually unrecognizable"¹²⁰. Although the individual words, in this case, "om," "mani," "padme," "hum," and "hrih" do possess particular meanings in their own right, used collectively in the form of a mantra, they become a distillation of divine wisdom which cannot be satisfactorily translated¹²¹. In fact, attempting to derive some sort of concrete meaning eliminates

¹¹⁹ Charles Olson, "Human Universe," p. 162.

¹²⁰ David Edward Shaner, *The Bodymind Experience in Japanese Buddhism: A Phenomenological Study of Kokai and Dogen*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985) p. 88.

¹²¹ According to Shaner, "Mantra literally means 'mystic doctrine' that cannot be expressed in ordinary words." Ibid. p. 92.

its spiritual potency¹²². The object of a mantra is not to automatically impart wisdom onto its speakers but to be used as a vehicle for achieving “pure mind” through perpetual repetition.

Of course, the mantra makes up only one part of the Buddhist triumvirate which leads practitioners on the path to enlightenment. The other component which is relevant in the context of Twombly’s work is the mandala, a drawn or painted design which symbolizes the universe and is also used, by its creator and viewers alike, as a vehicle for meditation. Much like the mantra, the mandala lulls the viewer into a meditative state through repetitive contemplation. While the mantra “channels auditory intentions that aid a practitioners understanding of the mystery of speech (sound), a mandala channels cognitive intentions that aid the practitioners understanding of the mystery of mind (word).”¹²³ The images in “Suma” and “Hrih” can be understood as mandalas both because of the mantric inscriptions above them and their physical appearance. Although, there are many components that make up a traditional Buddhist or Hindi mandala, the practice in its most primitive form consists of a set of concentric circles—a pattern which has upheld significance across the span of human history both in terms of time and cultures¹²⁴.

In light of their ubiquity, it should come as no surprise that the mandala held a special place of interest in the work of Carl Jung. While he would eventually come to study mandalas in terms of their archetypal value, his initial engagement with the subject was far more personal. While serving in the British army during World War I, he drew a series of twenty-seven

¹²² Ibid. p. 92.

¹²³ Ibid. p. 92.

¹²⁴ Jung A. Huh, “Mandala as Telematic Design,” *Technoetic Arts* (Vol. 8, No. 1, May 2010) p. 26.

mandalas in an army notebook¹²⁵. He did not originally understand why he was compelled to draw these shapes but felt that they were important regardless. After a period of introspection, supplemented by correspondence with Maria Moltzer, Jung began to realize that his “mandala images were cryptograms on the state of [his] self, which were delivered to [him] each day.”¹²⁶ Over the next year, as he began to acknowledge the calming effect of mandala creation on his psyche, Jung’s appreciation for the profound importance of the mandalas deepened¹²⁷:

The self, I thought, was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the soul...Only when I began to paint the mandalas did I see that all the paths I took, all the steps I made, all led back to one point, that is, to the center. The mandala became an expression of all paths.

At the hands of Jung, the mandala is more than simply a symbolic rendering of the cosmos. Through the creation of mandalas, Jung “regains his soul and overcomes the contemporary malaise of spiritual alienation.”¹²⁸ The mandala is the tool by which the ideas propagated by Olson, but present in various forms throughout human history, can be expressed and enacted.

Twombly’s mandalas are the ultimate reflection of his engagement with Olson’s Humanism. Within these images he is discovering, as Jung did, his place both within the cosmos and within history. His mandalas do more than forge a connection between his practice and that of Olson’s or Jung’s, they are deeply personal reflections of his inner psyche as expressed through a trope which has featured prominently in human culture since the Neolithic era. In

¹²⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book Liber Novus*, edited and introduced by Sonu Shamdasani (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2009) p. 206.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 206.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 206.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 207.

Twombly's work, the mandala is both ancient and contemporary, eternal and fleeting, singular and universal. Appointed by Jung as "the archetype of wholeness" the mandala performs a unification of man and cosmos and, in so doing, corrects at long last, the means established by the Greeks by which man has isolated himself from the natural world¹²⁹.

¹²⁹ Peter Patrick Barreda, *Mandala: Spiritual Visions of Our Ancient Selves*, (BookSurge Publishing, 2008) p. 41.

Conclusion

To understand Cy Twombly's work as a relevant, modern practice is to understand that his work does not attempt to conform to traditional art historical boundaries, nor transcend them. Rather, through his own connectivity to ancient ideas and people Twombly reached the same recognition as Olson that "there is no history."¹³⁰ Human existence, in Olson's and Twombly's terms is not an orderly sequence of events but a mutable field of activity. In ignoring the arbitrary confines which the modern idea of history has imposed upon Western epistemologies, Twombly is able to reestablish, in the form of his art, an active string of consciousness which spans the entire breadth of human culture.

Almost all of Twombly's creative decisions—from writing on his canvases to bridging temporal and cultural gaps in his allusions—contribute to the New Humanist agenda. Indeed, it is only once having applied the foundations of Olson's body of work to Twombly's, that the aspects of his oeuvre which at first seemed contradictory ultimately become cohesive. By employing this lens in our understanding of Twombly's work, I believe we are able to finally begin to appreciate the artist for the complex and profound visionary that he was. As Twombly scholarship continues to expand, I trust that his creative relationship to Olson and New Humanism will play a valuable role in forming a more widely-accepted picture of one of the most complex and creative artists of our time.

¹³⁰ Paul, Olson's Push, p. 29.



Figure 1) Hero and Leandro (A Painting in Four Parts) Part I, 1984. Oil, house paint, and paint stick on canvas. 66 X 78 7/8 inches.



Figure 2) Hero and Leandro, Part II, 1984. Oil-based house paint and oil paint on canvas. 61 1/2 X 80 1/2 inches.



Figure 3) Hero and Leandro, Part III, 1984. Oil-based house paint and oil paint on canvas. 61 1/2 X 80 1/2 inches.

He's gone,
up bubbles
all his amorous breath.

Figure 4) Hero and Leandro, Part IV, 1984.



Figure 5) Poussin, Nicolas. Jupiter and Antiope. 17th century. Oil on canvas.

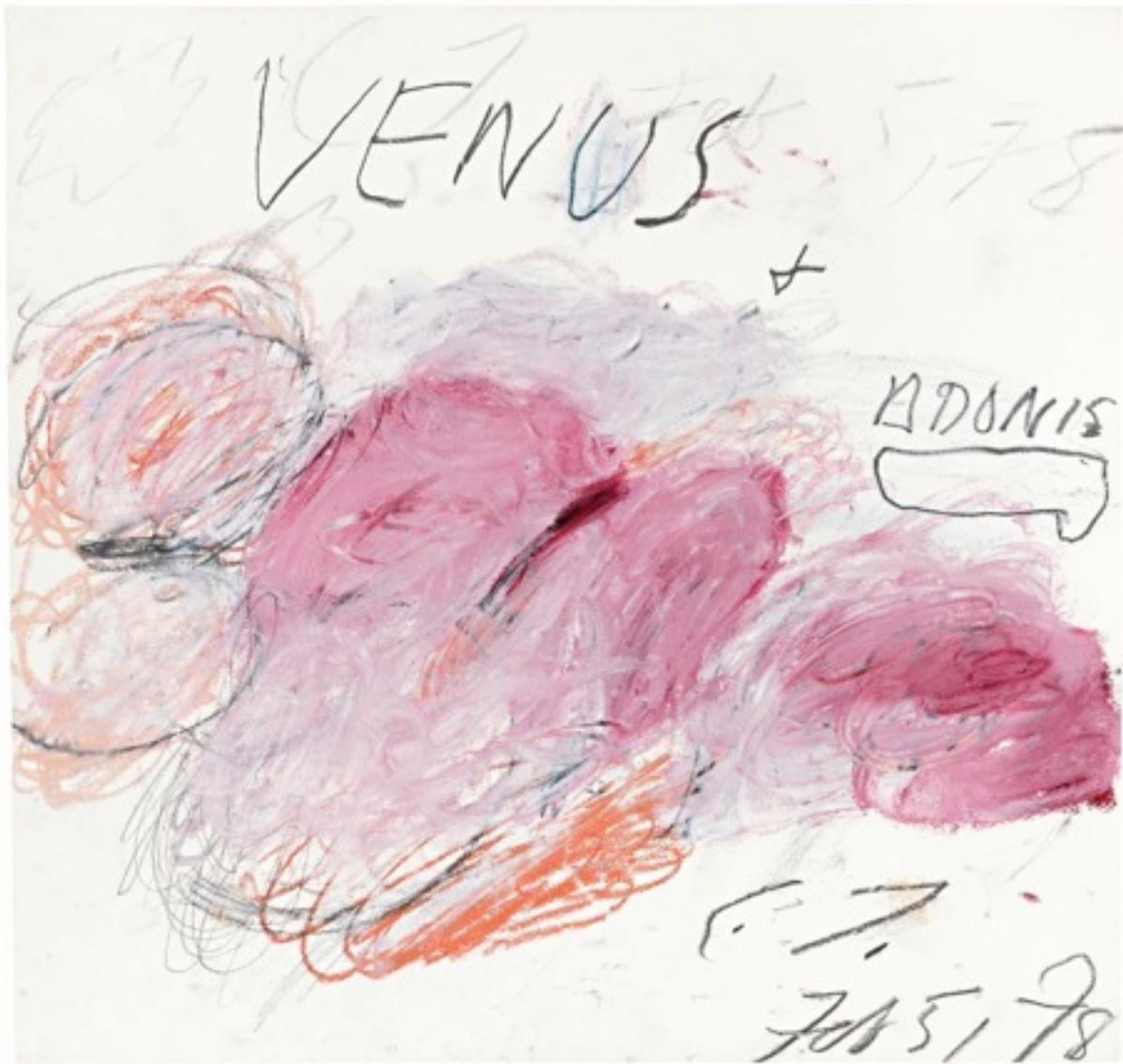


Figure 6) Venus and Adonis, 1978. Oil on canvas.



Figure 7) Hérodiade, 1960. Oil paint, lead pencil, wax crayon and oil based house paint on canvas. 200 X 281.9 centimeters.



Figure 8) Untitled (In Memory of Alvaro de Campos), 2002. Wood, plaster, resin. 60 X 116 X 39.3 centimeters.

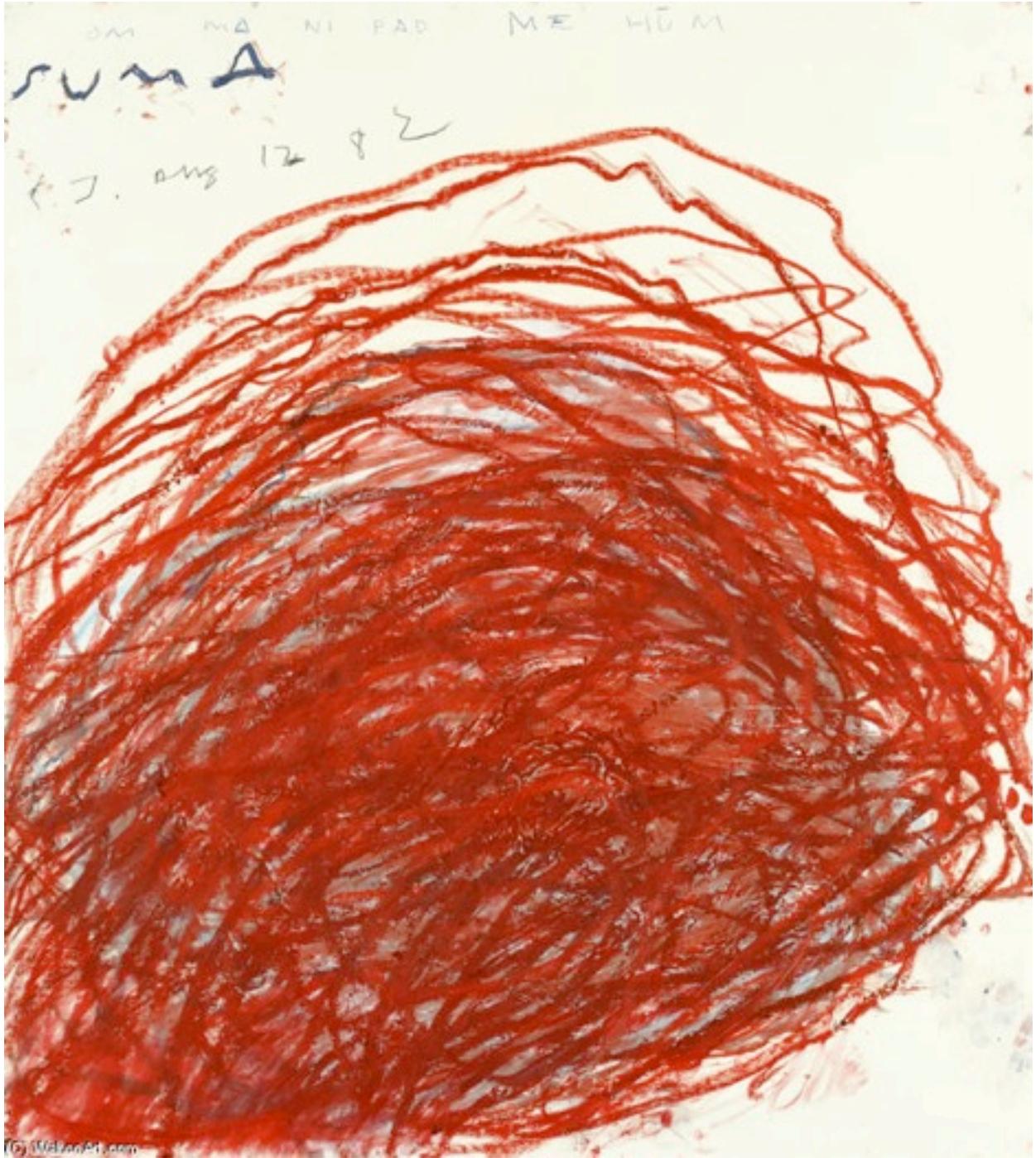


Figure 9) Suma, 1982. Oil paint, crayon, gouache, graphite, and color pencil on paper. 142.5 X 127.5 centimeters.



Figure 10) Hrih, 1982. Oil stick, pencil, color pencil on paper. 100 X 70 centimeters.

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