PRIMORDIAL FRESHNESS

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ELEONORA DI ERASMO AND THIERRY GREUB

EDE (Eleonora Di Erasmo) – *I would like to start our conversation talking about your first encounter with Cy Twombly's work and the origins of your longstanding research on the artist. Could you tell me how it all began?*

ThG (Thierry Greub) – My enthusiasm for Cy Twombly was first aroused while I was a student, by Gottfried Boehm, Professor of Modern Art History at the University of Basel, who subsequently supervised my doctorate. Later, as his research assistant, I once again engaged with his writings about the artist. Gottfried Boehm wrote a number of pioneering texts on Twombly between 1985 and 1987. One of these foundational texts, in which he compares Twombly's pictorial forms, emerging out of and sinking back into the palimpsest-like layers of the picture area, to human memory and the process of forgetting and remembering, was published in English in the anthology on Cy Twombly edited by Nicola Del Roscio (Boehm 2002).

Boehm was the first scholar to undertake an overall interpretation of Twombly's works. I have always kept his hermeneutic investigations of Twombly's art in mind. I was all the prouder, consequently, when I was able to wring a further text on the artist out of my academic mentor. It appeared in the materials of my first Cy Twombly colloquium, which I organized at the University of Cologne (Boehm 2017). So, right from my student days, Cy Twombly was never entirely new ground for me. In the Kunstmuseum Basel, which holds the key early works *Untitled* (1954) and *Study for Presence of a Myth* (1959), and at exhibitions, I had seen Twombly paintings – they both fascinated and disconcerted me, because I couldn't place them, and they forced me to reflect on the boundaries and possibilities of art. Also, my parents collected art, my father collecting especially Mark Tobey, so American Abstract Expressionism was not an unknown to me. Since I wanted to be an archaeologist until, through Gottfried Boehm, I found art history, I was fascinated by the scattered clusters and the stratifications reaching into the depths that appear in Twombly's pictures as well as by his works' numerous references to the ancient world. That was my phase as an enthusiast.

The direct viewing of Cy Twombly's works remained central for me also in the following phase of scholarly engagement with the artist. That began from 2008 with my move from Basel to the *Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities Morphomata* of the University of Cologne. There was an exquisite small exhibition in the Lindenau-Museum Altenburg in 2009, which took place to mark the award of the Gerhard Altenbourg Prize to Twombly.
By including the photographic works, unknown until that time, it was the first to bring together all the media of his artistic production. Twombly's photographic works were a real revelation for me. I then wrote my very first text on the artist, on the second volume of photographs from Schirmer/Mosel (Greub 2009). Altenburg, together with the extraordinary survey exhibition *Sensations of the Moment*, curated by Achim Hochdörfer, which opened shortly afterwards in mumok (Museum Moderner Kunst) in Vienna, was my definitive "jumpstart" – to paraphrase Twombly – into an ongoing engagement with this exceptional artist.

It was in the context of my scholarly engagement with Cy Twombly, and specifically against the backdrop of my first Cy Twombly Congress, which I already mentioned, which took place in 2012 at *Morphomata*, that the topic of my *Habilitation* crystallized. The congress was designed to be strictly interdisciplinary and brought together renowned scholars from numerous neighboring disciplines touched by Twombly, such as Classical Archaeology, Egyptology, Greek Studies, and Assyriology (Greub 2017a).
Another genre that was a central point of reference for Twombly, namely the art of poetry in the form of handwritten inscriptions in his works, had already

fascinated me for a long time. The more attention I paid to them, the more I realized that there was a need for research on them, since there were only a few literary quotations that had been deciphered and ascribed to an author, which were discussed again and again in the research literature in a repetitive way. I am exceptionally happy that during my time at *Morphomata* I was able to achieve my *Habilitation* project on the inscriptions, thanks to the support of the Cy Twombly Foundation.

I am deeply grateful to the Board and especially to Nicola Del Roscio for their many years of support of my research. Nicola Del Roscio was present at the development of Cy Twombly's art almost from the beginning, and engages tirelessly for his artistic legacy and the scholarly study of his œuvre.

Thierry Greub, Cy Twombly Inscriptions
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EDE – *Talking about poetry, in the opening of your essay in* Cy Twombly. Bild, Text, Paratext *(2014; Engl. version 2017), you recall the encounter between a young Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Cy Twombly, which took place in a café in Rome in 1991.*
As Obrist recalls, the artist did not talk about his work, but about literature and the importance of building bridges again with poetry in the contemporary world, "to revalorize poetry now." The artist, as you write, thus becomes a "builder of bridges between art and literature." Starting from this poetic statement by the artist and also based on your long research on the subject, could you explain what role and meaning poetry takes on in Cy Twombly's artistic research?

ThG – This early text "*To Revalorize Poetry Now*": *On Cy Twombly's Literary Inscriptions* from 2014 was my first entry into how Cy Twombly dealt with literary quotations (Greub 2017b). Its starting point was the conversation you mention between Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Tacita Dean, in which Obrist describes his student "pilgrimage" to Cy Twombly in Rome and calls the meeting with him a "life-changing experience." My aim in this text was to make a first exploration of the terrain of the inscriptions and to take my first steps into it.

As I said, until that point it was always the same handful of literary quotations that were repeated in the literature on Twombly, and it was also not known that Twombly had put inscriptions into around 40% of his works. Further, there were two different, dominant ways of approaching Twombly's practice of textual inscriptions: the very first researchers on Twombly, such as Jutta Göricke, Katharina Schmidt, and Hubert Damisch, treated them quite straightforwardly as elements of the picture that should be read and included in the interpretation of a picture. But at the same time there were other colleagues who held up a "Stop!" sign and argued that one could not and – more gravely – that one *should* not read the inscriptions. In the work on this project, which after ten years resulted in five volumes of transcription and an introductory volume that investigates the development and significance of the inscriptions for Twombly's pictorial practice, I was by no means aiming to explain, far less demystify Cy Twombly's works – which would anyway be impossible (Greub 2022). Rather, by deciphering and attributing

the quotations, the intention is to open up additional, transmedial layers of meaning (cf. Shiff 2023; Busse 2023; Rader 2024). Thus the *Inscriptions* volumes attest that every generalizing claim about Twombly's art tends to foreclose interpretation, blocking out the differentiating nuances and hence the uniqueness of each one of his works. My deciphering and attributions of the literary quotations attest not only Twombly's enormous literary knowledge – for his roughly 900 inscriptions he used 113 literary sources, which he took, in the course of 54 years, from almost all periods and cultures of world literature (Greub 2022, vol. I).

The *Inscriptions* also uncover essential elements of his artistic creative process: from his highlighting the quotation in the book, via the decontextualizing excerpting of it onto notes, through to the inscription into the artwork.
Given the incredible range of levels of legibility in his works, whenever the wholly individual way that each inscription has been embedded in the action of the picture is compared to the standardized transcription, Twombly's enormous artistic contribution becomes visible anew each time. Not least, thanks to the deciphering it also becomes clear how far our reading – and I personally think that every viewer of the handwritten inscriptions will sooner or later attempt to decipher them – changes our seeing, and thus our perception of the works.

But to come back to your question: Today I would read Hans-Ulrich Obrist's conversation with Cy Twombly somewhat differently again. The fact that Twombly, according to Obrist, did not want to talk about his art but only about poetry and, again and again, stressed the importance of building bridges with poetry in the contemporary world, seems to me to be the vindication of a statement by the painter Marion Junkin, Twombly's art professor at the Art Department of Washington & Lee University in his hometown of Lexington, VA, in 1949–50. In a letter of recommendation for the then 22-year-old Twombly on 10 May 1950 to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Junkin wrote the prophetic words: "I feel that he will develop into a poet in paint and that it will be a strong poetry as he is not easily changed from his purpose." A year later, on 11 May 1951, he repeated this assessment even more forcefully in a letter to Black Mountain College: "He is working in his own way and I am sure will evolve a statement that is valid. He is a poet." This later characterization of Cy Twombly simply as a poet – and no longer as a poet through the medium of painting – attests that the description as poet is not at all intended to be metaphorical. For Junkin, Twombly was not just a painter-poet who made atmospheric, and hence "poetic" art. The painter Marion Junkin recognized in Cy Twombly the fundamental artistic constitution of a poet. Later Twombly himself would say: "I never really separated painting and literature."
That is revealed not only by formal qualities such as the practice (learned from Mallarmé) of working with zones of dense concentrations on a white background that in the late work become text-like blocks, or of transferring the mode of reading onto the painted graphic elements.

Above all, Twombly's works, like poetry, in which a single sentence or line of verse can mean a whole world, animate the imaginative power of the viewer. They possess one of the principal characteristics of poetry: the ability to generate inner images, to "paint" inside us. Junkin's conviction that Twombly would "evolve a statement that is valid" was without doubt vindicated by the artist. His art, then and now, makes, in Junkin's words, "an important contribution to our culture."

EDE – *I'm glad you recalled Marion Junkin's definition of the artist as a "poet in paint". This is closely connected to my next question. I think the poet Octavio Paz explained the relationship between word and image in Cy Twombly's work clearly.*
In an interview in 1995 he states: "Cy […] uses words with meaning, as well as fragments of poems. A collaboration of images and words, not just form but also their meaning". Therefore, not only the word intended as signifier, form, and set of lines, which are often confused with the signs on paper or canvas ("pseudo-writing"), but the word as an element carrying a meaning that enters into a relation with the very structure of the work to reveal itself.
Could you tell me about the ways in which writing enters into relation with the signs and images produced by the artist in the early works, and how it evolves and expands in the form of entire blocks of text, rearranged and reformulated by the artist after 1975?

ThG – The development of the inscriptions occurs, roughly speaking, from the hesitant use of single, script-like signs (rarely in 1955, then more frequently in 1957), through a brief use of personal phrasings, to word fragments, through to single lines of verse, in which the text still appears at the margin or in "cartouches" in the picture. Here we can also detect traces of failed attempts, of trying things out. The first, and still tentative, quotation of a literary verse – a partial quotation of Mallarmé – is on a drawing from 1959 (Greub 2022, Vol. II, Cat. No. 50). That is followed by different strategies to combine the pictorial with the scriptural, which then, as you rightly remark, develop in the late work into the ability to "paint" with large blocks of text.

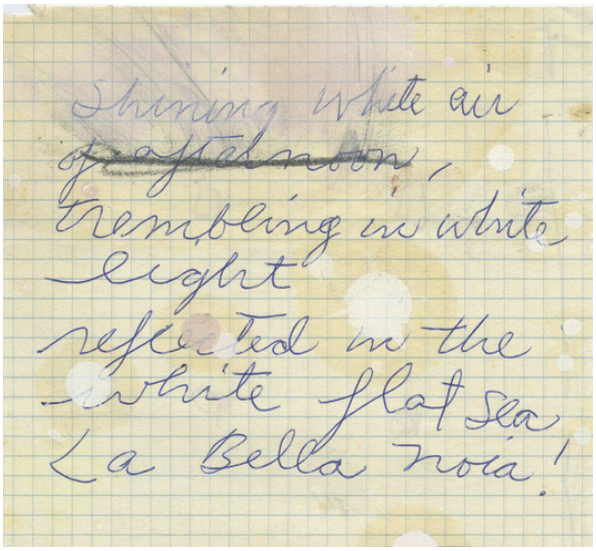
This stage is reached in the Seasons paintings and in Twombly's undoubted *opus magnum* – *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* – in the first half of the 1990s. After that, Twombly uses inscriptions in a very free and confident way, to the point of producing a canvas with almost an entire poem, as in Part VI of the cycle *Coronation of Sesostris* in 2000, in which 14 lines of an 18-line poem by Patricia Waters are the essence of the painting: the literary text worked its way ever more prominently into the work, until it moves from *parergon* (an accessory) to *ergon* (the work itself). The inseparable relation between image and writing that is so characteristic of Twombly's art is due not only to the way in which writing is integrated into the pictorial elements of the image, but also to his most deeply characteristic form of artistic expression: the line. We could describe its use with the English neologism "drawriting" (Greub 2025). For it equally produces forms of image and of script, as well as the "in-between" form that you mention, which Twombly called "pseudo-writing." It is an extraordinary achievement of synthesis by Twombly that he understands letters, and indeed the line, as the primordial starting point that is prior to any dichotomy of image and word.

Hence for me Octavio Paz' description of Cy Twombly's art as "a collaboration of images and words, not just form but also their meaning," which you mention, was central. Because that was how a writer and poet who was a friend of Twombly's, and had collaborated closely with him in 1993 on the book project *Octavio Paz – Eight Poems / Cy Twombly – Ten Drawings*, characterized the equal standing of the written and the painted in his work. The Mexican author had selected eight of his poems for ten drawings by Twombly from the 1981 *Gaeta Set (For the Love of Fire and Water)*. Udo Brandhorst records of this transmedial collaboration: "I will never forget the exciting tension as Cy Twombly immersed himself in reading Octavio Paz' poems. Joy rang in his voice when he announced that reading them one could not be certain whether it was Paz' poetry that inspired his *Gaeta Set*, or else that his drawings inspired Paz' poems." Twombly had earlier already achieved a similar point of fusion in a collaboration with a visual artist, Robert Rauschenberg.

The photographic works from their joint "grand tour" in 1952/53 to Europe and North Africa cannot now be ascribed to one or the other of the two young artists at all or only hypothetically. The goal of their close collaboration was a programmatic decision to become invisible, to dissolve the distinctive artistic signature of each of them, even of their artistic individuality, in favour of a fusion of the artistic actions of the two protagonists, subsumed into a shared action. This form of artistic collaboration, which in its selflessness

dissolves the boundaries of the artistic ego, seems to me to be an ideal that Cy Twombly repeatedly strove for as a way of working. He works in a comparable way in his own images with the integration of the written into the purely painterly elements, or, better: the inseparable, downright organic interaction of what is painted and what is written.

Richard Shiff, to whom we today indisputably owe the most profound advances in our understanding of the artist, said of this setting into relation of the written and the graphic in Cy Twombly: "To use a legible word in a graphic or pictorial manner constitutes abstracting an abstraction; it takes abstraction to an alternative space of sensory, emotional, and intellectual experience." (Shiff 2016, 13)



Cy Twombly's handwritten inscription "La Bella noia" (detail)
Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

EDE – *Delving deeper in the reformulation of the poetic texts, I would like to dwell on the teachings of Charles Olson, Twombly's Professor at Black Mountain College in the early 50s, which were to be fundamental to the development of his artistic research, and also to his analysis of the poetic text.*
Olson's lectures on Maya culture and language, classical literature, and modernist literature, in particular Ezra Pound's free and innovative method of translating poetic texts, offer important keys to understanding Twombly's work.
Could you talk about some examples of poetic text reworked by the artist in relation to Olson's teachings? How the poetic text thus reworked, in order to generate new meanings, is transposed into the works and related to them?

ThG – In 2000 Twombly gave an interview in the Cy Twombly Gallery in Houston in front of *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, at that time Chief Conservator at The Menil Collection, and during it he read aloud the lines "His mortal heart, presses out an inexhaustible wine" by Rainer Maria Rilke, one of his favourite poets, reading from the painting (Mancusi-Ungaro 2011, 28). Here already, this handwritten inscription into the painting does not follow the metrical form of the original. Twombly split up Rilke's single line of verse into four lines, with "wine" standing alone in the final line as a kind of enjambement. This division of the quotation should not, I believe, be ascribed solely to the mode in which it is linked into the picture as a whole. Because the way in which Twombly reads the quotation from the painting prompts another association, to return to your question: Twombly delivers each of the four lines in a separate breath, with even the final single word "wine" being delivered in its own, extended breath.

This characteristic, of basing the poem on a rhythm of breathing in and out, doubtless relates to Charles Olson's pneumatic principle of composition, which was a distinctive feature of what he called "projective verse." This American poet and literary theorist saw it as the duty of poetry, after the disastrous experiences of the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bombs, and the Korean War, to do no less than found a new humanism. To achieve this, however, poetry needed to be bound

closely to the artist's body, to, in Olson's phrase, the "laws and possibilities of the breath." In Olson's poetics it is no longer the Logos of the poet or syntactic-semantic coherence that determine the form of the poem. Rather, it takes its orientation from the breathing pattern of the human body: the length of the line of poetry follows the breath of the poet.

Cy Twombly got to know Olson, as you mention, at Black Mountain College (BMC) near Asheville in North Carolina, which at the time was the USA's most significant experimental creative zone. With brief interruptions Twombly stayed there from 6 July 1951 to the summer of 1952. In the autumn course in 1951 Olson taught "in verse: Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing and Ovid's Metamorphoses," under the heading: "For use, now." The reference to the script of the Maya may seem surprising, but for Olson its glyphs, with their alternation between representation and abstraction, had not yet lost their relationship to the things that they designate, in contrast to the Western alphabetic script.

According to Olson, the Maya glyphs thus still had the primordial energy of the signified within them. As bearers of energy they became for him the quintessential example of his projective verse, already mentioned, the foundational principles of which he had set out in his essay *Projective Verse* in 1950, i.e. shortly before he took up his teaching position at BMC. In that essay Olson adopted an understanding of reality based on the latest findings of modern physics and philosophy, but also, among other things, the idea already developed by Ezra Pound of the poem as a network of words and images that is charged with energy. The words and images float in a field of action (a concept borrowed from William Carlos Williams) in a dynamic, relational connection to each other. In this field the rules of syntax and grammar are largely set aside, everyday language bounces off unmarked fragments of quotation, layers of content from past and present collide directly with each other.

In connection with Cy Twombly it is significant that in the spring semester of 1952 Olson gave a course on, precisely, "Projective Verse." From my current archival research it appears that in the "Summer Session" of 1951 Twombly was officially matriculated only in the courses in painting, drawing, dance, and photography, and in the autumn to spring semester of 1951/52 in the courses in painting, photography, and Russian. But students at the BMC have reported unanimously that no one was able to resist Olson's charismatic personality. Olson set off a kind of "intellectual barrage" of ideas, and his theories were even discussed at mealtimes in the college. Further, we know that there were courses that Twombly demonstrably attended without any mention of them in his "Course Cards." It can hardly be doubted that Twombly was familiar with Olson's theory of literature.

In the interview that Nicholas Serota conducted with him in advance of his exhibition Cycles and Seasons in 2007, Twombly described his time at BMC with the telling words: "It was the first time I'd been in an atmosphere of artsy-ness. [...] Everything revolved around Olson. A lot of people were there mainly to see Olson. That summer ... was stimulus." (Serota 2008, 44) Also, Olson's reaction to Twombly's art, which is paralleled in the enthusiasm of Robert Motherwell, another of Twombly's teachers at BMC, is made in very clear terms. Like Motherwell, Olson was inspired by Twombly's art to compose a lengthy prose text, but also a poem, which survives in two versions. In Olson's BMC letters to the poet Robert Creeley, he praises in downright euphoric terms the depth of his conversations with the young artist, lauding his wide reading and his intellectual and human qualities. Olson ascribes to Cy Twombly's art not only the capacity to compensate for the moral deficits of Western man, but sees him as the harbinger of the new "Human Universe" that he yearned for. In his essay on Twombly he alludes to a sentence from the Gospel of John that describes John the Baptist – "There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6) – paraphrasing it to refer to Cy Twombly: "There came a man who dealt with whiteness..."

Charles Olson's poetics are central to the development of Cy Twombly's understanding of art – something to which Nicola Del Roscio alerted me right at the start of my work on the artist. This hint is something I have

continuously engaged with, even though at first I couldn't make sense of it properly. It was only after researching in the Charles Olson Archive in Storrs, CT, that I grasped the deep structural similarity between the poiesis of the two artists. For Twombly as for Olson, it is important that the poem or artwork be a forcefield in itself, which absorbs energies from the past and present and passes them on to the reader or viewer. In this transfer, its energy transcends the limits of the work itself. Other terms that Olson used synonymously to "projective" were the adjectives "projectile," "percussive," and "prospective," and his German translator Klaus Reichert translated the term with an apt image as *Stoßkraft* (force of impact). But the poem can only have a projective effect if, as already mentioned, it links its rhythm to the breathing pattern of the poet's body. This organic, energetic link of the work of art to the artist, but also to the viewer, is one of the reasons for our intense experience of immersion when looking at Cy Twombly's works.

It is an absolutely original artistic achievement of Cy Twombly to have made Charles Olson's theory of energy transfer fruitful for the visual arts. His application of the regular principles of projective poetics to the line of Rilke that he read off the Catullus painting is just one external indication of that. In reality, with Twombly we have much more than just a reworking of a poetic text according to Olson's projective rules. Because not only its parts but the entire structure of Cy Twombly's works, breathe the "projective art" propounded by Charles Olson.

EDE – *Cy Twombly owned a personal library full of texts of various kinds that he drew on for the genesis of his works, evidence of his multifaceted interests.*
The artist's library was crucial in the development of the Inscriptions *volumes.*
Following your extensive research, you had the opportunity to visit it and consult those publications. Could you tell me in detail about your research in the library and your process of analyzing the texts used by the artist?

ThG – On 23 May 2015 my wife, who is likewise an art historian, and I had the opportunity to visit Twombly's library in his palazzo in Gaeta, through the kindness of Twombly's son Alessandro and his family, and thanks also to Nicola Del Roscio who put us in touch with them. For us it was a very moving and personal experience. Sadly, my research had begun too late to meet the artist himself. And now Krystyna and I were standing in his library and, four years after his death, it felt as if Cy Twombly had just left briefly and would step back in the door at any moment… We were welcomed in very warmly by Alessandro and his son Caio, and were allowed to spend the whole day working in the library.

A great help to us was the list that Mary Jacobus had compiled when she visited the library and which she very collegially made available to me for our work. She and I have both been working in parallel on the topic of the link between art and literature in Twombly, she from the side of literary studies, I from the art historical side. Jacobus' book *Reading Cy Twombly. Poetry in Paint* appeared in 2016, whereas for the completion of my *Inscriptions* I had to wait until 2019, when all volumes of the catalogue raisonné of the paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and the catalogues of the photographic works of Cy Twombly were published, providing a complete edition of the entire artistic material.

In line with my *Inscriptions* project at that time, my main interest in 2015 in Gaeta was on the poetic texts that Twombly used and the translation variants in each case. Even just in the cases of Sappho and Rilke, Twombly worked with six different translations of the same volume of poetry. Accordingly, one of the first challenges of my project was to find the translations

that Twombly had used. In some cases, for example with Leopardi and Catullus, that was possible only with the help of renowned specialists. In the Catullus quotation "Say good-bye, Catullus, to the plains of Asia Minor" Twombly had changed "plains" to "shores," and it was the American Catullus specialist Julia H. Gaisser who first found the relevant translation on her bookshelves. She wrote to me in 2014: "I have a few English translations of Catullus in my office, and was lucky enough to find 'Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor' in the first one I looked at." And so in the library in Gaeta I was able to seek out the relevant book, where I found, highlighted in yellow, the quotation in question...

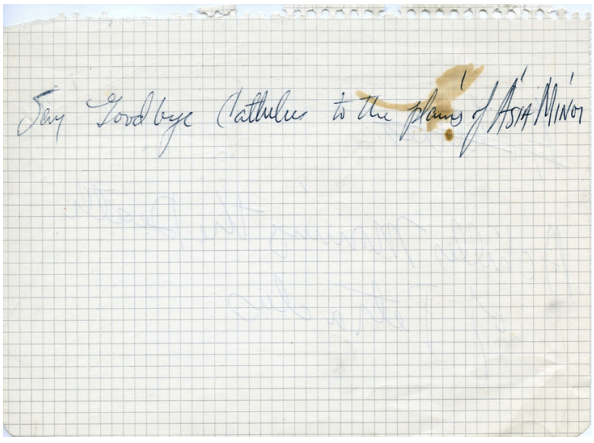
Once I had the correct translations in my hands, it was possible to completely reverse the assumption made until then that Twombly had quoted inaccurately from memory. Twombly himself had said of his inscriptions: "I edit out certain words, I think, to make it go." (Mancusi-Ungaro 2011, 29) At the same time, it was now possible to demonstrate that Twombly only very rarely took an interest in the context of the quotation or the poem as a whole. He really is always concerned only with the quoted passage that he writes out by hand. The Swiss art historian Franz Meyer described this aptly: "It becomes clear that it is not the intact poem that counts, but [...] only those passages from which an enchantment emerges that can intensify to the point of obsession." And further: "It is not the knowledge of literature that really matters but the ray of the immediate that it can send out." (Meyer 1973, 8) Thus Twombly wants to communicate to the viewer his immediate experience of emotion while reading, this "ray of the immediate" that electrified him at that point in the text. Against the background of Olson's poetics, the literary quotation thus becomes recognizable as an essential bearer of energy, whose projective force the artist is trying to pass on to the viewer in as pristine and undimmed a way as possible.

But Twombly's "editing," too, undergoes a process of transformation. Consulting Twombly's poetry books was so fascinating also because it allowed us, as it were, to look over the artist's shoulder as he prepared the quotation.

It was especially interesting to see how Twombly, as I briefly mentioned, excerpted the fragments of quotation that electrified him onto slips of paper, and to see the form in which he then inscribed them into his works of art. The Rose Gallery in the Museum Brandhorst in Munich offers telling examples of this. The painting with the third stanza of Emily Dickinson's 1862 six-stanza poem *The Soul has Bandaged moments* presents an entirely different line-division. On a slip of paper Twombly had divided the four-line stanza into eight lines, which in the inscription on the painting he turns into a 12-line garland of words.

On the other hand, the painting in this cycle that quotes lines from Ingeborg Bachmann's poem *In the Storm of Roses* divides the text in the inscription into two three-line verses placed opposite each other. Since the lines are at the same level, they can thus also be read across continuously in a meaningful way. And so, thanks to the human eye's conditioning to linear reading, the inscription gains an additional level of meaning.

Incredible though it may sound, this day of intensive work in Gaeta rewarded us with so much new material that I have created another book project on Cy Twombly's "Book Notes," the handwritten markings in the books of his library that directly preceded the notes on paper slips and the inscription into his works. (Greub 2024)



Cy Twombly's handwritten note
Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

EDE - *How did the consultation of the numerous photos depicting fragments of notes mingling on the worktable with paints, brushes, postcards, art, and poetry books in the artist's home and studio, help to reshape your research project?*

ThG – This type of archival material is of course very interesting for a researcher, since the artist's studio is both a space of physical action and also a place of reflection where the artistic idea took shape. For this reason too, artists only rarely allow glimpses into this microcosm. Photographs of an artist's studio may also document works of art in the process of creation, that is, in a state that is later for the most part painted over and hence lost forever.

This view into the work-process – for example Cy Twombly is only once, briefly, seen painting in Andrea Bettinetti's film portrait *Cy Dear* (2019), produced by Michele Bongiorno – allows us to retrace how the working, creating, but also often failing artist looks at the sources of his inspiration. And at the same time it makes it possible for us to relativize our own objectifying gaze as detached scholars standing "above art," as it were. The photographs of Twombly's studios by Sally Mann, Tacita Dean, Horst P. Horst, Ugo Mulas, Annabelle d'Huart, Deborah Turbeville, Bruce Weber, François Halard, David Seidner, and the recently published photographs of Rob McDonald (McDonald 2024) are so valuable therefore not only as works of art in their own right, but also for the sake of scholarly knowledge.

I assume that your question refers specifically to the photograph by Bruce Weber that shows *Cy Twombly's Studio Table in Gaeta* in the summer of 1995.
On it we see his reference points arranged in unexpectedly orderly fashion on a worktable. Dodie Kazanjian records of this "work installation," which the artist used while working on the second version of the *Quattro Stagioni*, now in Tate Modern in London: "His worktables are covered with oil crayons; pencils; tubes of pigment; postcard reproductions of boats and marine scenes; a big Manet art book open to a page that shows a boat painting; stacks of other art books (Ensor, Whistler, Turner); and a book of modern Greek poems in translation, turned to George Seferis's 'Three Secret Poems'." (Kazanjian 1994, 549).

Weber's photograph and Kazanjian's description attest the multimediality of the works Twombly used as models: as well as reproductions of paintings of the most varied periods and cultures, there are poems, notes, photographs of his own works, newspaper cuttings, and so on. We see a confusing jigsaw of inspiration elements, the coherence of which can only with difficulty be made to harmonize with the work of art that was being produced. On similar photographs there is always this kind of mixture of "classical" models that follow the logic of visual representation, for example a Dutch still life or a rose painting by Renoir in the context of the work on the Rose Gallery in Museum Brandhorst. But right along side them we see an advertising photo of jarringly colorful marshmallows cut out of a newspaper, which could, at most, be associated with the flamboyant coloring of the Munich Rose Paintings.

The photographs of situations where the artist is at work attest Twombly's profound engagement with the subject he is treating in each case. This long, conscientious period of preparation, too, goes back to Charles Olson, who termed it "saturation" in the material that was to be treated artistically. One of his demands of the BMC students was that they must go so deeply into the subject that they knew more about it than anyone else, even if it took 14 years... The release of the original energy of the base material demands, according to Olson, not only pneumatic bodily experience but also the intellect. Cy Twombly himself stated of the preparation of his artworks: "When I work, I work very fast, but preparing to work can take any length of time. It can even be a year." (Serota 2008, 50) That is confirmed by the large number of adhesive notes with which he highlighted material relevant to his work (paintings, but also architectural structures, carpets, fabrics, etc.) in his books and magazines. Twombly was an eager reader, as he reports also in his letters. Tacita Dean's moving film *Edwin Parker* (2011) shows him in his studio in Lexington still, aged 83, reading a recently published biography of Keats. Today I would even go further and see in this range of reference elements,

which sets fine art and the apparently banal, "high" and "low," painting and poetry, image and word, seamlessly alongside each other with equal standing, as a lot more than just prompts for Twombly's inspiration. Rather, they reveal the collage-like mechanisms of his artistic thought and work. Like his works – he described their synthesizing structure as a "fusing of ideas, fusing of feelings, fusing projected on atmosphere" – they form a palimpsest-like amalgam of things and thoughts. Bruce Weber's picture is in that sense itself a kind of photographed "Cy Twombly."

Cy Twombly's studio, Itri [Italy]
Ph. Nicola Del Roscio
Courtesy Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

EDE - *During the long research work for the Catalogue Raisonné of Cy Twombly Drawings, together with Nicola Del Roscio, we realized that the artist takes inspiration for his works not only from poetic texts, but also from prose works: recall for example a series of drawings from 1990 in which Twombly quotes a passage from* The World's Body *by the American poet and founder of New Criticism, John Crowe Ransom...*

ThG – Yes, that's right. There are quotations from them in Cy Twombly's inscriptions too, although rather rarely. That makes sense when we recall how hard it is to extract from a prose text a textual passage that will function on its own without major reworking. Twombly turned to theoretical writings, such as those of John Crowe Ransom or Wallace Stevens, from the 1990s onward. Once you notice this, you also discover prose passages among the inscriptions, from Catherine B. Avery, Charles Baudelaire, Goethe, Robert Graves, and Georgios Seferis.

The quotation you mention from Ransom in *The World's Body*, which Twombly wrote into two of his drawings [Greub 2022, Vol. I, Cat.-No. 768-769], has been known since Kirk Varnedoe's authoritative biographical essay on Cy Twombly in 1994. Tellingly, he sets it at the end of his text. (Varnedoe 1994, 52) This inscription – "The image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness which ideas can never claim" – as has long been recognized, expresses a cornerstone of Cy Twombly's understanding of art.

John Crowe Ransom, the founder and most influential exponent of New Criticism, in this 1938 work of literary theory argued for the priority of the image to any idea: "Image is the raw material of idea." For him, its "relation to idea is that of a material cause [which] cannot be dispossessed of its priority." The sentence quoted by Twombly is followed by the conclusions: "An idea is derivative and tamed. The image is in the natural or wild state, and it has to be discovered there, not put there, obeying its own law and none of ours."

As well as the conviction that the work of art is an object in its own right, central for Twombly here is the concept of the "primordial" that Ransom ascribes to the image

(Shiff 2023, 1032). For Twombly, one might say, this priority applies to every kind of culture, rationalization, every academic approach. Twombly's art is characterized by a programmatic priority ahead of every kind of fixing, definition, stabilization. This primordiality applies especially to Cy Twombly's line, which is just as rooted in the primordial, prior to its fixing as an image or script, as graphic marks are, prior to the pictorial.

According to Ransom, only a still-unfixed, wild, raw state can ensure that the treated object or motif is authentically brought into the present, a "primordial freshness." Every work by Cy Twombly attempts to convey this to the maximum degree. One could even go so far as to say that Cy Twombly spent his whole life seeking the primordial, in whatever form it took.
For example, there is his wide-ranging interest in the civilizations of the ancient world, which was perhaps first roused by Charles Olson, who had called for the return to the pre-logical and pre-abstract vision of the world of pre-Western civilizations – for him that was primarily the "ur-American" pre-Columbian civilization of the Maya.

Immediately before he took up his teaching position at BMC, Olson had tried to get into direct physical contact with the creative ur-energy of the Maya at illegal excavations on the Yucatán peninsula... This return to the, for Olson "first facts" is also a feature of Twombly's interest in prehistoric art. That is true of his interest in children's drawings, too, which ranges from integrating real objects (Twombly included children's drawings in his works) to his style of painting. I mention here just the cycle *Coronation of Sesostris*, of which Twombly proudly remarked: "I like the sun disc because I managed to do very childlike painting, very immediate." (Serota 2008, 50)

But in his interest in pre-classical civilizations and children's art Twombly goes far beyond the usual topoi of modernism. The primordial implies penetration into the origins, the release of an energy that emanates directly out of the subject of the picture. The primordial as the unfiltered, creative, original energy of the material treated enables Twombly to give expression in his works to past events, experiences, actions, but also, and especially, feelings. Richard Shiff, in his review of my *Inscriptions* volumes, has aptly characterized this incredible ability of Twombly to transport primordial feelings, emotions, and experiences of human existence in his works, and to trigger them in the viewer, as "activating deactivated feelings and sensations." He speaks of "waves of feeling generated by Twombly's drawing, painting and sculpture." (Shiff 2023, 1032)

Cy Twombly
Untitled (North African Sketchbook), [Page X], 1953
[Rome]
Pencil on typewriter paper
11 x 8 5⁄8 in.
Private Collection
© Cy Twombly Foundation

EDE – *The ability of the artist to "activate and deactivate feelings and sensations" in the viewer seems to bring to mind a quote by Roland Barthes: "Basically, Twombly's paintings are big Mediterranean rooms, hot and luminous, with their elements looking lost (*rari*) and which the mind wants to populate" (Roland Barthes,* Sagesse de l'art / The Wisdom of Art, *1979).*
"*Big Mediterranean rooms," a collection of memories, impressions and references that allude to the classical Greek and Latin world, as for example in the series of drawings in which the inscription "Virgil" dominates.*
Twombly in fact includes in his works not only fragments from poems, but also the names of those same poets he loved to read such as Virgil, Valery, Mallarmé, nothing but names, they are mentioned in the titles and become an integral part of the work through the written word.
The act of dedication, as Barthes says, becomes a performative act, since the meaning of the written word emerges in the very act of pronouncing it, and at the same time the viewer has the task of completing what he is observing.
In your opinion, what meaning does the inscription acquire within these works?

ThG – I think that this description by Roland Barthes, whom I would otherwise criticize for having pigeonholed Cy Twombly too onesidedly as a pure script-artist, cannot be surpassed. He describes precisely how Twombly's handwritten names of poets call up in the viewer a whole set of sentiments. They conjure up not only the whole of ancient culture, but they perhaps also evoke one's own study of the classics in school or reading them later, and that in itself turns them into a commentary on the poet in question. Today one should probably add: a commentary on an ancient world that has in the meantime largely been lost. But Twombly is not trying to work through grief for something lost.

The works that you mention are, rather, a re-evocation, a bringing into presence, a – perhaps final – attempt to keep present in the current moment something "that has vanished and left no trace of itself." These were the words with which, as Nicola Del Roscio recorded in writing, Twombly defined the physical concept of "remanence." The complete quotation reads: "The phenomenon of finding the memory of something that has vanished and left no trace of itself is called by … [unfortunately we do not know which author Twombly was referring to here specifically] 'Remanence'." (Greub 2022, Vol. I, 222)

This term from physics refers to the magnetic forces that remain in a magnetized substance that has been temporarily exposed to magnetism, even if it is no longer under magnetic influence. The term "remanence" precisely designates the continued existence of an impulse, the "remaining energy," the on-going vibrations of which are passed on by the artist to the viewer of the picture.

Richard Shiff asks in his Twombly essay *Eine lebendige Hand*: "Why does he write?" And he gives the following answer: "When he transcribes the poetry of another, he is neither reading nor interpreting but writing in the sense of composing (or re-composing) the work as his own. […] Twombly declaims and enacts poetry by handwriting it." (Shiff 2012, 245) The use of the word "enacts" is central here. It is the key concept in the definition of art provided by Charles Olson in his essay *Human Universe*, and which he discussed with students at BMC, perhaps including Cy Twombly: "Art does not seek to describe but to enact." (Olson 1997, 162)

And so, to return to your question, the act of inscription and the later reading of it in silence, or even speaking of it aloud, by the viewer is an act of "re-enactment." Consequently, I chose as the foundational concept of the *Inscriptions* volumes the concept of "Re-enacted Remanence." From that perspective, the gravity-free, fluctuating forcefield of Cy Twombly's paintings is charged with the energy of states of existence, felt values, and emotions, as also by the energy currents of remembered or imagined events, real or historical persons, or places visited in reality or imagination. It stores these energies and conducts them, in the form of projective remanence, onward to the viewer.

EDE – *As a conclusion of this rich conversation, I would like to dwell on the value of travel and travelling, which were an integral part of Twombly's life, and to quote an answer by the artist to David Sylvester: "You know the line: 'Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the shores of Asia Minor'. It's so beautiful. Just all that part of the world I love."*
Some titles of works, but also several quotations, almost chronologically trace a map of the journeys undertaken by the artist over the years (or even only imagined by reading books or travel reports), not only in the West, but also in the Middle and Far East and Japan.
The reference to the latter cultures is not limited only to the use of poetic inscriptions, but sometimes becomes an integral part of the very structure of the works, which refer to the two-dimensionality of Oriental art, the consequent sense of fluctuation, the reading from right to left, and the concept of a "fertile" void from which new forms spring…

ThG – In my essay "*He was a traveler.*" *L'esthétique (extrême-)orientale de Cy Twombly* I analyzed the importance to Twombly of journeys, both real and imaginary (Greub 2016/17). And in fact a gradual convergence towards the Islamic or Asian cultural areas can be observed, which he summons up prominently with the expression "The sound of 'Asia Minor' is really like a rush to me, like a fantastic ideal." Cy Twombly's first journey outside America took him in 1952/53 to southern Europe and North Africa.

In addition he was – probably in Olson's footsteps – on the Yucatán peninsula already in the 1950s, he visited Cuba, and later North Africa again, this time to Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, and also Yemen. In 1969 Twombly discovered the Caribbean (St. Martin, Îles des Saintes, Antigua, Saint-Barthélemy), and from 1995 onward he spent time in winter in the Seychelles (La Digue, D'Arros).
As well as India, his travels took him to Central Asia and the Near East, for example to Iran, where he made a long stay at Isfahan, and to Afghanistan. In 1996 in Tokyo he received the Praemium Imperiale, the "Nobel Prize" of art awards.

But no less important – and one wants to say: no less real – for Twombly were the imaginary journeys that he undertook with the help of travel guides and magazines such as *National Geographic*. The most wonderful example of this is the 14 drawings of the V *Day Wait at Jiayuguan*, first exhibited at the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980 and recently shown at Gagosian in New York. In this series, produced in Rome, we for the first time encounter an "East Asian" and an "Islamic" Twombly. The cycle presents a kind of collage-like diary of a mental journey to a city in the west of the Chinese province of Gansu, beyond which, according to a Chinese proverb, one leaves the land of humans and enters the land of ghosts. On his drawings, Twombly gives voice to two poets unknown in his work up to that point, ʿAbbās ibn al-Aḥnaf (750–809), born in Basra, and an anonymous Chinese poet of the ninth century – an Arabic voice and a Chinese one.

The works Twombly produced from the 1980s to his death in 2011 can no longer be explained by reference to classical antiquity and the aesthetic visual categories drawn from the Western canon of motifs. In his late work, visual strategies increasingly emerge that belong both formally and in content to the aesthetic categories of both the near and far East – though admittedly in Twombly's distinctive refraction. In his aesthetics influenced by Asian works of art, strongly reduced figurations that tend towards decorative stylization float, as it were, on a centerless sea of color, in which the image surface and the image space atmospherically fuse into each other. The content of the handwritten inscriptions places the stress on feelings and reinforces the magical-meditative depth of the works, and the viewer's gaze is decentered into a single moment of both reading and seeing, oscillating between an unfathomable emptiness and intensification.

The significance of both real and imaginary journeys for Twombly went far beyond "collecting" exotic travel impressions or foreign aesthetics. The exhibition curated by Nicola Del Roscio in 2023/24 in Marrakesh and Richmond, VA, *Cy Twombly. Morocco – 1952/53*, illuminated not only the value of non-European sources of inspiration and intercultural transfer processes for Cy Twombly's creative work. With six *North African Sketchbooks*, five hitherto unknown, the exhibition also offered essential new insights into how Twombly engaged with the "exotic."

Already in this first journey to North Africa, Twombly responded with his own wall hangings, sewn in Morocco (Greub 2019), to a practical, everyday implementation of Charles Olson's theory of energy transfer, as practiced in Morocco in the form of the Islamic folk belief, still widespread today, of *baraka*. This is considered to be an energy that arises out of living beings and objects and to be transferable onto them; depending on intention, it may be charged positively, as a blessing, or negatively as the "Evil Eye." Later, too, the energetic projective power of people and places remained important to Twombly. Thus his swimming across the Oxus in 1979 in the footsteps of his hero Alexander the Great (Nicola Del Roscio reports this in his essay written for my volume, cf. Del Roscio 2014) occurred against the backdrop of his search for the projective energy of this event.

Cy Twombly's places – Klaus-Peter Busse has devoted an in-depth study of the significance of "tracing places" in Twombly's œuvre (Busse 2024) – are the starting point of my own current research project too. In the context of a three-year research grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) I am working, with the support of the Cy Twombly Foundation, on a monograph on the artist's complete œuvre. It will be based on archival data that have never yet been evaluated – since Varnedoe's fundamental text in 1994 no extensive archival research has been conducted on the artist.

Of central importance in this are Twombly's places of work, such as Black Mountain College in North Carolina, New York, Rome, Bassano in Teverina, Gaeta, and not least the artist's hometown of Lexington, VA, where especially in his later years he returned repeatedly and where, with the Catullus painting, he created what was probably his most personal work. The landscapes and the literary works with which Twombly engaged, like his paintings, form different "strata." In this collage-like palimpsest I am interested in the traces of his career only insofar as they are of importance for the development of his art. It is the works themselves that take the foreground, with regard to the development of his understanding of art. Important here are Cy Twombly's teachers at the places where he was educated, who have hardly been given any attention in this context in the research to date: Pierre and Louise Daura and Marion Junkin in Lexington, the Boston Museum School, then the Art Student's League, and, already mentioned several times, BMC. At the latter location Twombly came into contact not only with Charles Olson's projective theory of literature, on the adaption of which for the fine arts Krystyna and I presented a joint paper at the second international congress in Cologne *Cy Twombly: White Zones*, which I organized in October 2024 with the support of the Cy Twombly Foundation in the context of my DFG research project (Greub/Greub-Frącz 2024).

At BMC the encounter with Robert Motherwell's concept of art is important too, which makes feelings the basis of all artistic decisions. But no less important are Ben Shahn's socio-political activism, Aaron Siskind's photographic abstraction, and the importance of reciprocal seeing when studying photography under Hazel Larsen Archer. I hope to show that the understanding of art that Cy Twombly developed on this broad basis made him one of the most intellectually and conceptually interesting contemporary artists, who pursued his highly individual artistic path with incredible determination and consistency, and who did very sensitively appreciate the contemporary currents in art at each moment, but without bowing to them.

That is what constitutes the – still today – unbroken contemporaneity of Cy Twombly's art. The project *Un/Veiled: Inside the creative process (after Cy Twombly)*, which you co-curated with Nicola Del Roscio in collaboration with Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio and which you presented in a speech at the Cologne congress, is an eloquent testimony to the power of his works to inspire works of contemporary art, as are the numerous reactions from poets, visual artists, musicians, and dancers to Twombly's work. For that reason it is especially important to me to transmit onwards my own enthusiasm for Cy Twombly's work. I am very pleased that in my second Cy Twombly colloquium a "Student Panel" gave participants in my Twombly seminar the opportunity to present the results of their research alongside established researchers. Their contributions were the best evidence of the

unbroken inspirational power of the art of Cy Twombly, with its emotional and intellectual intensity arising out of the "primordial freshness" of his artistic authenticity.

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