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Cy Twombly: Sign, Meta-Sign and Sense

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Abstracts

In a 1979 article on the work of the American painter Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes writes “TW [Twombly] refers to writing (as he also often refers to culture, through words), and then he goes off somewhere else.” This article starts from the question of where or what this “somewhere else” might be, towards which Twombly heads on leaving behind cultural and linguistic meaning. I propose that it is towards something logically prior to, or in a sense “behind” signification that Twombly directs his attention, and that phenomenology offers us a way of approaching this ground. Via an analysis of the effect of layering in several paintings from the early 1960s, I argue that, in this layering, signification via the presence of text becomes just another category of object to be called forth, or rather, another mode of relation to the world which the painting investigates in its meta-reflection on relationality as meaning.

Dans un article sur l'œuvre du peintre américain Cy Twombly, publié en 1979, Roland Barthes écrit, “TW [Twombly] fait référence à l'écriture (comme il le fait souvent, aussi, à la culture, à travers des mots...), et puis il s'en va ailleurs.” Cet article part de la question, où et quoi est cet “ailleurs” vers lequel Twombly se dirige en quittant les significations linguistiques et culturelles? Je suggère que Twombly nous oriente vers un fond qui précéderait logiquement, ou serait en quelque sorte “derrière” la signification, et que la phénoménologie nous offre un moyen de penser ce fond. A travers une analyse des effets de juxtaposition et de superposition dans quelques tableaux du début des années soixante, l'article expose la signification linguistique comme étant, pour Twombly, une catégorie d'objet parmi d'autres, ou plutôt comme un des nombreux modes de relation au monde évoqués par une œuvre qui nous offre une métaréflexion sur la relation comme productrice de sens.

Keywords

Twombly, abstract expressionism, phenomenology, painting, art, Jean-Luc Nancy, Merleau-Ponty, expressionisme abstrait, phénoménologie, peinture.

Biography

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Cy Twombly, perhaps more than any modern artist, is a painter of writing. Other artists may be more centrally interested in text, but Twombly paints the process, the practice, the feeling of writing by hand. There is a founding narrative, perhaps a founding myth regarding the relation between writing and drawing in Twombly's work. In 1954, this narrative goes, Twombly was a young army conscript working in cryptology when he produced a series a drawings, made in the dark after lights out, which already incorporated letters into their scribbled forms (Pincus-Witten n.pag). And even before those letters emerged, Twombly's line already walked the line between drawing and writing. As Démosthènes Dawetas has observed:

Dans ces premières œuvres, on ne voit encore ni lettres, ni mots, ni collages ou autres formes analogues qui rythmeront plus tard le travail de l'artiste. Mais elles dégagent une forte impression de matérialité, de muralité, et on y perçoit cette propension de la *grammè*/ligne – conçue comme un trait, une trace, une entaille, un sillon – à demeurer agissante, à se faire l'instrument d'une méditation continuelle, le rail d'un incessant aller et retour entre le pré- et le méta- (19).

As early as 1955, in *Academy*, however, the isolated letters of Twombly's blind experiments begin to come together as words, the choice of words (one can make out “fuck” amongst them) chiming with the graffiti aesthetic of the works. The line is a mark, a scratch, between sign and mute trace, between signifying form and gestural expression.

Two quotations will serve as my starting point here for an exploration of the relationship between signification and its others in Twombly's work. The first comes from Roland Barthes's seminal 1979 essay on Twombly, “Non multa sed multum”, in which he refers to Twombly by the abbreviation “TW”. In the section entitled “Écriture”, Barthes writes, “TW fait référence à l'écriture (comme il le fait souvent, aussi, à la culture, à travers des mots: *Virgil, Sesostris*), et puis il s'en va ailleurs” (146). But what or where is this “ailleurs” towards which Twombly heads? The text is intriguingly indirect in its answer to its own question. Barthes tells us what it is not – that is, calligraphy, or “ce qu'on appelait au 18e siècle la belle main” (146). But the positive sense of the “ailleurs” is displaced by a striking

analogy. Twombly's work is to calligraphy as a careless teenager's discarded trousers, rolled up in the corner of a room are to trousers as they might appear neatly folded on a hanger in a swish department store. The injection of a narrative vignette into this reflection serves a particular purpose. It emphasises the trousers as objects of an interaction, as marked by a gesture. Though he does not say so very directly, for Barthes, it is gesture towards which Twombly's work moves, having made its glancing reference to writing. Indeed, it is gesture to which Barthes's reading subordinates all signification in the paintings. Barthes's account turns the act (or action) of painting into a kind of writing, but only insofar as Twombly's textual figures themselves, occupying as they do the boundaries of legibility and of comprehension, turn writing into painting, emphasising its embodied, temporal and gestural character: "De l'écriture, TW garde le geste, non le produit" (147). Barthes goes on to emphasise that the gesture is understood here as distinct from the act, which is transitive and goal-orientated, where the gesture is intransitive and open-ended. "Le geste" is "quelque chose comme le supplément d'un acte":

Distinguons donc le *message*, qui veut produire une information, le *signe*, qui veut produire une intellection, et le *geste*, qui produit tout le reste (le "supplément"), sans forcément vouloir produire quelque chose (148).

My second quotation is drawn from a recent catalogue essay by Richard Shiff, which – inevitably perhaps – refers back to the *incontournable* Barthes. Discussing the relations (or absence of relations) that govern the placement of figures within Twombly's compositions, Shiff writes:

Bound to the same space and yet apart, dispersed, Twombly's various figures – some destined to be obliterated, then perhaps reinstated in a process without evident direction [...] – form relationships by contiguity, not resemblance (11).

This notion of contiguity as the specific form of relation in Twombly's works is useful when applied back to Barthes's distinction between gesture and sign or message. If Twombly's work alludes to the signifying elements of language but goes off in a different direction ("ailleurs"), might we think of a relation of contiguity existing between signification itself and

that which is not it, which is other to it, which is elsewhere? I shall begin by looking more closely at how Twombly's work locates itself at the limit of signification, notably through the use of handwriting. I then examine nature of the "elsewhere" of signification – specifically its relation to gesture and to affect – before turning to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy as a means of mapping the border, via the role of "sense", spacing and gesture in his writing.

Signification and its non-signifying others might already be said to be contiguous in Twombly's work, where drawing and writing come close enough to one another to blur the line that divides them. Close enough, one might say, to undo one another. This is particularly the case in the "blackboard" works of the late 1960s, (some of which are on paper, and others on canvas) and the "Nini" series, produced in response to the premature death of Twombly's friend Nini Pirandello, the wife of his Italian gallerist, in 1971.¹ The surfaces of these paintings are covered by rhythmic, looping, continuous lines, filling the frame horizontally or in rows that slope slightly, always from left to right. In the blackboard versions they evoke childhood handwriting exercises; in the Nini series, the obsessive palimpsest of a private journal. Yet in both, handwriting, or something resembling it, can be recognised without being read. We are faced with what Jon Bird has called "the constant interplay between recognisability and a blockage or failure of signification" (494). In these works where rhythm is as much spatial as temporal, Barthes's "intransitive gesture" is clearly in evidence. Handwriting is the incorporation of text, its passing through the body, and it is this bodily practice and expression that Twombly retains where signification is discarded, blocked or refused.

Illegibility of this kind can be seen as a form of social resistance, as well as a confrontation with the limits of signification. It adopts the superficial appearance of conformity to accepted systems of communication and social interaction whilst actually refusing or subverting them. As Martine Reid writes in an essay on visibility and legibility in art:

Illegible writing shows things to be what they are not. That is why it is "sanctioned" by whatever means possible (by various authorities, from school on). It is accused of trying to hide something, of being a disguise. It is "read" (by graphologists and others) as a gesture of refusal, as antisocial. It is at least an indication of the tenuous, fragile nature of this legibility of the most basic kind. It shows the legible to be a category that is forever under threat, forever in danger of disappearing, of becoming lost, despite appearances, in a paradoxical obscurity where writing can be seen and recognized, but can no longer be read. Illegible writing indicates in fact that the sign has been remorsefully eaten away by its own figurative nature, and that it does indeed take almost nothing at all for the figure to resort back to its status as a mere drawing (6).²

The social dimension of such resistance in Twombly's case is compounded by the implicit reference (which might have been obvious to contemporary American viewers of his work) to the "Palmer method" popularised in the the early twentieth century as a way of teaching children through handwriting – though it was intended to teach them more than just writing, being conceived according to Richard Leeman as a method "variously capable of reforming delinquents, assimilating immigrants and, more generally, giving small children the habit of obedience" (171). Twombly was himself taught by this method, a bodily discipline involving repetitive exercises, with the child using the whole arm to form the letters, rather than just the wrist and hand. And so his subversion of it represents a subversion of the values it was intended to inculcate; it is at once a fond revisiting and a parodic refusal of the discipline of "writing lines".

Yet Leeman argues, following Robert Pincus-Witten, that this revisiting of his own schoolboy past functioned less as a subversion than as a reinstatement of a certain version of Americanness represented by the Palmer Method. In 1968 some of the blackboard paintings featured in Twombly's first retrospective at the Milwaukee Art Centre. They were enthusiastically received, the critical response contrasting with the opprobrium that had greeted his so-called "European" paintings from the early 1960s. According to Leeman, the blackboard paintings in the Milwaukee show were seen as a renunciation on Twombly's part of those elements of his work that American critics associated with "mannerism, elegance,

sophistication, in short: Europe”. They conformed to an aesthetic of pared-down abstraction and directness to which those American critics were much less hostile. Leeman continues:

The blackboard metaphor expresses [...] the mixture of paternalism and puritanism to which Twombly owed his rehabilitation. He returned to the country of his birth with works that renounced his past errors [...], which Leo Castelli could describe as “American Type Material” [...]. The rediscovered Americanness of Twombly’s painting – simple, rudimentary, elementary, masculine – resembled a return to the Palmer Method, with the exercises assuming the appearance of a punishment: “Again and again”, said Robert Pincus-Witten, “Twombly seems to be writing ‘I will not whisper in class anymore’” (174).³

But if these works allude to writing while blocking signification, and seem all the more acceptable for that in the context of American minimalism, what of those where signification (or something like it) is apparently preserved? For words often seem to be the vehicle of all that “Europeanness” for which American critics condemned Twombly – words with a particular freight of culture, mythology, poetry; words as a tool of the referentiality with which painting investigated its own history. It is where the loops, scribbles and isolated letters are allowed to crystallise into words that their presence becomes more problematic, not just because of the nature of the references they make, but because of the very obvious questions they raise about what words are doing on a painting.

As many critics, Barthes included, have pointed out, Twombly’s use of words emphasises the materiality of the signifier in other ways, as well as by drawing attention to the gesture of writing, scribbling or otherwise inscribing. Texts are often written in such a way as to break up individual words, and play with double meanings, puns, anagrams and palindromes (playing with the “womb” in his own name for example in *Epitaph* of 1960), foregrounding the plasticity of the signifier. Letters sometimes resemble visual symbols or pictograms from Egyptian or Buddhist traditions, emphasising the contiguity of the symbol not just with the index of a gesture, but with its other other, the icon.

And of course, the words Twombly uses are often proper names – his own and those of places or figures from mythology. A proper name has a referent, but no meaning, properly

speaking, and Twombly's use of names in the early 1960s in particular emphasises their status as cultural objects, since, when they appear on the canvas itself, they are frequently enclosed within cartouches or frames, as if quoted as place-holders for an image or an idea. Where names feature as the title of the work, they lay claim to it as labels, but Twombly endlessly plays with the expectations of readability or reference that such labelling invites. These works often mock our attempts to find classical precedents for them, as Leeman observes in a discussion of *Leda and the Swan* (1962):

As with the *Triumph of Galatea*, there is something provocative about the picture-title relationship, both in the distance between Twombly's image and the presumed references – Raphael, Leonardo or Michelangelo, models of a craft that Twombly's versions manifestly lack – and in the sense that “provoke” means “call forth”: in the central red patch spattered with white, the picture shows what happens in the primitive myth, an archaic treatment of the myth conforming to the “directness” that Twombly, following in the footsteps of the Mythmakers and the surrealists, strives to put in his painting (95).

But the names themselves do nonetheless “call forth”, functioning as vessels of connotative meaning, a kind of shorthand for a network of relations into which the viewer is invited to insert herself. And in this context it is interesting to note what Barthes writes about names elsewhere. Discussing proper names in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, he writes that what Proust needs in order to construct a complex web of associations within his vast and sprawling text is “un élément proprement poétique”, something that would constitute connections for the reader just as reminiscence does for the narrator:

Or il est une classe d'unités verbales qui possède au plus haut point ce pouvoir constitutif, c'est celle des noms propres. Le Nom propre dispose des trois propriétés que le narrateur reconnaît à la reminiscence: le pouvoir d'essentialisation (puisqu'il ne désigne qu'un seul référent), le pouvoir de citation (puisqu'on peut appeler à discrétion toute l'essence enfermée dans le nom, en le proférant), le pouvoir d'exploration (puisque l'on “déplie” un nom propre exactement comme on fait d'un souvenir) (“Proust et les noms” 124).

What is notable in Twombly's paintings is that these forms of reference are inserted alongside figures and forms which may be said to “call forth” sensations rather than referents or signifiers: child-like scribbles, blood-coloured splatters and finger-prints. The picture plane

thus becomes the site of an encounter between different modes of reference, representation or signification. In the context of painting, this relationality of course relies on spatial organisation, but the presence of language systems within the picture-plane questions the nature and status of pictorial space in the ways that text-image interactions have so often done. Twombly's paintings of the early 1960s have a sparse, bare quality, and often rely on scattered, distributive, or even centrifugal compositions. The predominance of the white ground on which the marks are littered invites reflection on relationality as we shall shortly see, but it is worth noting in passing that this provocative blank expanse of whiteness is something Twombly inherits from poetry – notably from Mallarmé – as well as from modernist abstraction. The original version of the line from Mallarmé which appears in Twombly's painting *Herodiade* (1960)⁴ is “J'ai de mon rêve *épars* connu la nudité !” (45).⁵ What is more, what Mallarmé wrote about his “Hérodiade” in a letter to Eugène Lefébure creates an intriguing (and intriguingly synthaesthetic) link to the idea of names as evocations, citations or “element[s] proprement poétique[s]”:

La plus belle page de mon œuvre sera celle qui ne contiendra que ce nom divin Hérodiade. Le peu d'inspiration que j'ai eu, je le dois à ce nom, et je crois que si mon héroïne s'était appelée Salomé, j'eusse inventé ce mot sombre, et rouge comme une grenade ouverte, Hérodiade. Du reste, je tiens à en faire un être purement rêvé et absolument indépendant de l'histoire (154).

For Mallarmé, as for Proust and Twombly, it is the material qualities of the name as much as its referential capacities that give it its evocative power.

But whatever the power of proper names to “call forth” sensation, the introduction of any text into the space of the picture raises questions about the regimes of spatial (and for that matter, temporal) organisation that it might bring with it. Critics seem to divide over whether words or numerals interrupt the free play of relational sensation in Twombly's work. Suzanne Delehanty, writing in the catalogue of a 1975 exhibition in Philadelphia remarks that, “The relationships among his words, erotic pictographs and globs of luscious paint are alogical and non-sequential, an order which follows our impressions or felt experiences” (16). For her, the

words are simply one type of component in a collection of objects that offers itself to us to be formed into an infinite number of constellations, according to the sensations with which we invest it. For Leeman however, words are a particular category of object and thus impose particular forms of relation, if only because of our ingrained (Western) habits of reading from top left to bottom right. Twombly's use of numerals also invites us to order or hierarchise the objects collected on the picture plane, since we cannot resist the sequential order they impose, even if we know that with an artist like Twombly, they are likely to be a lure. But is there a way of thinking about spatiality in these works that might take account of both these views?

In order to consider this question, let us look more closely at three paintings in particular, all dating from Twombly's "European" years: *Herodiade* and the two parts of *The Return from Parnassus*,⁶ produced the following year, in 1961. All three use mixed media, with lead pencil, wax crayon and coloured pencil marks appearing alongside conventional oil paint and oil-based house paint. All three feature handwritten text and/or numerals, sometimes in boxes or cartouches, as well as more abstracted, looping pencil lines like those that come to dominate the later blackboard and Nini paintings. Large expanses of each canvas are left almost blank, but scattered on them are geometric or architectural forms sketched in pencil, sometimes featuring what seem like vestigial co-ordinates, measurements or "keys". Colour is introduced either in scribbles of crayon and pencil, or swipes, drips and blobs of paint, often apparently applied with the hand directly onto the canvas.⁷ All three exemplify the dialogue between spontaneous energy and a certain meticulousness that characterises many of the paintings of this period.

When looking at these works up close, what strikes the viewer – as always with Twombly – is the complex, layered quality of the paintings, despite their sparseness. Of course, it is the gestural quality of the marks that draws attention to the layers, but this visible layering, as opposed to the traditional ways in which oil paintings tend to conceal their layered construction, emphasises exactly the almost collage-like confrontation of minimally

related components that Delehanty sees at work in the paintings. Twombly stages a representation made up of fragments, variously processed, many of them cultural (notably in this context the references to Poussin, to genre painting, to poetry, myth and allegory etc.); some of them personal (memories, visual snapshots); some of them gestural or performative, with a strong sense of something happening in the act of applying matter to a surface. Yet at the same time, there is a clear sense of the layers not just as indices of the gestures and processes of the work's genesis, but as a kind of metaphor for the processes which intervene between the viewer and *any* object. And in this layering, signification via the presence of text becomes just another category of object to be called forth, or rather, another mode of relation to the world which the painting investigates in its meta-reflection on relationality as meaning (or indeed of meaning as relationality).

Herodiade is particularly illuminating in this regard. Both the title and the quotation from Mallarmé appear in cartouches, as if in a preliminary diagram for a painting yet to be undertaken – as if marking the places where figures might later appear. Mallarmé's "Hérodiade" is a dramatic poem, written in the form of a short play, and with its references to "scène" [sic] and "ouverture", what Twombly's canvas stages in turn is an *undertaking* of representation. The painting seems like a set-up or assemblage of elements – preparatory, but not unfinished in itself, as if it were a painting of the moment a representation is about to come into being. And this is not to be understood in a psychological sense, as the coming into being of a mental image in the painter's imagination, still less the coming into being of a reproduction of that image on the canvas. Rather, this seems to be a painting of the *structure of seeing or thinking* coming into being. For these are paintings about thinking. They are not so much "internal landscapes" of the unconscious, as in surrealism for example, but a transposition of some kind, a depiction of the mental process of organising ideas in space, or perhaps of a principle of organising matter itself into something which does not yet emerge. For all the blood-red hand-print immediacy of the marks at the centre of *Herodiade*, their

expressionist gestural quality is in itself, by this period, quite heavily coded. These marks are in fact extremely measured and become one layer in the complex process of assemblage that the painting depicts. For all that they evoke expressionistic spontaneity and immediacy, these paintings have a cerebral, strangely non-psychological quality. This gives them an affinity with phenomenology as way of investigating the very ground against which notions of psychology might come into being, and it is to this affinity with phenomenology that I shall devote the remainder of my discussion.

If we return to the question posed at the beginning: where or what is the “elsewhere” towards which Twombly’s painting heads?, then one answer might be to say that perhaps this elsewhere is in some sense *behind* signification, in phenomenological terms. From this perspective, the works can be read as an attempt to depict the conditions of possibility of signification – or perhaps of relationality, being or *Dasein*: what it *is* to exist in the world.

Phenomenology’s thinking about space is in some ways a reformulation of the problem of substantialist versus relationalist theories of space. Briefly put, the substantialist view holds that empty space is a substance, an entity which intervenes around and between material objects. Relationalists such as Leibniz deny the existence of space as an entity, arguing instead the space is nothing but than the distance between objects in the world and the relation between them. In other words, space is not matter or substance, but a function of mind’s capacity to relate objects to one another: it is not material but ideal.⁸ Though it shares some aspects of the relationalist tradition, phenomenology circumvents the problem by refusing (or bracketing out) the distinction between subject and object. For Edmund Husserl, the only kind of being it is possible to posit is the kind of being which is intelligible to consciousness. Thus, consciousness cannot be separated from any notion of being, nor can being be considered in abstraction from consciousness. This means that space is at least relational insofar as it is always relative to consciousness.⁹ Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and following them in this regard, the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc

Nancy, take from this fundamental tenet of phenomenology the idea that there is something which precedes space, which is logically prior to it. This is what Nancy calls “le sens”, sense, which he describes as “the constitutive *sense* of the fact that there is world” (*Le Sens du monde* 55). In Nancy’s work sense constitutes, as it does for Heidegger, a kind of ground of existence, or of disclosure, the quality of what Husserl calls “being intelligible for consciousness”, which precedes language and signification proper, and in fact precedes and *exceeds* any specific instantiation of being in time and space. It is indeed the very condition of possibility for such instantiated being. Space is thus understood by Nancy in the following terms:

Il y a ainsi une spatialité originaire du sens, qui est une spatialité ou une spaciosité antérieure à toute distinction d’espace et de temps: et cette archi-spatialité est la forme matricielle ou transcendantale d’un *monde* (*Le Sens* 29).

The genealogy of this idea is helpfully traced by Ian James:

Nancy follows Heidegger [...] insofar as he confers an ontological status on the term *sens*, and thinks the being of a spatial world as an event of disclosure, which is logically prior to time and space as such, and which occurs as an opening or spacing of space. Nancy, like Heidegger, thinks *sens* as constitutive of the existence of the world, conferring upon this term a fundamental ontological status which, once again, situates it prior to the existence of language. Thus it is not that our human world has a meaning or *makes* sense, since for Nancy it only ever exists *as* sense (93).

For Heidegger, sense is also the ground of space, in that Cartesian space – consistent, measurable and abstractly considered – is secondary to what he calls “equipmental space”, the mode of *Dasein* in which proximity and distance are not literal, measurable properties, but functions of “readiness to hand”. For in *Being and Time*, Heidegger considers the primary mode of *Dasein* as one in which the object is a tool, to be encountered via manipulation towards a particular end, rather than being considered in abstraction. He states, “What is ready-to-hand in our everyday dealings has the character of *closeness*. [...] Every entity that is ‘to hand’ has a different closeness, which is not to be ascertained by measuring distances” (135). In this mode, *Dasein* does not consciously distinguish between self and thing; it is not a

question of the relation between a subject and its object, but of spatiality as an infinitely extensible network of relations which constitute a “world”. This mode of being in space, this “sense” in Nancy’s terms, is the condition of possibility for the coming into being of Cartesian space as well as time, and of all signification.

But what light might such phenomenological considerations shed on Twombly’s paintings of the early 1960s? I am not suggesting, of course, that Twombly’s sparse enactments of inscrutable forms of relationality are attempts at depicting a pre-Cartesian or Heideggerian ground of “equipmental space”. Such a space could clearly not be represented, least of all in the more or less two-dimensional form of a painting.¹⁰ Indeed, the nature of phenomenological “finitude” in these accounts means that a “coming-into-being of being”, which is how Nancy understands “sense” is not (yet) a being, and thus has no presence (*Le Sens* 35). It would be nonsensical to suggest that such a thing could be represented. We can think of the marks on Twombly’s canvases as objects – figural, graphic, linguistic, material, gestural, coloured – which the artist assembles. They are heterogeneous in nature, in that some signify or represent, others evoke, express, or are simply present, but what Twombly does with them tends precisely away from their treatment as “Zeuge”, as tools whose being is not distinguishable from the being of the agent who wields them. On the contrary, in decontextualising them, placing them in visual equivalents of quotation marks, Twombly brings words in particular into the estranged mode of “presence to hand” rather than unthinking “readiness to hand”, the former being the mode which considers, analyses and interprets its objects consciously *as* objects. Yet perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these figures vary and even oscillate in their status between the thingness of “readiness to hand” and the objecthood of “presence to hand”. Indeed, they seem at times like visual explorations of these different modes of being towards the world. The keys, codes, letters, measurements, tables and frames within the frame all gesture towards that Cartesian mode of relation in which the world is considered, contemplated and accounted for. But next to them

appear marks that seem incidental, haphazard and meaningless, like the by-products of non-signifying bodily gestures that simply co-opt matter in the service of their accomplishment. To return to Barthes's analogy, we might say that in Twombly's paintings of this period, there are trousers both hanging in the shop window to attract attention, and lying discarded and unconsidered on the teenager's floor. In this way, the paintings become a second-order reflection on the conditions of possibility of all representation, because they oscillate across a boundary between two mutually exclusive modes of relation to the world.

Another way of framing such an oscillation in phenomenological terms is via Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of "perceptual faith".¹¹ Like Heidegger's "readiness to hand", perceptual faith expresses a mode of being in the world which is instinctive rather than reflective, and which engages with the perceptual world as (and by virtue of being) an indistinguishable part of it. It is

en deçà de l'affirmation et de la négation, en deçà du jugement, – opinions critiques, opérations ultérieures, – notre expérience, plus vieille que toute opinion, d'habiter le monde par notre corps, la vérité par tout nous-même, sans qu'il y ait à choisir ni même à distinguer entre l'assurance de voir et celle de voir le vrai, parce qu'ils sont par principe une même chose, – foi donc, et non pas savoir, puisque le monde n'est pas ici séparé de notre prise sur lui, qu'il est, plutôt qu'affirmé, pris comme allant de soi, plutôt que dévoilé, non dissimulé, non réfuté (Merleau-Ponty 47-48).

Perceptual faith is thus distinguished from knowledge, in that it precedes the operations of knowledge, of truth and of judgement, relying only on our most fundamental, pre-reflective experience of being in the world.

In Merleau-Ponty's late work, his pursuit of a way of accounting for such an experience – and overcoming the dualisms of transcendental philosophy – leads him to develop the notion of flesh. Flesh is Merleau-Ponty's way of designating the materiality of embodied being and its continuity with the objects of its perceptions. The body perceives, but is at the same time perceived, touches and is touched; it is of the same substance – the same "flesh" – as the world that surrounds it:

S'il [le corps] touche et voit, ce n'est pas qu'il ait les visibles devant lui comme objets: ils sont autour de lui, ils entrent même dans son enceinte, ils sont en lui [...]. S'il les touche et les voit, c'est seulement que, étant de leur famille, visible et tangible lui-même, il use de son être comme d'un moyen pour participer au leur, [...] que le corps appartient à l'ordre des choses comme le monde est chair universelle (179).

The juxtaposition of signifying with non-signifying elements in Twombly's paintings of the early 60s seems to take account of this way of thinking about the world as flesh. It does so not by attempting to represent something like "universal flesh" – once again, such an undertaking would be impossible, since all representation is necessarily at one remove from the unreflective being of perceptual faith. Yet by bringing signifying elements into contact with what lies beyond their limits, the works gesture towards the mode of faith upon which knowledge is always layered. The layered texture of the works thus becomes an exploration of being between knowledge and faith, between body (or mind) and flesh. In the blackboard and Nini paintings moreover, the line itself both *is* and represents; it stands for a non-reflective, gestural bodily presence, but one that always threatens to turn into something else, namely writing. And, while they share many features, it is on this question of presence that Nancy's account diverges from that of Merleau-Ponty in a way that seems particularly pertinent to Twombly's work.

Touch is central to Merleau-Ponty's conception of flesh in *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, which contains the famous account of one hand touching the other and the intertwining of the sensible and the sensate as chiasmus, or as two sides of the same coin (183-186). But as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, Merleau-Ponty's use of touch belongs to a long philosophical tradition (notably in France) in which touch or the haptic is co-opted to bolster an account of vision that tends, after Descartes, towards the idealist and the disembodied (Derrida 138-145). Touch in this tradition is taken as an unproblematical index of presence and unmediated contact. Seen in this light, Merleau-Ponty's recourse to the image of the hands touching turns out to be a way of suggesting the immediacy of all perception (notably

vision), and emphasising its reversibility. For Nancy on the other hand, touch is a paradigm not of presence but of “spacing” and separation. In his account of touch as illuminated by the tradition of the “Noli me tangere” scene in painting, Nancy presents it as necessarily accompanied by separation or departure (“la partance”). He notes that in the Biblical account of the encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ outside his empty tomb, Christ’s rebuke to her, “do not touch me” is better translated from the original Greek as “do not try to hold on to me” (*Noli me tangere* 29). In this emblematic scene of an encounter with the other, then, touch cannot and must not become grasping, fixing or holding back. As such it would become sameness, identity, foreclosing the possibility of a relation between two bodies which may come together but must always also separate: “Le toucher, le retenir, ce serait adhérer à la présence immédiate, et de même que ce serait croire au toucher (croire à la présence du présent), ce serait manquer la partance selon laquelle la touche et la présence viennent à nous” (29). Touch is therefore, for Nancy, not an index of presence and proximity but a figure for the primary separation on which his notion of “sense” is founded.

If we return to the notion of sense as spaced, or spacing – in Nancy’s terms as “archi-spatialité” –, we find a further instance of this way of thinking about touch, and one that takes us back to Twombly. Insofar as this spatial quality of sense is “la forme matricielle ou transcendente d’un monde”, it the condition of possibility for conceiving of space in the way that a painting might. But the hand prints and finger-smears on paintings such as *Herodiade* and the two versions of the *School of Athens* (1961 and 1964) find an echo in Nancy’s account of the “primal scene” of art.¹² In an essay entitled “Peinture dans la grotte”, Nancy pictures the prehistoric human’s first gesture of image-making as one which paradoxically does not produce an image, only the conditions of possibility of the work of art:

Pour la première fois, il [l’homme] touche la paroi non pas comme un support, ni comme un obstacle ou comme un appui, mais comme un lieu, si l’on peut toucher un lieu. Seulement comme un lieu où laisser advenir quelque chose de l’être interrompu, de son étrangeté. La paroi rocheuse se fait seulement spacieuse: événement de la dimension et du trait, de l’écartement et de l’isolement d’une

zone qui n'est ni un territoire de vie, ni une région de l'univers, mais un espace où laisser venir, venant de nulle part et tournée vers nulle part, toute la présence du monde. (*Les Muses*, 128)

The first image is the negative hand print on the cave wall, but Nancy sites the origin of art before even this image comes into being. The image is simply a record of this touch that spaces, separates and presents. From this perspective, Twombly's (quite considered) hand prints are less indices of a spontaneous, expressionist gestural encounter with the painting surface than a kind of measuring of the space opened up for representation. Set alongside the digits and geometrical figures in a painting like *Herodiade*, they become part of that dialogue between sense and what it makes possible: measurable space, signification, conceptual thinking, representation, art.

Looked at in this way, the sparseness of Twombly's canvases takes on a particular significance. Empty space here is not in itself a kind of phenomenological "ground". Its very dominance of the paintings invites us to consider it as an active element of the composition rather than simply a neutral background against which the various figures can stand out. As such we might see it as standing – perhaps as a kind of allegory – for the primary spatialisation described by Nancy, which is the ground and condition of possibility of meaning, and of art. Citing a comment made by Twombly in an interview with David Sylvester,¹³ Richard Shiff observes,

Twombly's rarefied surfaces [...] show how ideas and feelings can be projected on "atmosphere"; the various graphic markings do not so much represent as constitute ideas which, newly arrived, belong to the artist. The accommodating ground of a Twombly painting is its atmosphere, the next-to-nothing that becomes an enabling support for ideas and feelings that fuse in a double sense: first, by forming a concentrated bond; then, by igniting [...] (24-25).

And perhaps this idea of ground as "atmosphere" is how Twombly might point us towards a phenomenology of sense, conceived in the way I have suggested. The paintings investigate signification by exploring its boundaries, the places where it comes up against its non-signifying others: movements, energies, sensations, abstractions. This is one way of

understanding how they “form relationships by contiguity” (Shiff 11). But in doing so, they take as their object signification *itself* as a mode of relating to the world, and it is one mode among many others. These paintings investigate thinking alongside feeling, meaning and seeing as secondary modes of a more fundamental being in the world – of something like *Dasein* in a world of sense.

¹ Images of works from both these series can be seen on the artist’s website:

http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_gallery.htm. Accessed 31 December 2015.

² Cole Swensen, writing on Twombly amongst others, extends the claim beyond illegible handwriting, arguing that in contemporary society handwriting of all kinds offers valuable lessons about language, ambiguity and authority: “Type tells us that language is clear, uniform, and instantly decipherable, while handwriting functions as a visible metaphor and powerful reminder that language is never monosemantic, but always multivalent” (85).

³ The quotations are from Leo Castelli in an interview with Paul Cummings 18 June 1969 (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-leo-castelli-12370>, accessed 31 December 2015) and from Robert Pincus-Witten’s catalogue essay cited above.

⁴ This painting is a private collection. An image can be seen at <http://abstractartist.org/cy-twombly/>. Accessed 31 December 2015.

⁵ Emphasis mine. The text appears on the painting as “I have Known The NAKEDNESS of my Scattered Dreams”.

⁶ The two parts of *The Return from Parnassus* are in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and images can be seen on its website:

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/186049> and

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/186050>. Accessed 31 December 2015.

⁷ A vivid description by Kirk Varnedoe of Twombly's method in this period exemplifies the standard equation of hand-applied paint with spontaneity as well as with a primordial directness and even sincerity: "For Twombly, the application of the hand (a primordial index of direct engagement with art, from prehistory through Miró and Pollock) had a particular set of pragmatic purposes, side effects, and connotations. Clutching gobs of oil pigment let him work more continuously, uninterrupted by the need to 'reload' a brush, and it put him, literally, in closer touch with the picture." (26).

⁸ For a useful introduction to these debates, see Nick Huggett and Carl Hoefer, "Absolute and Relational Theories of Space and Motion." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition). Ed. Edward N. Zalta:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/spacetime-theories/>. Accessed 31 December 2015.

⁹ See Husserl, especially Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Heidegger himself, in his commentaries on Kant, observes that the very term "ground" is problematic because "underlying as a ground cannot mean lying behind or in the background – for this would again be something extant. This is a distinctive term for Kant and means functioning as ground, i.e., making possible that things as such show themselves and appear as extant here, there, now, and then" (*Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* 79).

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty's work has tended to dominate phenomenological accounts of painting, not least because he wrote extensively on the subject himself. The most substantial recent engagement with Twombly in the light of Merleau-Ponty's work is chapter 5 of Rajiv Kaushik's *Art, Language and Figure in Merleau-Ponty: Excursions in Hyper-Dialectic*.

London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Kaushik's analysis focuses on Merleau-Ponty's theory of language, a topic with which there is not scope to engage here.

¹² The scenario he imagines is a "primal scene" in both Freudian senses: it is the moment of origin of art, but one which we can only ever reconstruct retrospectively as a fantasy.

¹³ The quotation reads as follows: "Painting is [...] fusing of ideas, fusing of feelings, fusing projected on atmosphere." Twombly "Interview" in David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2001; 181, cited in Schiff, 24.

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