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Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper, Serpentine Gallery, London, 17 April – 13 June 2004.

In 1953 Cy Twombly returned to New York after a year's travel fellowship to Europe and North Africa. He brought back homemade sketchbooks of stapled-together drawings, many inspired by tribal objects he had seen in the Pigorini ethnographic museum in Rome. Intended for use rather than exhibition, these books combined sketches and notations on semi-transparent paper, the underlying pages partially visible through each densely worked sheet. They formed a repository of overlaid marks to which Twombly would return in his search for expressive immediacy – whilst simultaneously recoding the museum display's 'primitive' *mise-en-scène*. At once a memory aid, a point of origin, and the reproduction of an existing categorization, Twombly's sketchbooks formed a layered archive of graphic impressions. They seem a fitting introduction to his work, which investigates both the production and effacement of the trace, and the classificatory function of the proper name.

Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper draws on a much broader archive – the artist's personal collection of works on paper from 1953 to 2002. It is thus doubly 'private': as works on paper some of these pieces are speculative experiments, not intended for sale or exhibition. Others are larger and more 'finished,' but have been retained by Twombly until this show, which marks his seventy-fifth birthday. This sense of an intimate disclosure is heightened by the enigmatic presentation of the pieces, with minimal documentation. We are forced to encounter this eclectic array of works on its own terms: to extrapolate upon gaps in the chronological sequence, the function of particular pieces and the meaning they hold for the artist. It is an experience akin to rifling though an archive, and is likewise both fascinating and frustrating.

The exhibition begins with Twombly's return to New York in 1953, when he devised a number of strategies to thwart his skill as a draftsman and access the 'simple directness' he perceived in 'primitive' art. Whilst this quest for unmediated expression has been likened to Dubuffet and *Art Brut*, in Twombly it seems to be tempered with an awareness of the repetitive and referential nature of the mark. One drawing is a direct quotation from his 'North African'

sketchbook, miming its look of scribbled immediacy through careful reiteration. The same 'primal' forms are reproduced in a painting of 1953 entitled *Tiznit* – not in reference to the North African village, but because Twombly liked the sound of the word. This emphasis on the materiality of the signifier, as a mark or a noise produced by the body, remains evident throughout his practice. Drafted into the army in 1954, Twombly began to draw in the dark, producing lines that scratch and stutter across the page like the uncoordinated daubs of a primary-school child. Reminiscent of surrealist 'automatic' drawings, they are concerned less with yielding 'unconscious' imagery than with disengaging the skill of the draftsman through a series of bodily impediments. Alternatively drawing at oblique angles, or as though with his left hand, Twombly explored the mark as the material product of the body, or more specifically the body under duress – its habitual modes of functioning disrupted.

There is a gap of ten years between the first room and the 1969 *Bolsena* drawings that follow. During that time Twombly had settled in Rome, where he moved in 1957, and the open scribbles of his early drawings had tightened into a vocabulary of scatological and pornographic graffiti. By 1969, these scabrous marks were being filtered through his concurrent preoccupation with the Apollo space landing – so that the scattered components of the *Bolsena* pieces suggest vectors and compartments more than breasts, buttocks and vulvae. The omission of two 1961 drawings exhibited in St. Petersburg (and reproduced in the catalogue) thus has the effect of 'cleaning up' the Serpentine show, and making Twombly's development from 1959–69 difficult to comprehend. This problem is compounded by a distinct lack of information, both in the exhibition itself and the glossy colour catalogue. The latter contains a gushing appreciation by historian Simon Schama, but no catalogue entries for individual works, most of which were previously unpublished. This becomes particularly problematic when regarding some smaller studies, which hint at a preparatory status without making their function explicit.

Twombly's friends Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns are often credited with reintroducing Modernism's repressed terms – language, temporality, the image and the body – to American art of the fifties and sixties. In recent years there has been a sustained attempt

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to relocate Twombly within this American counter-tradition, with a retrospective of the paintings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1995), and the sculpture at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (2001). The introduction to the Serpentine exhibition – supported by the US Embassy – declares Twombly 'one of the greatest living American artists.' Yet in the 1960s his work fell out of favour with American critics, seeming to embody the decadent grandiloquence of European culture to eyes attuned to Minimalist pragmatism. It was only towards the end of the decade, with a series of grey-ground works made in New York that Twombly began to rebuild his reputation amongst his compatriots. Four of these pieces are on show at the Serpentine. Made in wax crayon on dark grey house paint, each layered surface is a tissue of lines and smudges tracing the duration of the mark-making process. In some, this stratification in depth is offset by sub-legible waves that move from left to right across the paper – retrieving the physical act of writing from its customary, narrative function. These pieces recall the 'Scene of Writing' described by Jacques Derrida: a palimpsest of traces on which every mark is always already a transcription, the archive of its own event. And yet these lines are not quite yet writing. Instead it is the field of *drawing* that is worked and reworked – scratched and smudged and incompetently erased, so that each past action remains compressed on its surface. Despite the house paint, it is undoubtedly drawing that is at stake here: the grey washes function as a ground to be inscribed rather than covered. Each line is scuffed and broken by the friction of the crayon against the surface, an effect that is utterly distinct from the fluid skeins of Pollock, however linear they may be. Unlike the painterly mark, the drawn line relies on this process of abrasion for its existence. These 'works on paper' recall Twombly's early insistence that he had a greater sense of that material – the grainy surface that draws forth the line – than he had of the physicality of paint.

In this sense, Twombly's work prefigures recent debates surrounding the medium, and whether the term can be rescued from a particular reading of Greenberg that locates medium-specificity solely in the physicality of the support. In '*A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss argues that the medium should be understood as a set of differential relations that can never be collapsed into pure materiality: a complex layering of conventions through which specificity is generated. Whilst Twombly might

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appear less radical in this respect than Johns or Rauschenberg – with their wilful disregard for traditional categories – he operates a subtle exploration of what it means to draw, casting the conventions of the medium out towards colour and texture, and reeling them back through a series of draftsmanly devices. This kind of improvisation in relation to a relaxed set of principles is something Krauss identifies in younger artists like William Kentridge and James Coleman, who resist the 'post-medium condition' of installation art. Yet it has been active in Twombly's practice since the early 1950s, not necessarily as a rejection of modernism, but as a working loose of its perceived rigidities.

Another of those rigidities was the absolute exclusion of language from the visual field of modernist painting. By naming his paintings and drawings after people, places, and mythological figures, Twombly jeopardised their autonomy. But by inscribing those names on their surfaces, he insured that they could never be viewed in optical terms alone: the spectator is persistently enticed into the conceptual (and temporal) activity of reading. Twombly's reception has thus been divided into those critics who interpret his work *according* to these inscriptions – subjugating every mark to their signifying power – and those who regard them simply as another form of mark-making, or playful red herrings for conscientious art historians. Schama, for example, describes a cutting from a biology textbook stuck above the word *Pan* as: 'two tenderly caressing leaves of chard (one crimson, one gold) as if laid gently over the brow of the goat-lord.' A reddish-brown smear is seen to represent 'the visceral reality of his rule: *Pan-Ic.*' Reading Twombly through Bataille, Krauss regards such word-play as indicative of the scatological violence of graffiti, noting that a disjointed *Mars* equals M/ARS: 'art' in Latin, but 'arse' in English. Whilst she eschews the kind of mythological story-telling favoured by Schama, Twombly's words still trigger a narrative for Krauss: when the word 'fuck' is found on *Olympia* (1957) it conditions her entire reading of the piece.

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Cy Twombly, *Adonais*, 1975. Oil paint, wax crayon, pencil, collage, 116 x 119cm, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery.

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Yet when Twombly gave his 1953 paintings names like *Tiznit*, it was not because they were representational, but because he liked the sounds of the words. Certainly the signifying potential of these North African names would have been blunted by their relocation to a New York gallery. For most visitors to the Serpentine, the word *ANABASIS* is similarly dislocated from any identifiable concept. Rather than telling a story then, these words seem to investigate what it means to write: to detach *M* from *ARS*, to hook up *PAN* to *IC*, to put *FUCK* in front of *OLYMPIA*. On a larger scale, this reconfiguration of signs follows the logic of the citation – the re-ordering and re-inscription of previous utterances. The virtuoso scrawl of *Adonais* (1975) mimes the act of writing – of producing meaning – in the grooves of the already written. Cut and pasted from Shelley's poem *Adonais: an Elegy on the Death of John Keats*, these citations are presented *as though for the first time*, in an accelerated splutter of inspiration. Yet the sentence at the foot of the paper – 'he has outsoared the shadow of our night' – has been inscribed and effaced repeatedly, so that it is finally scratched over the remnants of its own prior manifestations.

If Twombly's early work investigates the process of drawing, which veers towards – and eventually becomes – an exploration of writing, then his pieces from the mid-1980s onwards have a different, more painterly aesthetic. The final rooms at the Serpentine are filled with viscous globs of paint smeared by hand across the paper, or watered-down pigment allowed to course in rivulets down the page. Some of these are similar to Twombly's *Four Seasons* (1993-94), currently on display at Tate Modern, or the huge 'flower' paintings on show at the new Gagosian gallery. This sudden spate of Twombly shows is in marked contrast to the artist's reception at earlier points in his career: after a disastrous exhibition in 1963 he claims that, for a few years at least, nobody in America cared what he did. Whilst Twombly remembers that period as a time of freedom, it seems that now – secure in his popularity – he is able to produce his least self-conscious works. In fact some of the smaller paintings in these final rooms seem a little self-indulgent, weak parodies of the monumental canvases from the same period. Given the impressive cycles of larger paintings on view elsewhere in London, the Serpentine show could have concentrated on the earlier drawings, or important paint-on-paper works like *Petals of Fire* (1989).

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In one of the most influential essays on Twombly, 'The Wisdom of Art,' Roland Barthes describes painting as a kind of *stage* on which an event unfolds, permanently altering the spectator. Twombly's palimpsests recall another kind of stage, the 'Scene of Writing' described by Jacques Derrida. Such theatrical metaphors indicate a temporal event, and one that exists for an audience – what Derrida describes as the *sociality* of writing as *drama*. The subject of writing is not an isolated author, but a layered system of differential relations in which the writer, the instrument of inscription, the reader and society all play a part. Instead of presenting us with a narrative that is fully present and intact, Twombly offers an incomplete archive of impressions on which our own experience must be bought to bear. It seems unlikely that the enigmatic presentation of *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper* is a deliberate curatorial strategy, but it is nonetheless pertinent to the fragmentary traces of Twombly's own artistic practice.

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