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Katherine Markoski

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"I have a chance to have a one man show next season but I feel its' (sic) too early yet to think of that," wrote a twenty-two-year-old Cy Twombly in March 1951, several months before traveling to Black Mountain College and roughly halfway through his first and only year at the Art Students League in New York City.[1] Raised in Virginia, Twombly's time in the city was supported in part by a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship, and this statement appeared in one of the progress reports required by that award. Though his reluctance to accept a one-person show suggests a studied self-awareness, it also is striking in light of other comments made in updates for the Museum. In that same letter, Twombly remarked, "Have had a very productive period in painting the last few months," and the following month, he claimed, "My painting has developed beyond my own hopes for a year's work."[2] Moreover, by the time Twombly arrived in New York, he had already been a serious art student for years: as a teenager, he studied with the Spanish artist Pierre Daura; between 1947 and 1949, he attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; and he then enrolled in Washington and Lee University's arts program, one of his teachers there later deeming him "the most promising young art student I ever came across" and claiming he would "develop into a poet in paint."[3] Yet in March 1951, the time was still not right for a one-person show.

Significantly, however, just over half a year later, it was "too early" no longer: in November 1951, Twombly had a solo exhibition at the Seven Stairs Gallery in Chicago, and in December, he had his first major New York exhibition, a two-person show, at the Samuel Kootz Gallery.[4] Most notably, the intervening period saw him attend the Summer and Fall 1951 sessions of Black Mountain College. Indeed, both exhibitions featured paintings made during his period of study at the school.

The paintings Twombly executed at Black Mountain have long resisted easy assimilation into broader accounts of his practice. Executed mainly in black and white with compositions ranging from the quasi-biomorphic to the loosely patterned, they, quite basically, *look* radically distinct from many paintings that would follow, a difference often glossed as symptomatic of early exposure to Abstract Expressionism.[5]

Compounding the difficulty of these paintings is the fact that few are available to be seen: many have been lost, and the artist painted over or otherwise destroyed still more. While this reality underscores the provisional nature of Twombly's work at midcentury, the significance he ascribed to these objects is nevertheless clear: in addition to being among the first he publicly exhibited, fifteen of the paintings executed at Black Mountain appear in his catalogue raisonné, preceded by only two earlier works and including objects he destroyed.[6]

What, then, are we to make of these paintings that appear to stand at the threshold of Twombly's artistic career? What might they tell us about his earliest priorities and their purchase? Answering these questions requires a careful engagement with the context of their creation, Black Mountain College, and especially the school's emphases on exchanges with others. As is frequently noted, such exchanges were brought to the fore at Black Mountain in various ways. On a practical level, the establishment of productive relationships among the school's community members was critical to the institution's survival. Not only was Black Mountain self-governing, but the community was also responsible for the College's general maintenance (a responsibility met with varying degrees of success over time). In addition, the College's small population and relative geographic isolation created an intimate living situation. A former student remembered, "Any place you went, […] any time of the day or night, there were always groups of people arguing and talking, drinking coffee […] all kinds of people with completely different associated interests and fields would be sitting and talking and talking and talking."[7] This kind of near-constant contact—and attending thoughts about one's inevitable situatedness in relation to others—was also of intellectual interest to those at the school. Consider, for example, courses on offer, like philosopher Albert William Levi's "Individual in Society;" lectures given, like physicist Natasha Goldowski's on "The social behavior of molecules;" or drama teacher Wesley Huss's 1952 declaration that "Each of the faculty has been chosen because he knows one thing thoroughly and because he has a broad knowledge which helps him, and a curiosity which prompts him, to relate that thing to many others."[8]

As Twombly sought to establish a singular artistic base from which to work, he had a host of crucial interlocutors on the Black Mountain campus, from Robert

Rauschenberg to Ben Shahn to Robert Motherwell. As I have argued elsewhere, these multiple back-and-forths were variously vital to Twombly's development.[9] In what follows, however, I focus on Twombly's encounters with the poet Charles Olson, exploring how their interactions facilitated the former's emergence as, precisely, the "poet in paint" he had already been prophesied to become.

Of course, in many ways, such a framing of Twombly as poet is familiar. I am hardly the first writer to explore Twombly's engagement with poetry, his inscriptions of and gestures towards verse long-beckoning such investigations. A pair of essays Roland Barthes authored in 1979 crucially fueled attention to the writerly aspects of Twombly's practice more widely, with Mary Jacobus publishing in 2016 the first book-length study on Twombly and poetry, aptly titled *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* and carefully engaged with the artist's library, and Thierry Greub releasing in 2022 *Cy Twombly's Inscriptions*, an impressive compilation of all the handwritten notations and literary inscriptions in the work.[10] Other authors have noticed the potentially foundational importance of Olson's poetics to Twombly's practice, more recently Christine Kondoleon, Michael Schreyach, and John Yau.[11] This existing scholarship has focused primarily on objects postdating the artist's departure from North Carolina; where it has addressed Olson, it has done so mainly by drawing broader, thematic connections.

The present study, by contrast, locates the dawn of Twombly's poetic painting in that earlier Black Mountain moment and does so through a prolonged reading of select works. What consequently emerges is how exchanges with Olson and his thought not only fostered Twombly's arrival at original solutions to specific, pressing pictorial problems but also spurred meditations on such exchanges' very nature and significance. Within and through his Black Mountain paintings, Twombly came to assert his particular position in awareness of and relation to the broader field of positions occupied by others, artistically and otherwise, at Black Mountain and beyond.

Projective Painting

Twombly first traveled to Black Mountain College with Robert Rauschenberg in July 1951. The two men met at the Art Students League, and Rauschenberg, a student at the College in 1948-49, encouraged Twombly to attend the summer session with him.

Twombly went on to live and work at the school for the fall term, taking intermittent trips home to Lexington, Virginia, and in early 1952, he journeyed with Rauschenberg through the deep South and to Cuba. Having missed much of the spring semester because of his travels, he visited the College again that summer. In August 1952, Twombly left Black Mountain permanently, setting sail on the first of many sojourns abroad.[12] Olson, for his part, first taught at Black Mountain during the 1948-49 school year and the 1949 summer session. Around Twombly's arrival for Summer 1951, Olson traveled once more to North Carolina straight from a several-month stay in the Yucatán and assumed what turned out to be a relatively permanent position. During that time, Olson built on what he had recognized from the first as strong affinities between his concerns and those of the school, especially a shared attunement to the value of interactions among individuals. In an essay started not long before his 1951 return, the poet theorized, "At root (or stump) what *is*, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us—and the terms of what we are."[13] The possibility of "what we are" being fundamentally bound up with relations was one that Olson felt Black Mountain brought to life, and one, I will argue, that proved crucial to Twombly's painting.

Twombly and Olson entertained a close rapport during their shared time at the College. "I so like this lad," Olson remarked to poet Robert Creeley in a November 1951 letter, recounting, "[…] the pleasure, of talking to a boy as open & sure as this Twombly, abt *line,* just the goddamned wonderful pleasure of *form,* when one can talk to another who has the feeling for it—and Christ, who has?"[14] (And while beyond the scope of this essay, a statement such as this underscores the need for further study of how Olson's project was shaped by the artists he encountered at Black Mountain, as Jeff Gardiner has argued in this journal.)[15] A poem dedicated to Twombly and an essay meant to accompany an early exhibition of his pictures further indicates Olson's enthusiasm.[16] That Twombly himself asked Olson to write the latter text suggests that the painter was equally drawn to the poet's work. Though never enrolled in his classes, in a late interview, Twombly noted that Olson's concerns were hardly contained by classroom walls, remembering of the 1951 summer session: "Everything sort of revolved around Olson."[17]

The summer of 1951 was a decisive season for the poet, one when many of his key positions as a thinker were coalescing. Olson's understanding of his preoccupations as relevant to painting and to Twombly's painting specifically is evidenced by his essay on the artist. In it, Olson draws a striking parallel between what he sees as the task facing a painter and that facing a poet. Writing of the canvas, Olson asks, "On it, how can a man throw his shadow, make this the illumination of his experience, how put his weight exactly—there?" He goes on, "(In my business it comes out how, by alphabetic letters, such signs and syllables, how to make them not sounds but *my* sounds […]."[18] Put differently: Olson asks how each artist might create work that effectively registers and makes use of their specific corporeal situation.

The poet had provided an answer in a 1950 essay widely circulated at the College during Twombly's time there. Entitled "Projective Verse," it advocates a turn away from inherited measure and form to what he variously calls projective verse, open verse, or composition by field.[19] Early in his text, he lays out what he calls the "dogma" of projective verse: a projective poem, according to Olson, is kinetic, at all points "a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge;" it also must obey the principle first articulated by Creeley, namely that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT;" and finally, as was initially suggested by writer Edward Dahlberg, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" for projective verse to come into being.[20]

Olson then describes how projective verse is made, or what he terms the "machinery" of it. The projective poet is one whose verse "manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath." This position turns out to mean two things: first, a renewed concern for the syllable—the "king and pin of versification"—which, taken as sound, is born of the "union of mind and ear;" second, an understanding of line as coming "from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes."[21] As ear and breath together turn syllable into line, the projective poem unites the particular mind and body of the composing poet.[22] "If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts," Olson claims, "It has to. It starts with the composer."[23] Indeed, Olson's emphasis on breath allowed the idiosyncrasies of each poet's speech patterns back into verse. At

the same time, his stress on the moment of composition lent new importance to the distinctive situation confronting each poet as they worked. Olson's essay described a model of composition that was equally available to all—or to all men, in Olson's telling—yet capable of generating verse that was ineluctably distinct to each poet.

Figure 1. Cy Twombly, *MIN-OE*, 1951. Bitumen, oil-based house paint on canvas. 34 x 40 inches (86.4 x 101.6 cm) © Cy Twombly Foundation

Twombly's *MIN-OE* (1951), one of his few extant Black Mountain paintings, reveals how Olson's theory of projective verse proved generative for the young artist.[24] Executed on canvas using oil-based house paint into which Twombly mixed bitumen, *MIN-OE* is comprised of two ovoid cream shapes joined by a thicker vertical and more or less central band of cream. Two lines—legs they almost ask to be called—reach downward from each round form, and the top of each sprouts a single line. Connecting,

or more accurately nearly connecting, those upper lines are two more that form an antennae-like V, the bottom tip of which emerges from the central band. Though the painting speaks of symmetry, the figure is not perfectly symmetrical. Similarly, though this cream figure is seemingly set against a black background, closer inspection quickly belies such a straightforward description. First, the palette is not so simply limited to black or cream: we find areas where Twombly has deployed silver paint, along the bottom left side of the support, for instance, or around the ends of the antennae. Moreover, multiple applications of wet on wet paint teamed with Twombly's use of bitumen make fore- and background challenging to parse precisely, a difficulty only heightened by occasional flickers of silver paint at the canvas' edges.

With "Projective Verse" in view, as it surely was for Twombly as he painted, one of the first things we might notice about *MIN-OE* is how he has broken the title into two parts. With this division, Twombly calls attention to how the title *sounds*—encourages us to sound it out, as it were—and begins to build the aural into his work. The title's cadence is then gently echoed by the cream form itself, both word and shape split into two nearly but not quite equal parts of distinctive character: MIN-OE, we almost see the painting say.[25] Importantly, another way to describe Twombly's title might be as foregrounding the syllable, the building block of projective verse—emerging from the union of mind and ear, as Olson has it. Indeed, insofar as it suggests the involvement of the ear, Twombly's title seems designed to gesture towards his awareness of and affinity for Olson's poetics.

This attention to the syllable prompts us to ask whether Twombly made creative use of projective verse in other ways; briefly stepping back from Black Mountain brings potential answers into view. Just before arriving at the school, Twombly described his direction in painting as "simple in form and color with great stress on movement and power."[26] As is often noted, this emphasis on movement and power brings to mind the bold, gestural paint handling of figures like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock, whom Twombly deeply admired.[27] Twombly's year in New York had been studded with events that brought increasing attention to the individuals we now know as Abstract Expressionists, and from his avid gallery-going he surely would have been well-versed in their painting. Although no longer extant, works like Twombly's

large-scale *Martyrdom* (1951) or *Attacking Image* (1951), both executed at Black Mountain and illustrated in his catalogue raisonné, seem characterized by a quickness that signals his knowledge of compositions like Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950), shown at his Betty Parsons exhibition in late 1950, or Kline's *Chief* (1950), also on view during Twombly's time in New York.[28]

Nevertheless, despite the seeming proximity of his interests to this slightly older generation of artists, contemporary critics received their work in much different terms than they did the work of Twombly. Reviewing Kline's 1950 exhibition at Charles Egan's gallery, for instance, one critic deemed the works so many "explosive spectacle[s]" in which "thick lines and streaks of black dash or swirl across a palette-knifed expanse of white or grey."[29] Similarly, writing of Pollock's 1950 show at Betty Parsons, another critic referred to the "crazy, whip-lashing calligraphy which is Pollock's special mark."[30] In 1951, this critical emphasis on the gestural was underscored by Hans Namuth's iconic photographs and film of Pollock at work, visuals that brought into view the dance behind his drip paintings (*Art News* published the photographs in May, and The Museum of Modern Art screened the film later that year).[31]

Allusions to such bodily actions are pointedly absent from reviews of Twombly's first exhibitions. Instead, in addressing Twombly's compositions, Stuart Preston wrote in the *New York Times* of "shadowy" patterns, and critic James Fitzsimmons noted how certain light areas read as "smoky" while elsewhere, "irregular circles of grimy white seems to mushroom on a grey or black field."[32] Prudence B. Read noticed in *Art News* that "the blacks carry the framework and yet melt into the lighter areas."[33]

While words like "shadowy," "smoky," and "melt" are a far cry from "whip-lashing," "dash," and "swirl," the former set of descriptors also register a sort of movement. Rather than the movement of an arm whipping across the canvas, it is a play between fore- and background, an irresolvable tension between the two, that contemporary critics saw as animating Twombly's work. Consider, again, *MIN-OE*. As mentioned, its cream figure, with its central passages of thickly applied paint, appears at first glance to rest against a black ground. However, we soon notice passages where that black ground encroaches on the form, pulling it back into space. For instance, it is as though each of the "legs" and the central band of cream uniting the two circular shapes are

slowly being claimed as ground by the black paint creeping over their edges. The silver paint within the body of the cream form furthers our impression of dark ground coming to the surface and cream figure retreating as the changing viscosity of the paint comprising *MIN-OE*'s hulking form leads us to read it as variously solidifying and dissolving. While in some places we see Twombly's brushstrokes, rather than dashing across the canvas, they seem almost frozen in a dense web of paint: the stroke limning the bottom of the right-hand form, for example, matters most not for its gestural quality but for how it looks to move increasingly into the foreground as it continues its clockwise loop, an impression intensified by how the paint thickens.[34] Through a host of minor pictorial incidents designed to keep our eyes moving—a heavy circle of cream paint here, a worked area of black there, a flash of silver at the edge—Twombly invites us to notice the presence of such spatially complex passages across the canvas. Scholars like Kirk Varnedoe and Vincent Katz have been right to characterize a painting like *MIN-OE* as slow and monumental, but intimately bound up with and constitutive of its totemic form is a multifaceted movement in and out of the picture plane.[35]

Though not gestural, this sort of activity did retain a connection to the artist's body. More specifically, the constant spatial movement in Twombly's Black Mountain paintings might be read as something like respiration. Where Namuth's images revealed the choreography behind Pollock's drip paintings, Olson showed Twombly how breath was itself a corporeal action capable of generating form.[36] Owing to his exchanges with the poet, an appeal to respiration might have seemed to Twombly a vital alternative to those models of pictorial movement growing prevalent in New York galleries during the postwar years, enabling him to metabolize and articulate to fresh effect existing emphases on the creating body and its connection to the work of art. Recall that Olson's insistence on breath brought the idiosyncrasies of each poet's speech pattern to the fore: it is as though Twombly signals the specificity of his own embodied painterly voice by using a sort of respiration to activate his painted forms. His inventive response to what he had seen in New York was to compose poetry rather than pictures: *MIN-OE* registers the acquisitions of ear and breath alike, a harbinger of the painterly lines that would prove crucial to Twombly's project.

Importantly, to suggest Twombly asserted his singularity through an allusion to breath is not to say that a painting like *MIN-OE* foregrounds his subjectivity. Far from invoking one's ego, breath is generally involuntary, and, according to Olson, it is (somewhat paradoxically) only by ridding oneself of ego and attending instead to one's physiology that an artist can act meaningfully in relation to a broader field.[37] It was in just such physiological terms that Twombly once described his painting process, deeming it instinctive and "[…] coming through the nervous system."[38] Around midcentury, many cultural figures understood the most advanced painting in America to be intimately bound to the subjectivity of its author. Emblematic of this trend was the 1949 New York exhibition *The Intrasubjectives*, which included, among others, Pollock, Motherwell, and de Kooning, with gallerist Samuel Kootz characterizing the intrasubjective artist as one who "creates from an internal world rather than an external one [and] deals […] with inward emotions and experiences." [39] Declaring his creative presence by conjuring a physiological process allowed Twombly to sidestep this prevailing emphasis, differentiating his work from what he had seen in New York in another way.

Using respiration as a significant organizing principle also began to suggest to Twombly new ways of thinking through his and his painting's connection to others. Olson's objective was to compose poems in such a way as to indicate how the reader might voice his work. Breath linked the producer and reproducer of the poem, allowing for the transfer of energy—and more specifically, for the transfer of something like the poet's bodily engagement with a singular situation at the moment of composition—from poet through poem to reader. By asking readers to breathe like he does, Olson, in essence, asks them to come as close as possible to adopting his perspective. However, as Lisa Siraganian has astutely pointed out, in calling on the reader's breath, Olson also recognized and incorporated *their* personhood—their individuality, their difference—within his poem.[40] A roughly analogous dynamic is at play in *MIN-OE*. In working through the spatial and material complexity I have described, we find ourselves breathing with and through the painting, as it were. But, as time passes and we cannot achieve any definitive understanding of its operations or predict or adopt its exact rhythms, we are gently brought back to our intractable separateness from Twombly and

his work. Otherwise put, Twombly's painting, like Olson's verse, invites a prolonged and intimate encounter that ultimately results in a renewed acknowledgment of the singleness of each party involved. In this, the operations of painting and verse alike resonate with a dynamic aspired to by the Black Mountain community, where, as M.C. Richards once claimed, "We recognize that each person develops in his own unique way, but at the same time we stress that this development occurs only through his relations with other people."[41]

Twombly's turn to respiration constituted a productive counterpoint to prevalent modes of painting in New York and a potent realization of Black Mountain ideals. Using language unavailable at the time, we might also notice something queer in this approach to painting, both in its turn from an emphasis on normative, masculine subjectivities and in its open, iterative complexities. (Bearing this in mind, we could return to the criticism outlined above—with its references to "shadowy patterns" and "grimy whites"—and note an implicit if not intentional marking of Twombly's perceived deviation from prevailing modes of painting, perhaps even of being.) A simultaneous—and canny—revealing and concealing of self, breathing is characterized by an ongoingness always charged with difference; it continually destabilizes a norm of existence. Put otherwise, the breath of Olson's *open* verse holds space for like and unlike at once.

"For use, now."

The interest in relations that surfaces in "Projective Verse" and that was of consequence to Twombly was further elucidated in Olson's "Human Universe." Drafted in June 1951, this essay drew on a series of letters that Olson wrote to Creeley during the former's stint in Mexico.[42] On arriving at Black Mountain, Olson read his drafts aloud to the community and in an August letter declared the text was to be "the frame of these 8 weeks […] I read it as my first act here, and propose to read it, rewritten, as my last."[43] Central to "Human Universe" in its final form are claims about the importance of actively engaging with an always-changing world. Olson advocates a move away from the abstractions of logos and discourse, arguing that rather than classify or generalize our experiences, we must instead "find ways to hew to experience as it is," which amounts

to recognizing that we are always "juxtaposed to any experience" on several planes. He suggests there must be a means of expression that "bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second […]" and allows constant discovery to take precedence over the acceptance of and reliance on static, abstract rules.[44]

Though time at Black Mountain—where the active pursuit of knowledge was privileged over its passive receipt and a careful thinking through of one's relation to the larger community was consistently stressed—may have helped Olson refine his ideas, it was his impressions of Mexico, flawed and discriminatory as they were, that initially shaped "Human Universe." In what amounted to a racially essentializing move, Olson emphasized what he saw to be the relationship between the people of the Yucatán and their flesh. According to Olson:

> "[They] wear their flesh with that difference which the understanding that it is common leads to. When I am rocked by the roads against any of them—kids, women, men—their flesh is most gentle, is granted, touch is in no sense anything but the natural law of flesh, there is none of that pull-away which, in the States, causes a man for all the years of his life the deepest sort of questioning of the rights of himself to the wild reachings of his own organism."[45]

Rather than understand skin as a barrier between self and world, Olson believed those he encountered in Mexico understood flesh and touch to be intimately related. On his account, a perceived acceptance of touch as part of one's very being modeled a sort of engagement with the world that had the individual in perpetual, vital contact with his surroundings. Olson's reference to how traveling bodies jostle in a bus brings to mind an image of persons perpetually reconfiguring their relation to one another in awareness of how flesh at once separates and connects them.

Figure 2. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1951. Bitumen, oil-based house paint on canvas. 49.5 x 54.2 inches (125.7 x 137.8 cm). Photo: Jochen Littkemann. © Cy Twombly Foundation

The significance of Twombly's encounter with these ideas is brought into focus by *Untitled* (1951), his largest extant painting from this period and one of the most complex. As in *MIN*-OE, central to this work's composition are two circular forms, each possessing something akin to legs. A horizontal strip of paint runs between those of the right-most shape, and from that form's top emerges something, again, like antennae. Spanning the upper reaches of that V-shape is a horizontal band that is, in turn, loosely connected to a single vertical line extending from the top of the slightly smaller form on the left. Twombly has once more incorporated bitumen into his oil-based house paint, lending the picture a rough materiality, and there are dense passages of cream paint

throughout, notably around the outer edges of each circular form. Scholars like Varnedoe have likened Twombly's paint surfaces to skins or membranes, and such a metaphor is apt in this work. The heavy encrustation of textured paint teamed with the glimmers of canvas afforded around the work's edges make the surface read as a flesh-like conduit between the support and the world beyond.[46] We might take this appeal to flesh, combined with the presence of a spatial play similar to that at work in *MIN-OE,* as a further means of directing attention to the presence of Twombly's sensate, creating body.

Importantly, this fleshiness—like Olson's own attention to flesh—is also bound up with an attention to touch, complete with all its associations of connecting with others. Not only does the highly worked surface conjure Twombly's repeated contact with the canvas, but the painting also appeals to the beholder through its pronounced tactility, inviting their imagined touch. In so foregrounding thoughts about contact, the work speaks of an openness to the world and others within it. Olson claimed in "Human Universe," "The meeting edge of man and external reality is where all that matters does happen."[47] *Untitled* is an articulation of that edge, the site of Twombly's engagement with the larger artistic world confronting him. In almost the exact center of the painting is a compositional metonym for the kind of encounter to which the tactility of *Untitled* alludes. This black area is bridged by two small cream protrusions that seem about to grasp one another, about to reestablish a coupling that we imagine has only recently been broken; indeed, that we imagine is forever being established, then broken, then established again. Each cream nub reads as simultaneously reaching out to the other and proclaiming its status as an independent entity, a sliver of black between them underscoring their intimate awareness of one another and their ineluctable separation**.**

Other aspects of *Untitled*'s composition intimate the productivity of such repeated interactions. Whereas in *MIN-OE* the two ovoid shapes present as halves of a single form, in *Untitled* the two circular shapes register as discrete entities. Though they at first appear firmly fixed, over time, the slightly smaller, slightly less worked circle on the left comes to seem possessed of a centrifugal energy that spirals off it to the right. A related velocity is palpable in the upper horizontal line connecting the shapes, which appears to gain momentum and girth as it moves to the right. In the right-hand circle, we feel that

influx of energy: it looks to have grown larger and heavier than its counterpart, and its less rounded outer edge suggests momentum come to a sudden halt—a halt, we sense, that will ultimately result in an equally rapid movement back through the composition to the buoyant left-hand circle. As our eyes shuffle back and forth, we recognize how the neighboring forms are mutually enlivened by their unremitting dialogue.

Another way to describe this compositional dynamism might be to say that *Untitled*'s ostensibly stable forms never appear entirely settled. In the same way that each breath opens onto another, similar yet distinct from the last, Twombly ensures this painting continuously presents in different ways. Coming to terms with it ultimately involves recognizing the absence of a single reading of its forms, acknowledging that they are simultaneously monumental and animated, rushing towards the canvas's edges and slipping back into space, similar and contrasting, "male" and "female," even. In this, it is as though the work pictures Olson's conviction that the full content of any experience is always multifaceted, unable to be accounted for from any one perspective. Twombly's experiences in New York and North Carolina were nothing if not multifaceted, and it is as if *Untitled* testifies to that fact. Recall Twombly's claim that his painting is "like a nervous system:" flesh, run through with nerves, suggests a painting grounded in ongoing responsiveness to various stimuli. Alternatively, returning MC Richards' formulation, we might say *Untitled* pictures how his development occurred "only through his relations with other people."

Olson's thinking around "Human Universe" seems to have mattered to Twombly in one more way, one related to the poet's escalating preoccupation with ancient Mayan glyphs.[48] Activated during his time in Mexico, Olson's enthusiasm for the subject did not wane on his return to Black Mountain, where he even offered a fall 1951 course advertised as "Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing and Ovid's Metamorphoses" and described as, "For use, now."[49] The poet was drawn to the glyph because he saw it as hovering somewhere between the mimesis of the pictogram and the abstraction of the phonetic alphabet. According to Olson, the glyph was, on the one hand, grounded in material reality, emerging from what he saw as the Mayans' acute attention to the world in which they lived: "The signs were so clearly and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images."[50] On the other, the glyph

remained sufficiently free of literal reference to be able to take on a range of meanings. As Olson had it, a glyph "kept the abstract alert."[51] Drawing on his familiarity with Ernest Fennelosa and Ezra Pound's discussions of the Chinese character, Olson suggested that this ancient Mayan form of writing generated meaning through the spatial juxtaposition of visual signs with concrete referents in the world.[52]

In his 1951 essay on Twombly, Olson wrote of the artist's works, "The dug up stone figures, the thrown down glyphs, the old sorrels in sheep dirt in caves, the flaking iron—these are his *paintings.*"[53] In addition to reflecting Olson's interest in the prehistoric past, this claim captures the emergence of what would be Twombly's long-standing attention to history, one that scholars have carefully elucidated. Authors have seen, for example, the title *MIN-OE* as connected to Minoan bronze age culture on Crete and that work's composition, like *Untitled*'s own, to Luristan bronzes and the symmetry Twombly was coming to value, describing it as "basic to both primitive and classical concepts."[54] The surface quality of his Black Mountain-era works has similarly been likened to the corroded quality of archeological artifacts, rhyming with his "aesthetic sence [sic] of eroded or ancient surfaces of time."[55]

The concept of the glyph in particular points towards another approach to these objects. Kate Nesin has flagged how Twombly's sculptures trade in literal and allusive materiality alike—how we can read the white paint covering an object, for instance, as the viscous substance it is *and* as marble.[56] A similar collision occurs in Twombly's Black Mountain paintings. It is as though Twombly apprehended in Olson's discussion of the glyph the possibility of foregrounding the stuff of painting without sacrificing the allusive potential of those materials, their ability to speak of breath, flesh, or relations more broadly. Glyphs, that is, offered Twombly a path towards materializing his interest in "symbols abstracted, but never the less humanistic," as he would soon put it.[57]

The glyph's reliance on juxtaposing forms to communicate meaning was undoubtedly ripe for painterly adaptation. Indeed, around midcentury, many artists working in New York had turned to the hieroglyph or ideograph for the way it appeared to model an ostensibly unmediated plastic language.[58] Like those figures, Olson certainly recognized that writing, in this instance, was a plastic art; but, importantly, he did not stop there. In the *Mayan Letters*, he claimed, "Christ, these hieroglyphs. Here is

the most abstract and formal deal of all the things these people dealt out—and yet, to my taste, it is precisely as intimate as verse is. Is, in fact, verse. Is their verse. And comes into existence, obeys the same laws that, the coming into existence, the persisting of verse, does."[59] The glyph, to Olson, was not just plastic writing but plastic *poetry*, verse and glyph alike emerging from the embodied experiences of their authors. Olson's conception of such hand-wrought glyphs as verse may have crystalized for Twombly—who in this moment would paint the now-lost *Ancient Glyph*—the compatibility of his plastic practice and particular poetic solutions.[60] It may have confirmed his sense that an attentive disposition towards his lived conditions could give shape to a projective painting.

Living, Looking, Making

When Twombly left North Carolina in 1952, what of this connection to Olson did he carry with him? It is tempting, and perhaps not wrong, to find evidence of their encounter's ongoing significance in details of specific works: pointing to the titles of Twombly's 1952 paintings *Solon I* and *Solon II* as anagrams for Olson or reading the outsized "O" in his 1979 painting *Orpheus* as an allusion not only to the titular bard but also the six foot seven Olson—"as wonderful as he is big," Black Mountain student Fielding Dawson once remarked.[61] But the more potent legacy of poet and painter's exchanges instead seems to have resided in Twombly's way of being in the world and what that meant for his art; in how he situated himself in relation to his surroundings, be they those of Lexington, Virginia or Gaeta, Italy. Critic David Sylvester once observed, "Living, looking, making: Twombly seems to be someone for whom there is no break between these."[62] Or, as Twombly himself put it soon after leaving Black Mountain College, "Each line now is the actual experience with its own innate history."[63]

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[1] Cy Twombly letter to Leslie Cheek, March 27, 1951, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Directors' Correspondence (RG-01). VMFA Archives, Richmond, Virginia (hereafter VMFA, Directors' Correspondence).
[2] Twombly letter to Cheek, March 27, 1951, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence; Twombly letter to Cheek, April 30, 1951, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence.
[3] Marion Junkin letter to Chairman, Scholarship Committee, May 10, 1950, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence. For a concise overview of Twombly's early artistic education see Kirk Varnedoe,

"Inscriptions in Arcadia," in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 10-12.

[4] Twombly was included in a group show at the League. Twombly letter to Cheek, March 27, 1951, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence.

[5] Rosalind Krauss, for example, has claimed that these early works imitate rather than interpret the mark of Action Painting. Krauss, "Cy's Up," *Artforum* 33 (September 1994): 70-75, 118. Similarly, Nicholas Cullinan has suggested that these paintings were created before Twombly's "impatience with the status quo" set in. Cullinan, "American-Type Painting?" in *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Modern, 2008), 56.

[6] All fifteen works are dated 1951. According to the catalogue raisonné, Twombly's Chicago show included twelve paintings, only three of which are documented; these three works were created at Black Mountain and one is extant (see numbers 13, 14, and 16 in the catalogue raisonné). The Kootz show included four paintings, three of which were photographed; those paintings were executed in Lexington, Virginia in late 1951 during visits home from the College and are all presumably lost (see numbers 24, 25, and 26 in the catalogue raisonné). *Cy Twombly: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, vol. 1, ed. Heiner Bastian (Munich, c. 1992). During his association with the College, Twombly executed more paintings than those illustrated in the catalogue raisonné, but many were not photographed or otherwise documented and have since been lost. In addition to making paintings, Twombly experimented with other media while at Black Mountain: he made sculptures, worked with a pinhole camera, and designed the cover of a broadside printed at the school for the poet Robert Duncan.

[7] Carroll Williams, interview with Martin Duberman, June 11, 1967, PC.1678, Martin Duberman Collection, Interviews, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC, USA.

[8] *Dear Friend* letter from Wesley Huss, Supplement to *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, Vol. 9, No. 4, *Spring Semester July 9th to August 31st,* Duberman Collection, College Publications.

[9] Katherine Markoski, "Elective Affinities: Artistic Practice at Black Mountain College, 1948-1953," Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2013. In a chapter on Twombly, I combine my reading of his relationship to Olson with discussions of his meaningful connections to Robert Motherwell and Ben Shahn, ultimately arguing that this lived situating of himself in relation to others allowed him to achieve a similar end artistically. That account as well as the present one builds on studies that have considered Twombly's connection to Black Mountain, including, e.g., *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Modern, 2008); Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*, trans. Mary Whittall (London, 2005); Carol Nigro, "Scribbling Across Continents: Cold War Humanism and Phenomenology in Cy Twombly's Early Works," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 2009; Marcelin Pleynet, "Designs in Letters, Numbers, and Words or Painting by Ear (1976)," trans. Miriam Rosen, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. Nicola Del Roscio (Munich, 2002), 74-87. Varnedoe's catalog essay for The Museum of Modern Art's 1994 Twombly retrospective laid invaluable groundwork for later scholars. Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions In Arcadia," 8-64.

[10] Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper" and "The Wisdom of Art," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 157-176, 177-194; Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Thierry Greub, *Cy Twombly: Inscriptions* (Paderborn, Germany: Brill, 2022). Another important and related text is Pleynet, "Designs in Letters, Numbers, and Words or Painting by Ear (1976)."

[11] Yau interestingly explores the connection between poet and painter throughout the whole of his text, but the paintings executed at Black Mountain by Twombly are not a central focus. Michael Schreyach, *History and Desire: A Short Introduction to the Art of Cy Twombly* (2017), 9-10 (Digital Commons, https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1065&context=mono); Christine Kondoleon, "Color and Line, Gods and Poetry," in *Cy Twombly: Making Past Present* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2020), 38-39; John Yau, "Cy Twombly and Charles Olson and the 'Archaic Postmodern,'" in *Cy Twombly*, ed. Jonas Storsve (Munich: Sieveking Verlag, 2017), 25-29. Also see, e.g., Adriana Bontea, "Cy Twombly: Painting as an Art of Thinking," in *Cy Twombly: Bild, Text, Paratext*, ed. Thierry Greub (Paderborn, Germany: Wilheim Fink Verlag, 2013), 41; Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*, 11-36; Carol Nigro, "Cy Twombly's Humanist Upbringing," *Tate Papers* 10 (Autumn 2008): n. pag.; Pleynet, "Designs in Letters, Numbers, and Words or Painting by Ear (1976)," 82-83.

[12] Nicholas Cullinan's 2008 *Burlington Magazine* article argues for the formative importance of the work Twombly created just after his stint at Black Mountain—that is, those objects made during and in the

wake of his 1952-53 trip to Europe and Africa—and Natalie Dupêcher offers a more interpretative account of those works in a 2016 essay. I contend that the works made at Black Mountain merit the same sort of close attention that Cullinan and Dupêcher lend to those that followed. Cullinan, "Double Exposure: Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly's Roman Holiday," *Burlington Magazine* 150 (July 2008): 460-70; Dupêcher, " 'Like Clocks': Keeping Time and Tracing Space in Cy Twombly's Morocco Paintings," *Oxford Art Journal* 39 (March 2016): 19-33.

[13] Olson, "The Escaped Cock," in *Charles Olson: Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, 1997), 138.

[14] Olson letter to Creeley, November 29, 1951, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, Volume 8*, ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Barbara, 1987), 199.

[15] Jeff Gardiner, "Olson's Poetics and Pedagogy: Influences at Black Mountain College," *Black Mountain Studies Journal* 11 (Fall 2020), https://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Gardiner_JBMCS_volume11.pdf, accessed 12 March 2024.

[16] For the poem, see "For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows (1951)," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997), 244. The essay was intended to accompany a 1952 exhibition at Washington and Lee University that did not come to pass. It was later published in *Cy Twombly: Poems to the Sea (1959)* (Munich, 1990); reprinted in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, 9-12.

[17] Twombly and Nicholas Serota, "History Behind the Thought (2007)," in *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Season*, 44. As a 1950-51 *Bulletin* read, "The student-faculty relationship is unusually close. Students feel free to take questions and interests to any faculty member whether they are studying under him or not" (*Black Mountain College Bulletin,* Vol. 9, No. 3, *BMC Education BMC*, PC.1678, Duberman Collection, College Publications).

[18] Olson, "Cy Twombly," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, 9.

[19] See Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Charles Olson: Collected Prose*, 239-50.

[20] Olson, "Projective Verse," 240. Metrically regulated verse was gaining sway within both universities and the poetic establishment during the 1940s as figures like John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke came to the fore. Among many other things, Olson's essay was a response to this situation, which is to say it was a response to the increasing prevalence of "closed verse."

[21] Ibid., 241-42.

[22] Thomas F. Merrill, *The Poetry of Charles Olson: A Primer* (East Brunswick, NJ, 1982), 53.

[23] Olson, "Projective Verse," 247.

[24] I center my analysis on two of the extant Black Mountain paintings for a number of reasons. In the first place, they appear among the most ambitious of the documented works created at the school. Moreover, I consider that they survived to be indicative of their significance to the artist. Finally, I rely on these objects for a practical reason: the material complexity of these paintings is crucial to their operations and reproductions do not adequately convey it.

[25] I am following Linda Norden in noticing a link between Olson's poetics and Twombly's emphasis on the "vocative and aural capacities" of words [Norden, "Not Necessarily Pop: Cy Twombly and America," in *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 158]. As is often noted, Twombly's interest in sound persisted. In a review of his 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery, which included works like *Tiznit* (1953) and *Quarzazat* (1953), Lawrence Campbell claimed Twombly "identifies his work by the names of Moroccan cities because he likes the sounds of the words and not because they are descriptive" [Lawrence Campbell, "Rauschenberg and Twombly" *Art News* 52 (September 1953): 50].

[26] Twombly letter to Cheek, April 30, 1951, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence.

[27] Varnedoe, "Inscriptions In Arcadia," 13-14. In a 2000 interview, Twombly remarked to David Sylvester, "To me, Pollock is the height of American painting," [Twombly, "Cy Twombly (2000)," in *Interviews with American Artists*, ed. David Sylvester (New Haven, 2001), 179].

[28] On this consonance, see, e.g., Nigro, "Scribbling Across Continents," 111, 127; Cullinan, "American-Type Painting?" 56.

[29] J.F., "Franz Kline," *Art Digest* 25, no. 3 (November 1, 1950): 20.

[30] B.K., "Jackson Pollock," *Art Digest* 25, no. 5 (December 1, 1950): 16.

[31] Robert Goodnough, "Pollock Paints a Picture," *Art News* 50, no. 3 (May 1951): 38-41, 60-61.

[32] Stuart Preston, "Cy Twombly," *New York Times* (December 9, 1951); James Fitzsimmons, "New Talent," *Art Digest* 26, no. 6 (December 15, 1951): 20.

[33] Prudence B. Read," Duet," *Art News* 50, no. 8 (December 1951): 48.
[34] Heiner Bastian has also claimed that Twombly pointedly avoids the gestural in these works. Bastian, "Introduction," *Cy Twombly: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*, vol. 1, 21.
[35] Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," 14; Vincent Katz, "Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art," in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 162.
[36] While the gestural has received far more critical attention, a striking number of artists appealed to respiration as a metaphor for their practice in the immediate postwar years. Robert Motherwell, for example, claimed in 1949, "My main effort is to come into harmony with myself, to paint as I breathe or move or dream[…]" [Motherwell, "A Personal Expression (1949)" in *The Writings of Robert Motherwell* ed. Dore Ashton with Joan Banach (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007), 76]. In 1955, dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham wrote that dance is "as accurate and impermanent as breathing" [Merce Cunningham, "The Impermanent Art," *Arts* 7, no. 3 (1955); reprinted in David Vaughan, *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years* (New York, 1997), 87]. Mark Rothko stated that painting was "[…]a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again" [Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted," *Possibilities* 1 (1947-48); reprinted in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven, 2005), 142]. I believe Olson's poetics were the key point of reference for Twombly, but the pervasiveness of this metaphor seems ripe for further exploration.
[37] Lisa Siraganian, "Breathing Freely: The Object of Art and the Subject of Politics in American Modernism," Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2003, 231. Also see Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149-51.
[38] Twombly, "Cy Twombly (2000)," in *Interviews with American Artists,* 178-79.
[39] Samuel K. Kootz, *The Intrasubjectives* (New York, 1949); reprinted in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, 154-55.
[40] Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Object*, 139-59, esp. 157-58.
[41] "Standards of Conduct in Community Living," PC.1678, Duberman Collection, College Publications. A related argument could be made about a rich series of small drawings executed by Twombly in 1951: viewed together, each work articulates itself in pointed relation to the others. Taken as a group, they also appear like Olson's graphic verse, drawing us into their combined cadence as they ultimately offer an utterance that is distinctly Twombly's.
[42] The letters were initially published as *Mayan Letters* in 1953 by Creeley's Diver's Press in Mallorca.
[43] Olson letter to Cid Corman, August 12, 1951, *Letters for Origin, 1950-55*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard/Grossman, 1969), 71.
[44] Olson, "Human Universe," in *Charles Olson: Collected Prose*, 155-67.
[45] Ibid., 158. For a critique of Olson's discriminatory position, see Philip Kuberski, "Charles Olson and the American Thing: The Ideology of Literary Revolution," *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 27 (Spring 1985): 185; Thomas Bertonneau, "Life in the Human Universe: Charles Olson's (Post) Modernism in Context (An Anthopoetics)," *Sagetrieb* 13 (Winter 1994): 139.
[46] Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," 31, 55. Something similar is said of the paint applied to his sculpture by Christian Klemm in "Material – Model – Sculpture," in *Cy Twombly: The Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 2000), 155.
[47] Olson, "Human Universe," 161.
[48] See Charles Olson, "Project (1951): 'The Art of the Language of Mayan Glyphs,'" *Alcheringa* 5 (Spring/Summer 1973): 94-100.
[49] *These Artists Have Chosen to Teach at Black Mountain College*, information for fall semester 1951, PC.1678, Duberman Collection, College Publications. Olson's interest in the subject seems to have been contagious. Though it did not come to fruition, the College advertised a "Photographic Field Trip to Yucatan" under the guidance of photographer Hazel-Frieda Larsen as part of its 1952 summer session. It was to be concerned with "a seeing and study of the Mayan ruins, and, second, with the exploration of the possibilities of using the camera to record the architecture, the sculpture, and the glyphs" (*Black Mountain College Bulletin*, vol. 10, no. 1, *Black Mountain College Summer 1952*, PC.1678, Duberman Collection, College Publications).
[50] Olson, "Human Universe," 159.
[51] Olson letter to Creeley, March 28, 1951, *Mayan Letters*, 64.
[52] In 1945, Pound introduced Olson to Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, a text that Olson copied almost in its entirety into his notebook. Against the abstraction of the

phonetic system, Fenollosa saw the Chinese character as ideogrammic, that is, as visually manifesting qualities of its referent. According to Fenollosa, the Chinese character also elided the Western division between nouns and verbs, instead seeing "things in motion, motion in things;" he thus insisted on the importance of the multiple implied relations between characters to the production of meaning. This understanding of the Chinese character resonated with Pound's aspirations towards poetry that did not veer away from concrete objects and sought to establish dynamic connections among particular images. Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Ezra Pound (1936; San Francisco, 1968).

[53] Olson, "Cy Twombly," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, 11.

[54] Cy Twombly, Application Statement, 1952, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence.

[55] Cy Twombly, Application for the Catherwood Foundation 1956 Fellowship for Virginia, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence. For scholarship on Twombly's attention to histories see, e.g., *Cy Twombly: Making Past* Present; Cullinan, "American-Type Painting?" 55; Dupêcher, "Like Clocks;" Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, 16; Kate Nesin, *Cy Twombly's Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 105-07; Nigro, "Scribbling Across Continents," 112, 155.

[56] Kate Nesin, "Some Notes on Words and Things in Cy Twombly's Sculptural Practice," *Tate Papers* 10 (2008): n. pag.

[57] Cy Twombly, Application for the Catherwood Foundation 1956 Fellowship for Virginia, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence. For a recent, related discussion of the significance of the glyph to Twombly see Yau, "Cy Twombly and Charles Olson and the 'Archaic Postmodern,'" 26-28.

[58] Exemplifying this tendency was the exhibition *The Ideographic Picture* at the Betty Parsons Gallery in early 1947. See Barnett Newman, *The Ideographic Picture* (New York, 1947); reprinted in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven, 2005), 135-36.

[59] Olson letter to Creeley, March, 20, 1951, *Mayan Letters*, 43.

[60] Archival documents indicate Twombly submitted *Ancient Glyph* with a 1956 fellowship application (Application for the Catherwood Foundation 1956 Fellowship for Virginia, VMFA, Directors' Correspondence).

[61] Yau, "Cy Twombly and Charles Olson and the 'Archaic Postmodern,'" 28; Fielding Dawson, Letter to Ca and Bill, postmarked July 12, 1949, Black Mountain Materials, Fielding Dawson Papers, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[62] David Sylvester, *About Modern Art,* 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 508.

[63] Cy Twombly in "Documenti di una nuova figurazione: Toti Scialoja, Gastone Novelli, Pierre Alechinsky, Achille Perilli, Cy Twombly," *L'Esperienza moderna* (August/September 1957): 32; reprinted in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, 27.