Cy Twombly's 'Ferragosto' Series

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Elizabeth J. Trapp

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This thesis titled
Cy Twombly's 'Ferragosto' Series

by
ELIZABETH J. TRAPP

has been approved for
the School of Art
and the College of Fine Arts by

__________________________

Jaleh Mansoor
Assistant Professor of Art

__________________________

Charles A. McWeeny
Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT

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Within current scholarship Cy Twombly is examined in terms of the American abstract expressionist movement he derives from, and not within the European context under which his most groundbreaking works were created. This thesis situates Twombly within the fragmented Europe he experienced upon moving to Rome in 1957, and the Post World War II problem-set he was forced to confront. In 1961 Twombly created his most pivotal series of paintings entitled Ferragosto. Based on the transformed Pagan to Roman Catholic holiday, Twombly dismantles the history of painting within this five-part series. Twombly attacks the conception of ‘time’ and therefore embeds the Ferragosto series within history, the evolutionary quality of these canvases acts as evidence of this attack. Often equated to Jackson Pollock vis-à-vis his gesture, Twombly confronts the monochrome and the dichotomy between absence and excess that surfaces in the paintings of his European contemporaries Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Jaleh Mansoor

Assistant Professor of Art
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INTRODUCTION: CY TWOMBLY’S ‘FERRAGOSTO’ SERIES

In the study of American Abstract Expressionism, Cy Twombly is often overlooked. Although gaining popularity in recent years, paintings created during his heyday (the late 1950’s to early 60’s) have existed in the shadows of the more ‘popular’ painters of his time, including Jackson Pollock, and Robert Rauschenberg. Part of the reason Twombly is not often included in conversations regarding American abstract expressionist painting is due to his move to Rome in 1957, and the expatriate status he maintained in Italy. Current scholarship on Twombly focuses on the Blackboard paintings done in New York, just before his move to Rome. The shift in his painting aesthetic upon moving to Rome, along with his new regard for ancient history, is often overlooked. The most pivotal series of paintings in his career, Twombly’s 1961 Ferragosto series, is nearly eliminated from scholarship.

This thesis was motivated by my own interest in Post-War European painting, and Twombly’s sensitivity to both the American abstract expressionists and the ‘problem’ of post-war painting in Europe. The ‘problem’ briefly is described as a break from pre-war painting in a necessity to come to terms with recent history, and a response to the collective trauma experienced by a fractured Europe during and after World War II. I chose to work with the Ferragosto series because it marks a major shift within Twombly’s vast oeuvre, both formally and conceptually. An examination of the Ferragosto series is necessary in understanding the link between American abstract expressionism and Post-War European art, as well as understanding Twombly’s oeuvre.
This thesis posits the evolution from the first to last canvas in Cy Twombly’s five part *Ferragosto* series. This suggests that Twombly’s canvases contain a time-based quality and is necessary in understanding Twombly’s attack on ‘presence’. Abstract Expressionism is predicated on the ‘presence’ of the artist. Jackson Pollock’s use of psychoanalysis in order to reach a realm of universal ‘freedom’ within his painting equates to a search for the presence of the artist. The fractured element of time is innate in the framework of the paintings’ trajectory, and not, as scholars have argued, specific to Twombly’s handwritten scrawl, as evidenced in the Blackboard paintings. Twombly’s attack on presence translates to an attack on the history of art, and is reinforced by his multiple references to the ancient past. Simultaneously, Twombly situates his canvases in the slippage between absence and excess. This slippage is evidenced on the surfaces that grow from the first canvas to the fifth, from a confetti-like white ground, to a hemorrhage of paint. The *Ferragosto* series acts as Twombly’s most pivotal group of works because of its deconstruction of the history of art from within the boundaries of traditional painting.

Throughout this thesis I pose questions concerning the *Ferragosto* series, and let the document unfold in response to them: How does Twombly address the ancient past within this series, and what is the motivation for this? In trading the loaded paintbrush for his gloved hand, how does Twombly dismantle the Abstract Expressionist notion of the artist as ‘individual genius’, the very background he derives from? How does Twombly react to both Post-War Europe and American abstract expressionism? Why is history painting obsolete in the 1960’s, and how does Twombly mark a return to it?
turn, how does Twombly come to deconstruct the history of painting from within the binds of the canvas, and why is this necessary?

The methodologies of historicism and post-structuralism are rarely linked, yet in this thesis they are imbricated. Within the framework of the *Ferragosto* series, Twombly insists on a historical reading; Ferragosto is the Roman holiday that dates back centuries, predating the development of the Roman Catholic Church. Even further, Twombly recalls history in numerous, smaller details on the surface of his canvases, namely, his handprint. This use of the handprint sets Twombly’s series back even further, to the prehistoric cave paintings in which the handprint was used as an indexical mark to announce ‘I was here’. Yet, given the framework out of which Twombly emerged, the abstract expressionists to whom ‘presence’ was a structural pillar; Twombly launches a direct attack on the conception of presence by use of the handprint. Therefore, Post-structuralism becomes an indispensable tool with which to rethink the *Ferragosto* series. Yve-Alain Bois defines post-structuralism in the introduction to the book that frames the history of modernism, post modernism, and anti modernism, *Art Since 1900*. Post-structuralism is growing out of, “a refusal to grant structuralism its premise that each system is autonomous, with rules and operations that begin and end within the boundaries of that system.”¹ Cy Twombly began to operate in a post-structuralist manner with his Blackboard paintings, conceptualizing writing that is unreadable. Yet, within the

¹ Yve-Alain Bois “Poststructuralism and Deconstruction,” in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Hal, Foster et al. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 40.
*Ferragosto* series he undoes the structure of history, both of linear history and the history of painting.

Current scholarship on Twombly misses the mark with the reading of the evolutionary quality of Twombly’s *Ferragosto* series, and all together lacks focus in utilizing this series as the central figure in which to discuss Twombly’s oeuvre. Among the scholars who have written on Twombly the strongest have focused on the framework of Twombly’s ‘pre-*Ferragosto*’ works and namely his ‘graffito.’ This thesis appropriates and situates scholarship on the *Ferragosto* series within this constantly shifting oeuvre.

Rosalind Krauss, Professor of Art History at Columbia University, and founding editor of the journal *October,* situates her discussion on Twombly within the framework set forth by Roland Barthes, the French Structuralist who was most concerned with Twombly’s form of mark-making, his graffito. Krauss elaborates on Barthes ‘gestural’ discussion and concretizes it with her assumption of the ‘graffito’ marking the past. This thesis departs from both Krauss and Barthes. Krauss alludes to the Derridian notion of the ‘performative.’ However, Krauss does not draw into this a discussion of the Derridian ‘veil’, one vital in reading the formless and eruptive gesture that builds strength through each of the *Ferragosto*’s. Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, Yve-Alain Bois, Professor of the History of Art at Harvard University, and Nicholas Cullinan, co-curator of the 2008 exhibition at the Tate Modern entitled, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*; present essays on Twombly in which I

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differentiate my scholarship in numerous incalculable ways. This differentiation is presented in the body of the thesis and boils down the underlying task of reading Twombly’s *Ferragosto* series as evolutionary, and as the pivotal work in his oeuvre.

The first chapter sets up the two most diametrically opposed canvases, *Ferragosto’s I* and *V*. This opposition sets the framework for the argument of this thesis; the evolutionary quality innate within these paintings that act as the penultimate series in Twombly’s oeuvre, while setting him apart from his contemporaries. In the early *Ferragosto* canvases, it is evident Twombly was confronting the problematic notion of ‘whiteness’; this notion was conceptualized by Mallarmé, the French poet who sought to deconstruct language. Twombly wrote very little on his own work, but in a 1957 statement, he admitted to reading Mallarmé, and relates the whiteness of his canvas to Mallarmé’s *symbolic whiteness*. Chapter 1 of my thesis will establish the post-structural framework I’ll be using to examine Twombly’s work. Therefore, I focus on the project of Jacques Derrida, the 20th Century French philosopher who sought to deconstruct philosophy from within its own framework, took his cue from, and worked alongside Mallarmé’s project. Derrida focused primarily on literature and philosophy, however, with a discussion on his essay, *The Double Session*, I posit a relation with Twombly’s *Ferragosto* series. This presents the Derridian term ‘veil’, or ‘hymen’. For Derrida, these terms perform two sides of the white surface, the actuality of the surface (the white page in which one marks) and the potentiality of the surface (the conception that it contains *everything, already*). Twombly eradicates both sides of the veil, and as discussed in Chapter 3, will rupture it.
Chapter 1 places Twombly’s work within the ‘school’ of American abstract expressionism and explores his need to differentiate himself from Jackson Pollock. Twombly adheres to the abstract expressionist conception of the canvas as an, ‘arena in which to act’ as presented by Harold Rosenberg, in allowing the surface to exist as a space for action. The paint is a residue of an action, and for Twombly, assumes the absence of the painter. Yet as Krauss argues, pushing the discussion further, Twombly recodes the Pollockian mark as ‘graffiti’. Yet I also suggest that Twombly has more to do with a discussion on Italian artist Lucio Fontana and his project of absence and presence than Pollock.

Chapter 2 utilizes Ferragosto’s II and IV to track the emergence of Twombly’s handprint on the surface of the canvas. Twombly’s use of the handprint reveals the indebtedness to time and history that is elemental within the Ferragosto series; by the use of his handprint, Twombly recalls centuries of mark making back to the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux. This chapter examines Twombly as a history painter; but his version of history painting is anything but the grand, canonized works of Jacques-Louis David, instead Twombly’s canvases unravel history in numerous, smaller ways. The subject contains the history for Twombly; the painting memorializes it, while the formless anti-gesture simultaneously undoes it. This formless “gesture” of Twombly formally recalls the Baroque period of painting; the colors begin to erupt in fleshy masses in the later Ferragosto’s and bursting, all-over ornamental evocation of Twombly’s gesture dominates the canvas. An extensive study of Twombly’s gesture is undertaken in Chapter 2 and is set forth by Roland Barthes reading of Twombly’s mark as ‘gauche’ or
'left handed’. This importance of the hand gains momentum with a discussion of Twombly’s trips to North Africa, where he build an awareness on the division of the use of left hand against the use of the right. The heart of the argument within this chapter commences with a Lacanian and corporal treatment of the paint linked with an examination of ancient mark making. By setting his paint-covered, gloved hand on the surface of the canvas, Twombly recalls a section of mark making from an ancient wall. He therefore situates the Ferragosto canvases within the immediacy of history, and these surfaces exist in a state of simultaneous erasure and production, absence and excess.

The final chapter situates Ferragosto’s III and V in dialogue with the conception of absence and excess, one that has been building over the course of this study. Twombly’s use of color and eruption of form in Ferragosto V illustrates a psychological disconnect occurring formally; color exists outside of form. This disconnect also occurs within the series itself, it marks the transition from the early Ferragosto canvases and the split that occurs within Ferragosto III; the canvases before it had been predicated on absence, while surfaces IV and V are now predicated on excess. The same dichotomy, or set of opposing terms, that dominates the surface of Twombly’s canvases, simultaneously dominates the construction of the series. I argue, in this chapter, the ultimate dismantling of such dichotomies, most dominantly that between absence and excess, Twombly insists, in his very approach to painting, to be completely unclassifiable. In the last canvas he ruptures the Derridian veil, he cites and dismantles history, and collapses the dichotomy of absence and excess; Twombly forces the Ferragosto series to exist in a cleavage of time.
Little on Twombly’s personal history is accounted for within this thesis; I divulge what is necessary but am more interested in his relationships with other painters, as well as the experience of the American painter moving to Rome. I introduce how Twombly fits in with the American abstract expressionist scene. Twombly’s formal art practice began in Boston at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where he was introduced to Northern European Painting, but his time there was short-lived and he traded Boston for New York. His practice grew in New York at the Art Students League, and most notably, he developed a friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, an artist similarly emerging from and reacting to American abstract expressionism, who would later prove to be a great influence on Twombly. On the word of Rauschenberg, Twombly headed to North Carolina in 1951 to study at Black Mountain College. It was at Black Mountain where Twombly’s artistic development was nurtured, and working under artists such as Ben Shahn and Robert Motherwell, Twombly developed his abstract, instinctive, and painterly gesture. Aside from both the formal and informal training Twombly was receiving from the Abstract Expressionist ‘hotbed’ that was Black Mountain College, every American painter was soon left to distinguish himself against Jackson Pollock’s all-over, and ejaculatory gesture. This is where Twombly’s Blackboard paintings of the mid 1950’s came into play; on these surfaces, Twombly’s looping gesture reflects something similar to handwriting, although impossible to distinguish, it is often times recognized as

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5 Ibid., 13.
an ancient form of graffiti. The graffito was Twombly’s reaction to Jackson Pollock’s gesture.
CHAPTER 1: FERRAGOSTO I AND FERRAGOSTO V

The reality of whiteness may exist in the duality of sensation (as the multiple anxiety of desire and fear).

Whiteness can be the classic state of the intellect, or a neo-romantic area of remembrance – or as the symbolic whiteness of Mallarmé.

The exact implication may never be analyzed, but in that it persists as the landscape of my actions, it must imply more than selection.

One is a reflection of meaning. So that the action must continually bear out the realization of existence. Therefore the act is the primary sensation.6

-- Cy Twombly, 19577

Cy Twombly already notes the dominance of ‘whiteness’ on surface of his paintings as an innate quality that will simultaneously haunt and define his work and that of the twentieth century. Educated at Black Mountain College, an institution acting as incubation center for American abstract expressionists in the 1950’s, Twombly developed a close kinship with fellow abstract expressionist painter Robert Rauschenberg. The influence of this friendship was immense on Twombly’s work, perhaps sprouting from their travels together to the site notable as having the most effect on Twombly’s work:

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7 In a rare statement about his own work, this statement was published in 1957 in the August-September issues of L’Esperienza and is republished in Varnedoe’s book for MOMA.
the ancient city of Pompeii. Shortly after this excursion, Twombly found himself
displaced in the Post World War II European art scene; while living in Italy he had to
come to terms with the problem of the activation of the ground and the monochrome as
declared by artists such as Manzoni or Yves Klein.

In 1961, shortly after a series of breakthrough paintings (including his famous *The
Italians*) Twombly produced his most pivotal series of works, the *Ferragosto* paintings.
Twombly cites two things in this series: the centuries old graffiti scrawled on the walls
of Pompeii, and the wild, masturbatory gesture of Jackson Pollock (an American abstract
expressionist painter prominent in the 1950’s). By citing these ‘situations’, Twombly
both dismantles the history of art, and mobilizes the ‘Mallarmean’ or ‘Derridian’ white
page. By doing this, Twombly eradicates the dominance of the ‘white page’, the
overriding Mallarmean/Derridan concept; in *Ferragosto I* Twombly fully activates the
white surface. Roland Barthes, a French theorist who was particularly interested in the
white space and gesture of Cy Twombly’s works, in the late 1970’s explained Twombly’s
surfaces as ‘repositories for all writing,’ yet, Barthes fails to take into account the
evolutionary quality of Twombly’s paintings. Here, I seek to dismantle current discourse
of Twombly’s surfaces as being *always already inscribed* and reveal that in the
development from the first to the fifth part of his 1961 *Ferragosto* series Twombly
evolves to mobilize the Derridian white surface, and moves from concretizing his gesture
within the medium of paint allowing the white surface to be fully dynamized.
Reading the White Space

_The white spaces take on importance, are initially striking; ordinarily versification required them around like silence...I do not transgress this measure, only disperse it. The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws, accepting the succession of others._

--Stephane Mallarmé, “Preface” to Un coup de des

Twombly cited in his 1957 personal statement, the importance of the white space of the image, and the influence that the poetry of Mallarmé had on his work. For Mallarmé, the white space of the page no longer lingers neutrally as it has for ages; it begins now to peak through the lines of script as a faint image, it begins to oscillate between figure and ground. The white page asserts itself in the slippage of what is ‘real’ (i.e. the text on the page) and what contains the ability to assert everything as ‘real’ (i.e. the space of the page itself). Mallarmé, a 19th Century French poet, sought to deconstruct the French language and in turn determined that the white page itself, the object on which the poet writes, is not a neutral space. In his poem Un Coup de des, Mallarmé sets importance on the syntax of the words, the musical qualities, and the sounds of the words that may reference other words. For Mallarmé, the importance lies less in the concept than in the aforementioned vocal conditions of the words. Un Coup de des, defines this

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notion of the syntax and even further defines the dominance of the white space of the page by arranging the words in such a particular manner, that the possibility exists of switching the order of the words around, of giving pause when vast white space dominates. Even more so, this ability to read ‘out of order’ both undermines the importance of the concept of the word or phrase, and gives flexibility to the notion of authorship as well as disseminating the hierarchical structure language is build upon.

Jacques Derrida a 20th century French philosopher, known for his work of deconstruction, mobilized the Mallarmean white page in order to deconstruct philosophy. For Mallarmé to deconstruct the French language he first used it; he eroded the structure of language by using its own tools (i.e. syntax, sentence structure, composition) to prove flaws. Derrida responds to Mallarmé by asserting that no white page is ever neutral, it always already contains everything. It has been assumed from time immemorial the blank page is pure, receptive, awaiting the authors word; Derrida breathed life into the page by assuming the page, instead of containing nothing until the ‘word’ fell upon it, in fact, contains everything. The definition of everything, as every organic emotion, feeling, and human experience, every possibility of letter, word, language, or line combination to infinitum is already on the page. At the moment the first mark is laid upon the page, a violence occurs. This violence operates as both productive and destructive; productive in that this mark (i.e. the written word) will go on to

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9 Before continuing with this discussion of Derrida, let us make a working definition for deconstruction in relation to Derrida. Deconstruction: To ‘undo’ from within the frame, or, to us the very structure itself (i.e. language) to unravel the structure, i.e. Mallarmé undoing language (overriding the hierarchical structure of it) by using the tools of language (i.e. the syntax, the arrangement, the page).
regenerate itself vis-à-vis the concept of the book. The violence, although producing a ‘readability’ of the page, and marking it as a battleground for thought, is destructive in that the everything that once existed on it, is now silenced. The mark on the page becomes the figure resting on a ground; Derrida argues there are then three spaces of the page, the figure, ground, and the space between. He terms this concept of the ‘space between’ as spacing. The concept of the activated white space will always be an undercurrent in Derrida’s work, for him this space is the virginal veil, the hymen.

Twombly soon comes to erupt the virginal veil of the canvas.

Evidence of the Artists Body

The first painting in Twombly’s Ferragosto series is largely dominated by white space (fig. 1). Even the gesture is a delicate, nervous energy in graphite; pockets of light flesh tones scatter across the surface like confetti. Images drawn on the surface begin to reveal themselves as shapes of penises, testicles, and breasts, but it seems to be the ‘blankness’ of the white space that dominates any gesture, or any imagery. Acting as the faintest precursor to the remaining parts of the series, a small dab of dark brown paint reveals a human manipulation. It looks as though Twombly has used his fingers to smear the paint, and this only alludes to the incorporation of the artists body within the work; one that will become ever so evident in the fifth part of this series. Kirk Varnedoe explains of Twombly’s work, an insistence of the use of the hand:

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 put him, literally, in closer touch with the picture.\textsuperscript{10}

Varnedoe cites the closeness, or intimate quality Twombly has with his work. The uninterrupted quality Varnedoe speaks of is evident as Twombly mentions in his 1957 personal statement, “Therefore, the act is the primary sensation.”\textsuperscript{11} Twombly’s intimate quality of \textit{Ferragosto I} lies in the ever so quiet shifting of the ground. The graphite presses down into the fabric of the canvas giving way to a horizontal reading, yet, in other areas of the surface the paint begins to drip down the canvas as if it were set vertically.\textsuperscript{12} The suggestion of fingerprints smudged in brown, pulling down across the surface reveals a tension of space, and horizontality is in dialogue with verticality.

\textit{Ferragosto V} (fig. 5) is an eruption of the medium itself, the canvas bears a certain quality of heaviness, and the airy and ethereal paintings are but a trace. The medium no longer dominates the white space of the image as it had in \textit{Ferragosto I} (fig. 1), instead the medium dominates the surface as though the white space never existed, and any question of horizontality has disappeared. It is almost as though Twombly was pulling paint down across the surface of \textit{Ferragosto V}. The light gesture inscribed in pencil from \textit{Ferragosto I} is now replaced with a violent action encapsulated in paint. Fingers smudge the flesh tones, and the small brown area seen in \textit{Ferragosto I}, containing just a few fingerprints, has turned into a full scene of bodily action. Central to

\textsuperscript{12} By using the term “horizontal reading” I mean to say, that which is on the ground. Painting traditionally exists in an upright, vertical, confrontational stance. Twombly alludes to the undercutting of this traditional thought.
the image is the fantastic eruption of flesh colors, Varnedoe describes this as, “The last two of this series, the last one in particular, have the kind of earthy fleshiness we associate with the Flemish Baroque, and carry uncharacteristic overtones of engorgement and satiation.”¹³ These colors ‘associated with the Flemish baroque’ are intense reds, fleshy peaches, and bodily browns. The paint is set thick on the canvas, and it is as though even the small areas of white space have malicious undertones; gesture has been laid down and rubbed out. Perhaps this is the influence of Twombly’s association with the ‘fabricated veil.’ This idea described as while oil paint added to the surface of the canvas in order to create the sense of white space, or a fabricated veil. However, it is as though in *Ferragosto V*, Twombly gives the white paint “a body of its own.”¹⁴ For it even seems to erupt from the very strands of the canvas, in a material generated orgy of simultaneous pleasure and violence.

Performance: Derrida’s ‘Double Session’

The dichotomy between pleasure and violence is a relationship Jacques Derrida will generously pick apart in his text *The Double Session*. He uses the story of Pierrot and Columbine to examine dichotomies not only between violence and pleasure, but also stage and the blank page, speech and writing, and ‘the real’.

The crime, the orgasm, is mimed doubly: the Mime plays the roles of both Pierrot and Columbine alternately. Here is simply the descriptive passage (…) in which the crime and the orgasm (what Bataille calls dying laughing and laughing [at] dying) take place such that in the final analysis what happens is nothing, no violence, no stigmata, no traces; the perfect crime in that it can be confused with only the heights of pleasure (…) obtainable only from a certain speculation. The

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¹⁴ Ibid., 31.
author indeed disappears since Pierrot also is (plays) Columbine and since at the end of the scene he dies, too, before the spectacle of Columbine, who suddenly comes to life and, insider her portrait, bursts out laughing. Here, then, is the apparent production of the spasm or, let us already hazard the word, of the hymen. \(^{15}\)

The Mime is the only character on stage; he is playing both Pierrot and Columbine, telling the audience a story that never seemed to happen. From the moment of this performance, time has collapsed itself. The Mime will set himself up on stage and play out the mimodrama, or the tale. The spectator must be aware that the actor is playing the part of Pierrot and simultaneously the part of Columbine, the crime has already happened, or has never happened at all. This is simply a representation of it. \(^{16}\) Derrida will go on to argue that because the mime plays both the past and present, he in turn creates a new sense of presence. The story of Pierrot and Columbine goes as such: Situated above a bed is the portrait of Pierrot’s wife Columbine, on the bed across the bedroom the “real” Columbine sleeps. Pierrot (perhaps sleepwalking, creating another form of presence) contemplates how he must kill his wife. He meanwhile paces back and forth, as in a deep mode of contemplation when he trips and strikes his foot. Soothing it he thinks, “Yes!” He will kill Columbine by tickling her feet, tickling her feet until she dies; the perfect crime leaves no trace. The mime, Pierrot, is on stage performing this wild array of a tale. Note that the crime has never really happened therefore the conception of the present moment is never allowable.


\(^{16}\) Representation: as in, re-presentation, or presenting anew.
Pierrot is on stage, his body painted white out of necessity, the necessity to appear neutral, blank, and receptive. He is simultaneously performing the part of Pierrot and Columbine. Pierrot is tickling and tickling Columbine’s feet and the Mime will act this climax through her “supreme spasm,” the orgasm taking over Columbine before her death. The crime and the orgasm happen simultaneously, and because in the end Columbine dies, so as does Pierrot. Derrida describes this as a “non violent crime” a sort of “masturbatory suicide” and goes on to say, “Pierrot is again overcome by trepidation and tickling, and finally he dies at the feet of his ‘Painted victim laughing still.” The portrait of Columbine remains. To read this even further in the Derridian sense of the white page containing everything, it must be noted the importance of the figure and the title of the Mime. A crime occurs on the bed, le lit, literature, the bed consumes Columbine upon death, they become one in the same, the white space of the page. Pierrot acts as the mark creating a struggle and ultimate violence upon the white page, ultimately his mark puts everything (i.e. Columbine) to death. But not to forget, the mime is painted white, and performing upon a stage. The very necessity of this task asks that the mime interchangeably play the part of both the white space, and the mark. Ferragosto and Différence

Ferragosto V mobilizes the Derridian term, différence. Proper French spelling of the term would replace the ‘a’ with ‘e’, différence. Yet the visibility of this change is only in the written word, vocally it sounds the same. Derrida uses this to display the hierarchy of speech over written language, and, because words may sound similar, but have very different meanings; he underscores the ‘double meaning’ that always has the
possibility of occurring in language, and simultaneously occurring between speech and the written document.\textsuperscript{17} In \textit{Ferragosto V}, the white space of the page is in a state of complete eruption, and the medium fully owns the previous expanse of white space in the early \textit{Ferragosto} paintings. Paint (in \textit{Ferragosto V}) is seeping from every strand of the canvas, the relationship between figure and ground, horizontality and verticality, gesture and rupture; all collapse into one vast oscillation of the medium receding into and excreting from the structure of the canvas. For Twombly, this status of \textit{différence} was not always already there in his previous works; within the five paintings of the \textit{Ferragosto} series, it begins to develop, then concretizes itself in the fifth painting.

In \textit{Ferragosto I} the dominance of white space alludes to the monochrome, and even more specifically, a ‘projection screen’ reading of it. Yet, because in \textit{Ferragosto I} the white space is delicately dominated by medium, there is already an interruption in the viewing; a doodle of the wandering eye perhaps. In the 1957 statement on his work, Twombly uses the first lines to recall the influence the monochrome had on his work, “The whiteness may exist in the duality of sensation,” but then he sets up the possibility of the projection screen reading of this whiteness, “The exact implication may never be analyzed, but in that it persists as the landscape of my actions, it must imply more than selection.” It is likely he was influence by Rauschenberg’s 1951 \textit{White Paintings} (fig. 9)\textsuperscript{18} in that they exist as the ‘landscape’ for ‘chance’ to occur. Rosalind Krauss explains


\textsuperscript{18} For further discussion on Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{White Paintings}, please see Branden Joseph’s essay entitled, \textit{White on White} (citation to follow). In this essay, Joseph
Rauschenberg’s White Paintings as meant to “attract fleeting, ambient impressions the way that Cage’s music opened itself to the noise of the audiences breathing or coughing.”\textsuperscript{19} The projection screen viewing of these White Paintings allows the painting to carry within itself a ‘landscape’ quality, but in the sense that it oscillates with the conditions of life. Dust particles may land on their surfaces, and they become vulnerable to the ‘impressions’ or nuances of, which construct experience. The white space of the ground vastly change for Twombly from dominance of white space in Ferragosto I to Ferragosto V; in the first, the spectator can only sense the smallest vibration of the tremor to come through the rest of the Ferragosto series.

Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism

For Twombly, the mode of action becomes the work, his experience with the painting, his body pressing into the canvas, his hand sliding through lumps of paint. He has described his paintings as ‘landscapes’ for his actions, and this more than adheres to the criticism of the time, coming from Twombly’s grounding in New York. Harold Rosenberg states of American Artists in his 1952 essay The American Action Painters, At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.\textsuperscript{20}


This arena (i.e. canvas) was a space for the medium to exhaust itself, and as I have said, the Ferragosto series situates itself within a slow-moving evolution that mounts until the final eruption in Ferragosto V. Perhaps no less important is it that Twombly’s canvases seem to catalogue the passage of time, yet not on a steady pendulum; like a metronome clicking away, beat by beat, until one has reached the future from the present, or the present from the past; but in a more explosive way. Twombly’s beginning Ferragosto canvas resembles matador within a ring, the few footsteps before the fight is about to begin. The silent stalking resembles a heartbeat, a few beats continue with only silence, only stillness. And it is as though, with exorbitant energy the stage is set again, the ring prepared, and the event has hit a crescendo. It seems that even the white space of Ferragosto V, is the set of a stage, the ring of the event, the bed of literature. The space of white resembles the face of a Mime, the layer of suffocating make-up of white hiding the organicness of the human, the ‘purity’ of a neutral space in which the event is to occur. Twombly is in the ring, sparring with the history/trajectory of Painting.

Rosenberg is describes the reaction each abstract expressionist painter must experience when dealing with the work of Jackson Pollock, but Rosalind Krauss explores in more detail Twombly’s stakes with abstract expressionist painting:

(Twombly) fixated on the drawing of Pollock’s dripped paintings, turning their looped skeins into the violent furrows dug by the sharp point of his pencils and other instruments into the pigment covering his canvases. Thus for Twombly the weapon against Abstract Expressionism’s autographic mark was not the strategy of transforming the spontaneous stroke into a “device” but of recoding the mark itself as a form of graffiti, which is to say, the anonymous trace of a kind of
criminal violation of the unspoiled surface, like so many declarations of the fact that “Kilroy was here.”

Krauss elegantly places Twombly’s work within the historical and social moment of the 1950’s and 60’s and the movement of abstract expressionism that was so popularly defined by its poster-child, Jackson Pollock (fig. 10). Notably, Pollock transitioned from the traditional concept that painting should be maintained on the wall and instead worked with the painting lying on the floor. This movement to horizontality was fueled by a desire for Pollock to reach a universal freedom within his painting that was only accessible through the unconscious, and this being ‘located’ in realms when the body lies horizontally. Jackson Pollock created a very different relationship with his canvases than Twombly. While Twombly pushed down on the surfaces with graphite, smeared clumps of paint with his hands to create a gesture; Pollock allowed gravity and chance to affect the authorial mark of the artist. Pollock’s skeins of paint dripped and flung across the canvas restructured the function of the mark or gesture and created a visible and solid figure on ground. The strands of paint that define Pollock’s work sought a sense of authorship from the artist. Krauss determines this recoding of the mark achieved by Twombly eliminates the structure of authorship. The author has left his trace, has violated the surface, and yet remains completely and utterly anonymous.

22 This thesis will use Number 1 (Lavender Mist) painted in 1950, as an example of Jackson Pollock’s work.
23 It is noted that Pollock was practicing Jungian psychoanalysis, undoubtedly the horizontality of his paintings sought to reach a sense of ‘wholeness’ he only searched for within the Jungian practice.
Twombly’s Gesture

Twombly’s gesture recalls the act of writing. In *Ferragosto I*, Twombly recalls the fine rain of energy that moves across the space of his blackboard paintings, particularly *Paranorma* (fig. 6) 1955. Formally, these paintings appear to be sections removed from a schoolhouse blackboard, the constant, and fluid, repeating loops recall lessons in handwriting, while marks appear as though an eraser has wiped out parts of the scrawl. Twombly’s early blackboard works thus have a quality of simultaneous erasure and production. In the repetitive scrawl, these paintings recall the act of writing, but this language created is never wholly legible, because of this inability to read the gesture, Twombly refuses the reader access to anything beyond the surface of the painting itself.

Twombly mobilizes the gesture in *Ferragosto I* by forcing it to exist in the cleavage between language and image; this is even more elegantly displayed in Twombly’s painting *The Italians* (fig. 7), completed in January 1961. By placing *Ferragosto I* and *The Italians* within the same framework, one can understand the rift between the readability of language and image that acts as an artery in Twombly’s work. In *The Italians* the delicate scrawl of gesture encapsulates the gentle “neutrality” of the surface, the images are just barely readable, nearly existing in step with the very grain of the canvas. The gesture recalls the graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, a series of marks (events) frozen in time. With the words “The Italians” and “Cy Twombly, Roma” scrawled legibly across the surface of *The Italians*, Twombly brings into question Jacques Derrida’s concept of the signature, and questions the power of language over image. For Derrida, language is the final mode in representation; in the history of mark
making, images came first. The conception of written language directly joined the sign and signifier, therefore creating a more direct plane of communication. Derrida and Twombly will seek to dismantle this conception within their own projects.

The small, concentrated marks of *Ferragosto I* recall Twombly’s personal history as a decoder in the army, a time when he would write in the dark of night, detached from any sense of consciousness, a constant, meandering scribble created by his bedside. Roland Barthes describes the surfaces of Twombly’s work as spaces containing scenes of writing at infinitum, it is not the viewer that will project his or her own image onto the work, but instead a space where anything has the possibility of being erected from the surface.\(^{24}\) *Ferragosto I* admits itself a static object, the pencil-mark gesture resembles the silent fury seen in the Blackboard paintings, but it remains a static image. It is as though *Ferragosto I* exists as a portion of wall with graffiti scrawled across it, weathering the affects of time. Circular marks of graphite form images more often seen scrawled on the walls of a bathroom stall rather than adorning the walls of the gallery or museum. Penises, testicles, breasts, and curious pea-pod shapes crop up in infinitum; the marks appear so child-like, yet they remain utterly unrepeatable.

On certain surfaces of TW’s there is nothing written, and yet these surfaces seem to be the repository of all writing. Just as Chinese writing is born, we are told, from the tiny cracks of an overheated tortoiseshell, so what appears to be writing in TW’s work is born from the surface itself. No surface, wherever we consider

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\(^{24}\) I am referring to Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, in which the viewer must project his or her own experience on the work; the surface is left open for chance. This is an operative method of the Derridian blank page, however different from Barthes mobilizing the blank page as a repository for all writing. Less the space for chance, and more set on a pre-structured matrix of language.
it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal, set in motion by some accident.\(^{25}\)

Roland Barthes suggests that for Twombly (referred to as TW by Barthes) the surface of his work is always, already activated. The concept of the page acting as a ‘repository for all writing’ evolves from Jacques Derrida, whose work on deconstruction asserts the philosopher’s blank page already contains *everything*. ‘Repository for all writing’ also refers to graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, a site of specificity with extreme influence on Twombly, gestures scrawled on the wall in or before 79 AD with their destiny to be frozen in time. The site of Pompeii acts as a simultaneous existence of past, present, future; collapsed by the frame of linear time. By citing the ancient mark, Twombly allows the spectator the possibility of reading beyond the surface of the canvas.

**The Impossibility of the Neutral Surface**

Roland Barthes again cites Derrida by announcing the surface as a non-virginal surface; claiming the surface of the paper or canvas already contains *everything*. To liken this to the production of language (a practice Derrida relies upon) would be to say that every organic or non material thought, emotion, person, event, etc. must explained, described, brought to existence in the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, already a violent event, and infused with the possibility of even greater violence when exposed to the problematic notion of translation.\(^{26}\) The concept of the virginal/non virginal surface

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\(^{26}\) This violence of the matrix of language will be explored later in this essay in reference to Twombly’s scrawl in *The Italians / Ferragosto I* and his necessity to situate his work on (or within) the matrix of language. Please reference Jacques Derrida’s text *Signature Event Context*. 
legitimates Derrida’s invagination of the sheet of paper acting as the receptor to the violence of the mark. Often noted as the *veil*, the *hymen*, Derrida will assert to be an engendered surface to the blank page. It is the receiver, the violated, the cut, the partner that is always to be lacking, yet in a simultaneous state of excess.

The grain of the canvas shows through, the paper is blotched, the ends roughened. Barthes departs from the direct dialect with Derrida and claims the canvas or paper as not only not neutral, but the possibility of the first mark cast upon the page (that Derrida will say wills it to silence) is now impossible. The existence of the canvas or paper as an object already dislocates it from its origin, which is to say the violence of the first mark has already happened by these small details (i.e., weave of the canvas, curled surface of the paper) that are simple occurrences in the tremors of time. Barthes brings Twombly’s paintings to bear in the realm of language and writing. Although there is a possibility for the surface to act as a repository for all writing, the surface itself is innately a painting, thus it can never be returned to the origin. To depart from writing, the ground in Twombly’s paintings incubates the gesture.

Roland Barthes misreads the evolutionary quality of the *Ferragosto* series. Twombly’s work shifts from the quiet sodality of *Ferragosto I* to an image of striking contrast in *Ferragosto V*. The *Ferragosto* series doesn’t act as a landscape one approaches all at once on a gallery wall, instead, each canvas operates as a new moment in time as if to climax with *Ferragosto V*. Both *Ferragosto’s I* and *V* act as capstones to an extraordinary series that both define Twombly’s oeuvre and grasp the problematic structure of modernist painting after World War II. The ‘problematic’ structure being the
impossibility for the body or ground to exist as a ‘whole’ within the frame of painting, it must exist in fragments.

Post-World War II European Painting and the Quest for Freedom of Space

Working in Post War Italy, Lucio Fontana erupts as a painter placed within the same moment in time as Twombly; dealing with the same set of circumstances in which to confront painting; both faced with the turmoil of the eruption of the ground. Productive in comparison, it is almost as though a family lineage can be drawn between Twombly’s Ferragosto V and Fontana’s Concetto spaziale, Fine di Dio, 1963 (fig. 11). Fontana’s canvas are covered in plastic-like pink paint, which is a color only alluding to commodity, mass-produced culture. The canvases are so wrapped up in excessiveness that is seems as though this conception of commodity is itself up for purchase.27 Even the fact that Fontana’s canvas rests on the template of an egg, conjures up thoughts of the Easter holiday so commodity driven, one asks oneself what an egg has to do with the event of the ‘rising of Christ’. Fontana achieves in Concetto spaziale, Fine di Dio the same ends that Twombly achieves in Ferragosto V. For Fontana, his pierced and punctured canvas marks the paradigm of absence/excess within the temperature of post war Europe. At the edges of each stroke (each puncture) the materiality of the canvas is

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27 Note that Fontana created many colors of these egg-like canvases, I have, in previous discussion, likened them to the ‘Birken Bag,’ that which sells for significantly more money than it is work, has a years long wait list, and is perhaps only a symbol of one’s status in one’s own commodity driven culture. Perhaps this is the most allusive example of the excessiveness within the culture of commodity.
bare to the viewer. Historically, the canvas has, until modernity, always attempted to
mask or disguise itself, continually asserting itself to be a window onto world.\textsuperscript{28}

Through the pierces of the canvas, one can see the wall (the supporting structure
of the institution) behind the canvas. Fontana’s constant necessity within the quest for
space; and perhaps through this, a quest for the necessity of new parameters for painting;
visually leaves one to believe in his assault of the canvas. It looks as though he has
attacked it with a jackhammer gone awry. The viewer is seeing the result of an event, the
event: Fontana attacking painting from within its own medium. The gashes formed by
the palette knife, the paintbrush: paintings own tools. \textit{Ferragosto V} reacts to many of the
same situations as \textit{Fine di Dio}. The scene at first looks as though an extraordinary
violence has occurred; the viewer realizes they are witness to the result of an event.
Twombly is looking for the same means to end as Fontana. Within the \textit{Ferragosto} series,
Twombly also necessitates new parameters for painting, and like Fontana, he searches
within the structure of the canvas. Yet, Twombly’s attack is launched in various, less
confrontational ways, by a simple touch to the canvas with his hand.\textsuperscript{29} For both Twombly
and Fontana, the quest for space, for excess, with the absence of the figure, embedded in
culture, the quiet beauty of the ground.

How does Twombly enable the freedom of the gesture by concretizing the stroke
in the medium or space of paint? This question needs to be visited again and again with
Twombly’s work. The \textit{Ferragosto} series frees itself in its purposiveness that bases itself

\textsuperscript{28} Let this ring back to Twombly’s masked, make-up ridden background of “white”
which sets the ground on \textit{Ferragosto V}.

\textsuperscript{29} The handprint is a discussion explored in great detail within the remainder of this
thesis, and in Chapter 2 in particular.
in its own ability to transcend. Twombly indebts himself to the ancient city of Pompeii, his paintings recalling graffiti on the walls; yet through the gesture, Twombly simultaneously situates his work in the past, and propels it through the future. Through the first of the *Ferragosto* series to the fifth, his gesture situates itself on both sides of the Derridian veil, that which fluctuates from the figure to the ground and back again. Embedding itself within the tradition of painting, Twombly, as Fontana does, uses the very tools of traditional painting to unravel it within the frame. His gestures cryptic, canvas gendered, the simultaneous recalling of the ancient past along with the current stake in the eruption of the ground.

*Ferragosto I* and *Ferragosto V* prove themselves the most spectacular comparison from Twombly’s pivotal series; yet there is more to learn. The question still remains on how he got from point A to point B, why the stillness of the canvas replaced with the eruption of the gesture? The fragility of his graphite strokes are so boldly replaced with the concretized gesture in thick, gobs of paint. Twombly pushes and pulls the boundaries of simultaneous absence and excess that reigned through post war painting, a dichotomy that so many others were left at odds with. Even at the start of modernity when Mallarmé was deconstructing the French language with *Un coup de dés*, it was only a precursor to what the artists of the post war generation were at odds with. Twombly pushes the limitations of representation by citing himself constantly in his works; his gesture recalls a language, yet it is an unperceivable one. His *signature*, this gesture, instead becomes a smear across the canvas; the signifier has been deprived of meaning. Twombly is present
within his work, yet this alludes to a certain kind of passive assertion; he is here, yet his trace remains.
CHAPTER 2: FERRAGOSTO II AND FERRAGOSTO IV: THE EMERGENCE OF THE HANDPRINT

In Roman history, Ferragosto marks the holiday in mid-August that was once a day to celebrate fertility and maturity, and to honor the gods. Eventually it was deemed by the Roman Catholic Church as a day to honor the assumption of the Virgin Mary; thus, ‘converting the profane into the sacred, pagan to Christian.’\(^{30}\) It is interesting that Cy Twombly chose such a subversive holiday as the title of what is arguably his most pivotal series of paintings. This leads one to ask the question: if Twombly directly cites a holiday that is so intertwined and buried within ancient Roman history, does he then enter his paintings into a direct dialogue within the powerful ancient civilization? Yet, in the 1960’s, history painting has been obsolete for some time, why employ a return? This chapter will seek to unravel and respond to these questions.

In his deconstruction of painting, Twombly returns to the conception of history painting in order to unravel it. He responds to the heroics and victors with formless smears of fleshy paint. Twombly addresses history not through the grand canvases memorializing events such as an artist like 18\(^{th}\) Century Revolutionary, Jacques-Louis David has created; but instead, Twombly uses his grand canvases with their flowing, formless gesture to cite history in numerous other ways. Twombly’s indebtedness to time lies within his gesture, in his linguistic references, and most notably, Twombly’s use of the handprint. Within this chapter, I will examine Twombly’s *Ferragosto II* and *Ferragosto IV* in terms of their indebtedness to time, temporality and history; and how

the appearance of Twombly’s handprint upholds these temporal qualities and in turn begins to unravel the history of art.

Cy Twombly created all five canvases of the *Ferragosto* series in August 1961 from his Roman Via Monserrato apartment. The oppressive heat of Rome in late summer creates a strange sense of abandonment on the streets as the civilians escape from the decaying city. Nicholas Cullinan, who co-curated a 2008 exhibition at the Tate Modern entitled, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, describes the conditions in an opening remark on his essay on Twombly’s *Ferragosto* Series, “August in Rome is suffocating. Oppressive heat makes bodies sweat and rubbish rot on the streets. Everything becomes overripe and instantly perishable.”³¹ It is as though one can smell the decay on Twombly’s *Ferragosto* paintings, as Twombly moved from the first to fifth canvas the decay simultaneously evolves and erupts. In *Ferragosto’s IV* (fig. 4) and *V* (fig. 5) the paint seems to exist in a constant state of liquefaction from and melting off the surface of the canvas. Once intact, whole, and crisp, in *Ferragosto’s I* (fig. 1) and *II* (fig. 2), the very ‘form’ of the bodily paint itself has turned formless in the mid-August heat in *Ferragosto’s III-V*. Aside from its evolutionary quality, a clear split is made between the second and third canvases, defined line and ‘order’ moving to scatological smears, and it is as though agitation from the heat had driven Twombly to near chaos.

A Fracture Within the Series

*Ferragosto IV* marks the moment within the *Ferragosto* series just before the complete eruption of the picture plane as described in *Ferragosto V*. The Baroque sense

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³¹ Ibid., 99.
of grandeur and formlessness haunt the large looping gestures, Twombly’s paintings evolve from the quiet ‘backdrop’ of the wall to the erupting, baroque excess. *Ferragosto IV* puts forward a severe color-shift from the first three of this series, perhaps acting as one testimony to the fracture occurring between these works. The canvas was seen before as a confetti-like scatter of dirty jokes that littered the surface, and the neutral, excretory pigment erupt in colors of pure flesh. In *Ferragosto IV*, what was brown is now fleshy, bloodied red; the previous undertones of tans and airy peaches from the first canvases in the *Ferragosto* series transform to the colors of embarrassed cheeks, blood rushing under the skin. Twombly hasn’t completely done away with his previous color palette utilized in the first three of the *Ferragosto’s*; he retains the dirtied, excretory gesture to an extent. It litters areas of the canvas where one’s eye may otherwise skim, bringing to light the formal qualities of dark against light creating a sense of depth on the level of the surface. The eruption of Twombly’s gesture forces the spectator to have a bodily experience with the painting, Twombly’s extreme use of his own hand in *Ferragosto IV* places the spectator directly in-scale with the surface. By engaging his body with the canvas, leaving an imprint of his gloved hand that is in scale with the viewer’s own body; Twombly gives the viewer a gesture which to recognize, and therefore develop a direct, bodily connection with the picture plane.

Now, instead of a backdrop, the spectator must approach the later paintings of this series as though they are living, breathing, and pulsating objects. Twombly’s own description of the act of painting adheres to the organicness of the object, “It’s like a nervous system. It’s not described, it’s happening. The feeling is going on with the task.
The line has a feeling, from a soft thing, a dreamy thing, to something hard, something arid, something lonely, something ending, something beginning.”

Breath seems to slip from the binds of the frame, and release through the fibers of the canvas. Twombly’s boundless gesture allows for breath, and his handprint bears the innate ‘mark’ of organicness, all that is bodily and alive is shown in his gesture. Twombly’s surfaces are large enough to physically overwhelm the spectator. When one approaches a canvas that is to scale with one’s own body, the object of the canvas itself is to be recognized as an organic being.

Use of the Hand

It has been recorded on numerous accounts that Twombly visited Morocco while traveling abroad with friend Robert Rauschenberg on a scholarship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1952-1953. Twombly’s visual problem set grew as a result of these trips, and in turn developed into Twombly’s direct confrontation with the process of painting. Cullinan describes the importance of the hand, and what is perhaps the beginning of Twombly’s awareness of the hand in the condition of mark making:

North Africa exposed Twombly, among other things, to a cultural construct of the division between the right and the left hand, with the right hand being preserved for eating and shaking hands, and the left hand reserved for unsavory functions such as wiping extremities including the backside and feet.

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33 Ibid., 235. As introduced by Nicholas Cullinan on page 99, and informed further in the detailed biographical entry in the appendix of this text.
34 Ibid., 99.
This passage will support Roland Barthes claims of Twombly’s urgency to draw in a manner deemed as *gauche* or “left-handed,” as well as Twombly’s use of the hand as a vehicle for mark making in ways that extend beyond the formal qualities. For Twombly, the use of the hand is psychological; it connotes a symptom of human nature, that hand that must be in control of the scatological smear. The hand that is always lacking, unrefined, unclean. Twombly was interested in this hand, the one that has lost its civility, or perhaps, never had it to begin with. This divide is one that will inform Twombly’s paintings and his execution of guttural marks.

Roland Barthes, who has written extensively on Twombly, joins the ‘missing link’ between Twombly’s response to the use of the hand as he experienced in North Africa, and the emergence of the handprint within the second canvas of his *Ferragosto* series. Barthes writes on the *gauche*:

The “gauche”… is a kind of blind man: he doesn’t quite see the direction, the *bearing* of his gestures; only his hand guides him, or that hand’s desire, not its instrumental aptitude; the eye is reason, evidence, empiricism, verisimilitude – everything which serves to control, to coordinate, to imitate; as an exclusive art of seeing, all our past painting has been subject to a repressive rationality.

Barthes suggests Twombly’s gesture is a kind of ‘automatic thought,’ as in the surrealist’s use of ‘automatic writing.’ In his 1924 Manifesto, André Breton defined

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36 Ibid., 163. Barthes continues to say, “In a certain sense, TW liberates painting from seeing; for the “gauche” (the “lefty”) undoes the link between hand and eye: he draws without light (as TW actually did, in the army).
Surrealism as: “Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought’s dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.”

Thus, the act of automatic writing was to exist outside the conscious, and to be detached from the realm of reason. This approach to writing is mobilized within Twombly’s earlier Blackboard paintings that seemed to gain velocity in the mid 1950’s, yet this doesn’t uphold through the Ferragosto series. Twombly’s work does recall a feeling of “blindness” within his graphite marks in the Ferragosto series, the scattered penises drawn in small, graphic traces, the graphite diagrammatic drawings that appear in Ferragosto II. But this is quickly replaced by the pure sense of his ‘hand [that] guides him,’ with the appearance of the handprint, straightforward, grazed up against the surface of the canvas on Ferragosto II and eventually yields to a full acknowledgment of the handprint-as-medium in Ferragosto IV. The handprint that, for Twombly, becomes a form of mark making in place of his brush, that traditional phallus the painter must use to scar the canvas. The handprint in turn creates a softer, more sensual and a more developed material connection with the surface. Graphite is replaced by the stroke of the hand, the pure, phenomenological engagement of the body and canvas. It is in this later painting when Twombly detaches completely from any sense of control or form and the small, diagrammatic drawings of penises are then replaced with an overwhelming announcement of the guiding hand. Twombly’s earlier Ferragosto surfaces are

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reminiscent of a bored schoolboy’s inattentive notes withholding still some sense of organization, while the later Ferragosto canvases maintain but a trace of the schoolboy order.

Implementation of the Handprint

It begins on the surface of Ferragosto II, the handprint reveals itself as a dirty smear; a formless gesture that contrives a sense of immediacy within the work as if to say, ‘Twombly was here’. As discussed in Chapter 1, the canvas is still dominated by white space just as in Ferragosto I, its immediate predecessor; but in the lower left corner the spectator gets a sense of furious painted strokes. Ferragosto II is littered with traces of graphite, drawings reminiscent of doodles that have been erased out, only to be drawn over again. Twombly then abandons the apparatus for his gloved hand, loaded with paint and dragged down the surface in earthly, fleshy brown pigment. It is as though Twombly’s necessity to have direct, bodily contact with the work is almost too much to handle, he must remove the sharp apparatus of the graphite stick. Twombly later says of his use of the hand as an apparatus with which to paint:

Paint in a sense is a certain infantile thing. I mean in the handling. I start out using a brush but then I can’t take the time because the idea doesn’t correspond, it gets stuck when the brush goes out of paint in a certain length of time. So I have

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38 It is well known Twombly used a glove while painting with his hands, and perhaps most beautifully stated by Leeman in his monograph on Twombly, “The relative avoidance of paint, at first for the simple reason that Twombly is not very keen on touching colours (especially viscous matter, like oil), may also be put down to the ‘Apollonian’ (albeit fundamentally expressive) classicism he cultivated a that period…” Leemen footnotes this information as deriving from a ‘conversation with the artist.’ Richard Leeman, “Baroque Profusion,” in Cy Twombly: A Monograph (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 126.
to go back and by then I might have lost the rest of it. So I take my hand and I do it.39

In this passage, Twombly displays his urgency to react to the sensorial experience of painting. The immediacy of the hand presents Twombly with a direct line of communication from his thought directly to the canvas. The brilliance is in his realization that the brush acts as a translator, and therefore insists on the possibility of mistranslation. Twombly then all but completely abandons the graphite for his gloved fingers in *Ferragosto IV*; a surface dominated by the handprint allowing for a sensation of fleshy, bodily unease. Minus a few abandon marks of graphite, which have, in the evolution of the *Ferragosto* series, unraveled in form; thick paint attempts to distinguish the dirty jokes of penises and testicles from the pure pigment, erupting from the weave of the canvas.

Bodily contact is just what Twombly was after.40 In an interview with David Sylvester Twombly explains his interest in the bodily brown paint and the psychological connection between children and painting.

This double image like the brown paint, it’s verbal. There’s a Jungian example of a small child. It’s based on the use of words, how you affect the child. The child is in the bathroom and the father gets very anxious. So he goes to the door and

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40 ‘During the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly were involved in producing art that emphasized bodily knowledge’; Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones and Simon Taylor, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Citation in regards to Nicholas Cullinan).
says “What are you making?” and she says “Four horses and a carriage”. She was making a sculpture. Because children have that.41

Twombly’s act of smearing paint across the surface of the canvas in a raw, scatological way reveres the infantile sense of painting that he so eagerly attempts to channel. Upon returning from his trip to Morocco, Twombly wanted to lose the refined skill of mark making, ‘he began to draw ‘as with his left hand’ in an effort to erase any trace of his academic training and regain access to a childlike spontaneity.’42 But, what was the purpose of this spontaneity? This derives from the unconscious, and visually from Twombly’s automatic writing as seen in his earlier, Blackboard paintings. The cursive scrawl in these works both holds to form and linguistic structure in the sense of its affinity to language; yet, it simultaneously denounces any further reading because the scrawls often fail to create comprehensible words. It is as though, in those early Blackboard paintings, Twombly couldn’t completely let go of form and structure.

Twombly, though, overcomes this ‘failure to create comprehensible words’ by utilizing the handprint; his purchase on the Derridian conception of the ‘Signature’, and one that is to be further discussed within this chapter.

Thick paint and formless gesture became Twombly’s vehicle for child-like spontaneity, and a way in which to embrace the ‘blindness of the hand.’ Ferragosto IV is almost completely overtaken with smears of paint, that bodily viscosity melting over the

canvas in the Roman heat.\(^{43}\) The strong fleshy colors leave a sense of rotting organicness; smears on the wall give way to a child-like scatological smear, or perhaps a more violent crime scene. The temporality these later canvases [Ferragosto’s IV and V] execute through their gesture allows one to think of the canvas giving way to the rotting garbage Cullinan cited to describe Rome in August; barely holding form together as an overwhelming stench and excretion of fluid overtake it. Ferragosto IV seems as though it is about to melt off the wall. But what situates these images even deeper within the historical space of time is Twombly’s hand; that gloved smear. This leads the way for a discussion of the index; the use of the hand announces in a direct way, Twombly \textit{was} here.

The Index of the Handprint

The handprint is the predominant indexical mark that announces within Twombly’s work, “I was here.” By applying paint directly from a gloved hand, a bodily interaction with the work is formed. Twombly’s ‘handprint’ appears near center of \textit{Ferragosto IV} and announces, to scale, a human body was here, you are here, and now you (the spectator) have something to grasp. By this use of the handprint, Twombly comments on the traditional idea of the artist as a recognized, singular, genius (i.e. Jackson Pollock) and sets up a dichotomy that both produces and erases authorship within the \textit{Ferragosto} series. In his essay \textit{Signature Event Context}, Jacques Derrida

\(^{43}\) In a June [3] 2008 interview with the UK Guardian, Cy Twombly talks with Tate Director, Nicholas Serota about the “Ferragosto Series,” in an article entitled \textit{I Work in Waves}, “They were done in Rome, when I had to stay there in August. I was completely crazy, out of my mind with [the] heat. Paint is something that I use with my hands and do all those tactile things…”

www.guardian.co.uk
claims the signature to be more powerful than the Being himself. The very concept of re/producing one’s own signature is a violent one.44 In the sense of legality, when one signs one’s name on a document, they are immediately announcing their presence as less important than the signature occupying the space of the page. This im/possibility of the few letters that construct one’s proper name that become more powerful than the person him or herself is violent. Derrida produces a brilliant discussion in Signature Event Context surfacing from within the context of the mobilization of the signature, or that is to say, this idea the signature will produce a future of its own, aside from the producer him or herself.

One writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent. The absence of the sender, the addressor, from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him and continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning (…)45

Looping, skeining, bound up in language; once the marks of the signature are detached from the writer, signature proceeds within a life of its own. The signature is always, already more powerful than the writer, him or herself. As Derrida argues, the event of writing exists because of absence, an acknowledged absence that assumes whether the writer is at present or not, they are to be assumed absent. The writer’s signature will become more powerful than their Being, and the mark of language, of pictogram, holds a hierarchy over the event. In his essay, Derrida elaborates on the concept laid forth by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, the16th Century French philosopher whom, in his essay

44 I say re/producing with intentionality. As meaning both producing and producing anew with each event.
Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines, discussed language and its effect on human sensation.

Derrida extracts a passage from Condillac’s Essai, in what can only be assumed to construct and deconstruct the simultaneous effects of presence and absence as present within the formation of written language.46

Imagination then will represent but the same images that they had already expressed by actions and words, and which had, from the beginnings, made language figurative and metaphoric. The most natural means was therefore to draw the pictures of things. To express the idea of man or a horse the form of one or the other will be represented, and the first attempt at writing was but a simple painting.47

Condillac refers to the origins of writing as stemming from the pictorial image, the hieroglyphic symbol etched into the surface of the wall. If one were to ask for a restitution of language, one would have to return to the conception of imagination, and

46 Note: this passage is my extraction from a larger discussion between Derrida and Condillac concerning the process and history of writing/pictograph. It is as follows, “Because men are already capable of communicating and of communicating they’re thought to each other when, in continuous fashion, they invent the means of communication that is writing. (…) As soon as men are capable of “communicating their thoughts,” and of doing so by sounds (…), the birth and progress of writing will follow a direct, simple, and continuous line. The history of writing will conform to a law of mechanical economy: to gain the most space and time by means of the most convenient abbreviation; it will never have the least effect on the structure and content of the meaning (of ideas) that it will have to vehiculate. The same content, previously communicated by gestures and sounds, henceforth will be transmitted by writing, and successively by different modes of notation, from pictograph writing up to alphabetic writing, passing through the hieroglyphic writing of the Egyptians and the ideographic writing of the Chinese.” 312

beyond that, imagination derived from lived experience.\textsuperscript{48} This conception of the fluctuation between spoken language, written word, and image is one that will come to haunt Derrida’s work. For Derrida, the prominence of the handprint then, unbinds itself from language as it simultaneously binds itself within history. The emergence of the handprint within Twombly’s \textit{Ferragosto} series does more than entangle itself within the origins of the scatological smear; it immediately situates Twombly’s work within the binds of history. Twombly \textit{was} here, and the event of painting is set within the past.

Histories: Ancient Mark Making

There is a photograph of Cy Twombly in Pompeii, summer 1957 (fig. 13). In his stance, he appears to be an archeologist, ready for research, ready to unearth an ancient secret; his white cap pulled over his face, his shoulder resting on the remains of a decaying column. There is no doubt Pompeii played a role in influencing Twombly’s necessity to intertwine his \textit{Ferragosto} paintings within the ancient civilization, frozen in the temporal moment in time; this citation of Pompeii proclaims him to be a history painter.\textsuperscript{49} Before discussing Pompeii, we must go back to the first recorded signs of human mark making at Lascaux, France.

By engaging his hand in direct mark making characterized by that smear of paint created when his hand was pressed against the canvas by his own body; Twombly immediately sets himself within the framework of the history of art dating back to the pre-historical conception of cave paintings. The interest in cave paintings, especially

\textsuperscript{48} As I am to discuss within this chapter vis-à-vis the Lascaux cave paintings and their means.

\textsuperscript{49} The discussion of the “history painter” is one I will return to later in this chapter.
those at Lascaux\textsuperscript{50} (the infamous site in France that seems to be frozen in time) requires the viewer to realized the importance of the human body, the hand as a tool of mark making. Mark making that was then yet to be bound within the violent dislocation of language.\textsuperscript{51} From their conception, cave paintings have existed as a means to communicate an event, drawings about the tales of hunting inscribed on the wall from one nomadic group of people, left to be read by another group that can only be assumed to come across this in the future. Georges Bataille, whom has written and lectured extensively on the cave paintings at Lascaux, has taken a constructive purchase on the representation of man and animal painted within these caves. The stories that seem to be those of hunting victories are jarring in their representation of man against beast, the man fragmented, the beast whole and powerful. Within his explanation of this phenomenon is where the crux of Twombly’s representation lies; it is the impossibility of the form as a whole. Bataille describes the prehistoric world as one where death consumed the thoughts of men, and man saw “no distinction between himself and animals.”\textsuperscript{52} In turn, the animal/beast was seen as, “the same thing as man, but more holy- more holy, which is

\textsuperscript{50} The cave paintings of Lascaux, France (most famously from an area of the cave entitled “The Hall of Bulls”) are often referred to as the first traces of painting, and seen as interlocked with human mark making’s desire and innate need to translate information from person to person. By the phrase “Frozen in time” I mean to say, they are preserved from their conception, an estimated 17,000 years ago. For more information on Lascaux, please see: Georges Bataille, \textit{Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art}, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955).

\textsuperscript{51} When I say “violent dislocation of language” I mean this in the Derridian sense. How can everything experiential, organic, and immaterial possibly be bound up in the 26 letters of the English language for instance, and even further lost within the problematic notion of translation?

to say more sacred, more divine. Bataille continues his argument in asserting the only way for men to redeem their feeling of death, to quiet this all-consuming thought, was to hunt. Therefore the fragmentary representation of the human, and whole representation of the animal reflected a more divine notion. A notion that Twombly seemed to translate to the surface of his canvases as if to say, the handprint, the fragmented representation from his body, sought to give itself up to the material of the paint. Or, perhaps, disenchant the singular artist genius of the abstract expressionist age.

In other words, cave paintings functioned in the exact opposite way as the singular artistic genius that is emphasized within Abstract Expressionist terms. Twombly’s primordial relationship with the canvas developed when he dropped the academically trained hand after his trip to North Africa, and Kirk Varnedoe suggests the same in his 1995 exhibition essay on Twombly:

[…] His impulses would meet the surface sensuously, in the broad, flat engagement of the palm, or by fingertip daubs, or through varieties of clawing and caressing. That sensuality encompassed, too, the most basic and earliest life associations of primal creativity asserting itself through uninhibited play with every substance at hand.

For Twombly, the sense of letting his hand guide him overrides any culturally or academically trained mark. At the heart of his manner of embedding the Ferragosto series within the trenches of history lays Twombly’s uninhibited primordial mark, the one Barthes describes as gauche. This mark, the smeared paint, the formless attempt at the

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54 Ibid.
doodle of a penis catapults the *Ferragosto* series to the earliest forms of mark making, Lascaux, the most primordial index of humanity in recorded history.

Linked to Lascaux in its visible graphic trace of an ancient civilization, Pompeii was seemingly frozen in time by the eruption of the volcano Vesuvius, in 79 AD. What is so endlessly fascinating about Pompeii is the fact that an entire civilization was erased in three days, the approximate amount of time it took for from the first tremors of Vesuvius to the final blow. But, what aspect of Pompeii was Twombly interested in, in 1957, when that photograph of him was taken? His surfaces are so often related to centuries old graffiti on the walls of bathroom stalls, and perhaps this is where his interest lies. Pompeii is the perfect example of this. Scrawled on the walls of bathroom chambers in the ancient ruins are several characters of graffito, still a current day practice, Twombly’s notion of creation and excretion fuse together here. In other words, Twombly’s notion of the little girl who is in the bathroom creating a sculpture of her own excrement is simply a repetition of the ancient, centuries old human desire that links creation and excretion. Perhaps Pompeii is a reason why Twombly’s scatological smears have such a monumental impact on the *Ferragosto* series in their formless, phenomenological gesture.

**Pompeii and Sexuality: Twombly’s Engendering of the Canvas**

Aside from the graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, there is a richer and perhaps stronger link to Twombly’s *Ferragosto* series. On the walls of the many chambers

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56 In depth information on Pompeii can be found in: Joanne Berry, *The Complete Pompeii* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

57 Ibid., 102, 106-11.
reserved for sexual acts of the ancient city exist elaborate pictorial representations of those sexual acts. These are thought to identify what each particular chamber was used for, or what the Pompeian would be sure to expect once entering the brothel. The wall-painted images would adorn the entranceways to these chambers; they depict nude men and women with enlarged genitalia, sexualized and painted in a promiscuous stance.

Twombly’s depiction of penises and breasts on the surfaces of the Ferragosto series is undoubtedly inspired by these Pompeian sexual portraits, but Twombly goes even further than this; he uses these doodles of ‘dirty little jokes’ to engender his surfaces. As recorded in an interview with the artist:

> The male thing *is* the phallus, and what way to describe the symbol for a man than the phallus, no? (…) The female is usually the heart or a soft shape, and certainly very painterly. There’s a lot of tactile paint in those…you know which ones? Some of them got very heavy, like the last of the series called *Ferragosto*.58

_Ferragosto II_ is littered with phalluses; white dominates the surface of the canvas and angular penises define the composition. Even in areas that would be announced as utterly feminine, Twombly counteracts this by proposing the use of the graphite stick, the tool that in itself is a phallus. Whereas _Ferragosto IV_ announces itself as feminine, the sharp graphite replaced by painterly stroke, angular gives way to soft, phallus gives way to formlessness. As Twombly said in the aforementioned quote, “The female is usually the heart or a soft shape, and certainly very painterly.” Then the last two surfaces of the _Ferragosto_ series are undoubtedly, overwhelmingly feminine; this series, in turn, can be

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seen as illustrating the shift between masculine and feminine that Twombly was faced with that summer in Rome.

The Problematic Reading of Graffiti and its Relationship to Abstract Expressionism

Twombly’s surfaces are often decreed as lines of graffiti inscribed on the surface of a bathroom stall, just as on the walls of Pompeii. Rosalind Krauss defines graffiti, as it is associated with Twombly’s surfaces:

First, it is performative; it suspends representation in favor of action: I mark you, I cancel you, I dirty you. Second, it is violent; always an invasion of a space that is not the marker’s own, it takes illegitimate advantage of the surface of inscription, violating it, mauling it, scarring it. Third, it converts the present tense of the performative into the past tense of the index; it is the trace of an event, torn away from the presence of the maker: “Kilroy was here,” it reads.59

Krauss hits the nail on the head with her attention to the present transforming to the past tense that is an innate quality of graffiti. The index has always, already happened in the past; it is a trace, saying, ‘I was here.’ Twombly forces the viewer to read his Ferragosto canvases as traces of an event, and that event was Twombly’s painterly gesture. The handprint transforms the surface into a world of the past tense, and it is precisely with the handprint that the connection to graffiti forms. Twombly’s graffito is his handprint. Krauss explains the mark of graffiti as violent; and while in the Derridian sense, every mark cast upon a page is always, already violent, Twombly’s surfaces are not innately so. He admits to a growing agitation within his paintings, and certainly a growing internal chaos within Ferragosto’s IV and V is a result of the mounting mid-August heat clinging to his body and suffocating his mind, but this ‘violence’ in the later Ferragosto’s seems

to be more of an eruption from the surface of the canvas itself than a trace cast by
Twombly.\(^60\)

Writing extensively on the graffito, Krauss refers cave paintings as early forms of
graffiti. Utilizing the inscriptions in the caves of Gargas, a prehistoric site in South
Western France, Krauss initiates a discussion on the use, and reading of the handprint in
this early form of mark making:

[Many of the caves] include palm prints that were made, twenty millennia ago, by
placing an outstretched hand against the wall and blowing pigment onto the
exposed surface to create the image in the negative. The image as a residue of its
maker. No matter how simply, I leave my trace.\(^61\)

There you have it, the trace of the Paleolithic imprint that announces the presence of the
maker. Twombly, citing the fragmented handprint on the surface of his canvases cites the
earliest form of the graffito, the trace. In achieving the inverse of this prehistoric process,
one that for the cave dwellers created the negative of the handprint; Twombly creates the
positive. Paint is smeared on his fingers, and from this material relationship with the
paint, he has created a material imprint of his fingertips on the canvas. The defining
characteristic of this engagement is the residue built up under his fingertips. Twombly
has set into motion his disruption of painting from within the frame. Krauss utilizes
Bataille’s connection, linking the “child” to the “primitive” in a discussion of the

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\(^60\) Cy Twombly in an Interview with David Sylvester conducted in the year 2000 as
printed in:
David Sylvester, “Cy Twombly,” in Interviews with American Artists (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 2001) 171-181 (esp. 178). “…But those paintings, for instance, were
done in August in terrific heat in Rome. All my things, every one of them, show a certain
agitation.”

\(^61\) Rosalind E. Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press,
deconstruction of art. She begins with the statement that children are not innately creative, they doodle to “despoil a surface”62 and engage in acts of defacement as engrained in their nature, the “dragging of dirty fingers along the walls.”63 Krauss implies the construction of culture is part and parcel with the construction of creativity and states, “If the ‘primitive’ is to be understood on the model of the child, the birth of art is, as well, an act of defacement…”64 Therefore, according to Krauss, the act of citing the primitive requires one to engage with the defacement of art; which is, exactly what Twombly does.

Twombly’s Ferragosto surfaces are not innately graffiti. They perform lyrically, as more than the anonymous, violated inscription. Ferragosto II appears to be the section of an ancient wall, inscribed with centuries old ‘dirty jokes’ to infinitum. This reading is complicated by the evidence of Twombly’s graphic traces, the constant scrawling in graphite, drawings that seem to be loose representations of an engineer’s plans lying under layers of thin paint. Circles litter the surface of Ferragosto II like confetti and contain ‘x’s’ as though they are attempting to simultaneously produce and erase themselves; and it seems as though the canvas becomes a backdrop for thought and experience.65

Twombly’s graffito mark came out of his reaction to American abstract expressionism, with which he already had a complicated relationship. Krauss examines this relationship in terms of Twombly’s urgency to cancel the Abstract Expressionist mark and assumes

62 Ibid., 152.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Twombly’s position; “Twombly took up graffiti as a way of interpreting the meaning of action painting’s mark, and most particularly that of Pollock’s radically innovative, dripped line.”66 Biographically, Twombly was sewn within the same cloth as many other abstract expressionists, trained at Black Mountain College and later shifting to the New York art scene, which in many ways served as the ‘abstract expressionist hotbed’ at the time. Twombly, though, creates a rupture within abstract expressionism in his handling of the gesture of Jackson Pollock.67

A Rupturing of History

Nicholas Cullinan describes the Roman sense of the baroque that is evident in Twombly’s Ferragosto series; that overwhelming, formless grandeur evidenced in Ferragosto IV and all but defines Ferragosto V. Cullinan cites Robert Smithson whom was traveling in Rome in 1961, the same year Twombly created the Ferragosto series. Smithson wrote beautiful, descriptive letters of the decaying city: Smithson’s letters home from Rome, like Twombly’s paintings, focused on ‘the scatological, the ornamental, and the disproportional rather than the spiritual ideal’. He spoke of ingesting the accumulation of history and ruins, which for him were symptomatic of the Baroque and the grotesque.68

67 Rosalind E. Krauss, The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993) 258-9. “By 1955 Twombly had stopped making paintings with the expressionist’s loaded brush and had started using the sharp points of pencils to scar and maul and ravage the creamy stuccoed surface of his canvases instead…And he had made it clear that the manner he had taken as his model was Jackson Pollock. It is not just the circularity of Twombly’s marks and the loopy aimlessness of their tracks repeating over the canvas field that is addressed to the drip pictures. Rather it is the experience of the trace itself - the trace that composes the tracery of the drip paintings – as violent.”
Twombly’s citation of the decaying, baroque city appears in the grandeur of his surfaces and within their innate temporality. *Ferragosto IV* begins to erupt in all of its ‘Baroque-ness’ with the large, formless gesture that seems to seep from the canvas itself, moments from melting off the surface entirely, and colors that resemble flesh itself. Even the quality of the baroque returns effortlessly to Twombly’s consideration of the hand vis-à-vis Erwin Panofsky, “In early Flemish Painting the opposition between left and right operates in such a way as to make this a signifying pair capable of expressing the opposition between the before and the after, the past and the future, the old law and the new, and so on.”

Twombly’s use of the hand dictates this slippage in time, both existing in the past (Twombly was here) and in the present with its immediate, bodily relationship to the spectator. The citation of the Baroque grandeur of the *Ferragosto* series is constantly created and canceled out, just as Twombly’s relationship with the abstract expressionist stroke. The Baroque-ness is canceled out in the small qualities of *Ferragosto II*, those drawings that seem to scatter across the surface as though to find refuge in the vast white space, nothing like the full embrace of the baroque framework in *Ferragosto IV*.

‘exacerbated the tension he felt, already evident in his paintings, between the desire for timelessness and his fascination with history and decay’.”


70 Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture: Paintings from the Daros Collection* (New York: Scalo, 1999) 61. “Twombly…exemplifies the importance of the little. His little things are not parts of a nature that dwarfs man, but the little things that people do compared to a much larger world of all human activity. He is a humorist, too accepting, to adaptive for satire. For satire, after all, is an angry assertion of man’s
Twombly is a history painter. Not in the sense of the grand canvases of those masters whom are noted for their suspension of moments in history in a few strokes of pigment across the canvas. May the victors appear mighty and heroic, and may those who have lost look pathetic and distraught. Twombly asserts himself as a history painter by unraveling this mythical ‘Jacques-Louis David’ notion of history painting. It is by the suspension of the lyrical hero’s in his work, the citing of ‘Virgil’ or ‘Leda and the Swan.’ Twombly cites the painterly stroke, the grandeur of the history painter in the size of the canvas, one that overwhelms spectators. But Twombly unravels he heroics from within the frame, the canvas seeming to seep with pigment, *Ferragosto’s IV* and *V* unravel before the spectators eyes. The formlessness of the gesture refers to nothing outside itself, while the title and the inscription land this series in a framework of history. The decaying city of Rome, the walls of Pompeii, the markings on the cave, the summer holiday that leaves Rome abandoned, lost in time.

Twombly suspends the *Ferragosto* canvases in time. By their title, they already mark a holiday with an unclear history, a fluctuating past. *Ferragosto* itself is indebted to a fracture in history, the pagan transformed to the Christian. This reflects a pattern Twombly himself followed with these works, the series that unravels the very framework of art history. Within the *Ferragosto* series, Twombly asserts himself as a history painter, yet allows his formless gesture to exist in a state of temporality; his gesture is doomed to be erased. A constantly revolving dichotomy is then formed with the unheroic history painting Twombly associates himself with, a dichotomy between grandeur and the failure to be heroic…He exemplifies the importance of the little in the equality of small details.”
little, absence and excess, rotting and growing, inscription and erasure, past and present, and most intentionally between the ‘left’ (gauche) and the right.

The *Ferragosto* series develops beyond the conditions of evolution, it situates itself within the conversation of art historical painting. Twombly cites Jackson Pollock’s ejaculatory drip that defines the 1950’s and abstract expressionism, and attempts to react to and subsequently unravel the Pollockian drip. Twombly gives a nod to the very conception of painting by dragging his hand across the surface of the canvas, citing the scatological smear that derives from human psychology and the handprint that inevitably recalls the history of painting to the pre-history of the cave. By doing so, Twombly bridges his own importance and reliance on the written word, bound in language, bound in culture and society; the use of the hand seems so unmistakably non-political. Yet, by situating himself so deep within history, Twombly unravels it from within, he deconstructs this premise of art history by setting up his revolving dichotomies. Twombly then, erases and appropriates the notion of authorship by using the identifying trace of the ‘handprint’, and announces it as just that, a trace. *Ferragosto II* and *IV* retain the evidence of the painterly shift occurring between each half of the series, by the emergence of the handprint in *Ferragosto II* and its evolution in the formation of the gesture, Twombly erupts painting from within the frame.
CHAPTER 3: FERRAGOSTO III AND FERRAGOSTO V: ABSENCE AND EXCESS

Rosalind Krauss hits the nail on the head when she asserts Twombly’s line in the form of the Derridian notion of performativity, the conception that in language the word performs. Perhaps this notion is best explained within the sanction of marriage, whereas the ceremony is consecrated at the moment the pair is named husband and wife. Krauss then argues, it is not possible for one to read Twombly’s canvases verbatim; he forces that impossibility with the impenetrability of his images (is this really a penis, or is it also a boat?). Rosalind Krauss alludes to the Derridian notion of the ‘performative’, but does not draw into this a discussion on the Derridian ‘veil’, an operative mechanism vital in reading the formless and eruptive gesture of Twombly. Krauss fails to mention the underlying performance at work in Twombly’s paintings, his sexualizing of the canvas.

This chapter will use Ferragosto’s III (fig. 3) and V (fig. 5) to examine Twombly’s urgency to engender the surfaces of his canvases. In utilizing the Derridian veil, Ferragosto’s III and V will illustrate and dismantle the ever-shifting relationship between absence and excess, the very structural couple within which Twombly’s Ferragosto series is embedded. Hand in hand with Twombly’s engendering of the surface of the canvas, is his performing of history; I will elaborate on an argument developed in Chapter 2 on how Twombly’s work formally appears ‘baroque’. After a discussion on the performative aspect of his canvases, it becomes necessary to discuss how Twombly’s Ferragosto series performs the baroque, above the level of formal elements on the surface of the canvas. Ultimately, this boils down to the argument that by embedding his canvases so deep within history (the baroque, the Ferragosto, the old
masters), Twombly exists in a state of utter inclassification, he is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’, and he forces his canvases to exist in the slippage between absence and excess.

Twombly’s Performative Gesture

Forms evocative of breasts and phalluses burst from the corners of Twombly’s \textit{Ferragosto} canvases and suggest a schoolboy relationship Twombly has with sexuality. From these images of erect penises and large breasts, one might imagine Twombly to be poking fun at sexuality. In fact, Twombly seems to be adding another layer of signification to the conception of engendering the canvas itself. Rosalind Krauss assumes Twombly’s surfaces to be an overload of the signifier; she proves the impossibility of reading Twombly’s scrawls as “a penis” or “breasts,” the scrawls become a residue of an event, or an icon emptied of meaning that contains the possibility of being repeated to infinitum. Instead, Twombly enables his canvases to \textit{perform} sexuality, and in turn, the surfaces \textit{become} gendered. In her critical analysis of Roberta Smith’s essay on Twombly, Krauss assaults Smith’s assumption in reading Twombly’s marks as singular, literal events, “These marks indicate blades of grass.”\footnote{Rosalind Krauss, “The Latin Class,” in \textit{Perpetual Inventory} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010) 193-204 (esp. 200).} Instead, Krauss insists on the necessity to read Twombly’s works as pluralistic, or as many parts to a whole, and therefore the work performs. Painting no longer remains a singular, inanimate object on the wall where it has rested for ages. Krauss argues of Smith:

It never occurs to her that it is precisely this form of semiological overkill, in which she moves from one “looks-like” to another, which has the effect of undoing semiosis, of scattering and disrupting analogy, acting to perform a
violence of the mark which Derrida would call dissemination: the mark reconsecrated as performative.\footnote{Ibid., 200.}

The performative mark will continue to develop a life of its own, once detached from its maker it will gain power as a locomotive rendering ‘truth’ in the fluctuating realm in which it exists. Krauss elaborates on her definition of the performative in explaining it as, “a modality of language where meaning is identified with the very performance of the statement (…) I pronounce you man and wife.”\footnote{Ibid., 199.} Krauss forms this conception around Twombly’s works where the written scrawl seems to dominate the image. Roland Barthes, the French philosopher who wrote extensively on Twombly was introduced in Chapter 1 in relation to Twombly’s graffito, is utilized in Krauss’s argument. In The Italians (fig. 7), Krauss cites Roland Barthes in saying “If the canvas is called The Italians, do not look for the Italians anywhere except, precisely, in their name.”\footnote{Ibid.} To depart from both Barthes and Krauss, this conception of the performative doesn’t only apply to Twombly’s canvases that contain scrawl; this very modality is how Twombly inscribes the Derridian performative mark within his Ferragosto surfaces. These surfaces contain raw gesture, unraveled fingertip paintings in place of a written scrawl; his gesture performs.

Twombly performs the Derridian mark in another way, one that Krauss alludes to in her discussion on Twombly in The Optical Unconscious, but nearly neglects, and

\footnote{Ibid.}
perhaps even misreads\textsuperscript{75} in her previously mentioned essay; the impossibility for Twombly’s work to exist as a ‘whole’.

The form of the mark-as-graffito is, in its attack on presence, an attack on organicity, good form. Twombly would increasingly celebrate this aspect of the graffito’s “content” in his own versions of the dispersed, disseminated body. (…) He had by the early 1960s felt the need to acknowledge that it was in fact the body that was at stake. (…) Over the surfaces of his Roman paintings would thus appear so many cocks and cunts, so many wounds and scorings, so many tatters splayed over the surface of the work, the erotics of which is that its body will never be reconstituted, whole.\textsuperscript{76}

This is in part symptomatic to the social and political world Twombly entered upon moving to Italy. The Post-World War II European ‘problem’ of viewing the ground as a constituted ‘whole’ in the aftermath of such loss and dismantling of the ground/body vis-à-vis Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Holocaust. This problem transferred to painting and the inability to retain the wholeness of either the ground or the body; any sense of ‘wholeness’ became impossible. This problem of the ‘whole’ is evidenced in both Twombly’s rupturing of the ground within the last of the Ferragosto series, as well as the detached body parts that litter the surface in the early Ferragostos. In the aforementioned passage, Krauss suggests the wholeness of the body, and the possibility of a ‘present’ to be at stake in Twombly’s paintings, especially the Roman canvases, a group in which Ferragosto is located. According to Derrida, writing has always already

\textsuperscript{75} In the aforementioned quote I am citing, Krauss insists on reading Twombly’s works as many parts of a ‘whole’, this slightly undercuts her argument of the impossibility of the whole in Post War Europe, but I depart from this argument in interjecting Twombly’s ‘play’ of the Ferragosto series as single, evolutionary works. One canvas builds on the next, and only relies on the previous canvas because it dictates the previous moment in time. Not because together they constitute a ‘whole’.

\textsuperscript{76} Rosalind E. Krauss, \textit{The Optical Unconscious} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993) 266.
occurred in the past and has yet to occur in the future. The conception of ‘presence’ renders itself obsolete.

Fracturing of the Landscape

Twombly is perhaps searching for some sense of wholeness within his conception of the landscape, and it is as though his Ferragosto series can be read as his response. Ferragosto III alludes to a diagonal horizon line splitting the painting into two diametrically opposed halves. On the one half, there is color and furious gesture shrouded by a white wash, as though a throwback to Ferragosto’s I (fig. 1) and II (fig. 2). The right half of the canvas consists of brilliant reds erupting into clotted elegance, penises and breasts burst from the threads of the canvas and pigment begins to drip and hemorrhage straight from the weave. Ferragosto III is a literal attack on presence and the possibility of a ‘whole’ ground in the post war years. Ferragosto III echoes the early Ferragosto’s and simultaneously acts as a precursor to the rapturous Ferragosto’s IV (fig. 4) and V. Twombly deals with the fracture of the ground, the body, and the landscape through each frame of this series while reminding the viewer of his love for the sensation of belonging to a space both vast and deeply intertwined with ancient histories. Twombly was drawn to Rome because of ‘life’ and the backdrop of architecture, but he states, “Probably even more than architecture I’d be drawn to the landscape. That’s my first love, landscape (...) all kinds of landscape, if it’s not cluttered up and vandalized.”

This quotation by Twombly acts as a vehicle in which I set up an argument in the

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previous chapter of misreading Twombly’s canvases as “innately graffiti.” Here, this argument it sets forth the idea of the vast, open space; troubled by nothing. This, in a sense, transforms the readings of Twombly’s canvases as pieces of architecture (sections from a vandalized wall) to horizonless landscapes\textsuperscript{78} in which the differentiation between organic body and fruitful landscape is indefinable. In a 1994 roundtable discussion on Twombly, artist Francesco Clemente describes his first experience with Twombly’s painting, “There is a pink, an extraordinarily golden pink light in Rome, when the sun goes down. I have a very vivid memory of the extraordinary reverberation of light on this painting, which started really to \textit{bleed in front of my eyes}.”\textsuperscript{79} The painting Clemente is referring to is an unspecified section from Twombly’s \textit{Fifty Days in Ilium}. Yet, this statement can be directly applied to the \textit{Ferragosto} series, cataloguing the hot and stifling days of Rome, and the pink hue of a sun burning into the sky as it dips below the horizon line. \textit{Ferragosto V} bleeds from the canvas, but this bleeding operates on a binary of bodily sensation, and a record of the daily cycle in which the sun sets into the landscape. This landscape, that in all its fruitfulness, ultimately doubles as the ruptured Derridian veil in \textit{Ferragosto V} and forces the series to exist in a state of absence/excess.

\textsuperscript{78} Although \textit{Ferragosto’s I-III} give a hint of a diagonal horizon line, this is entirely ruptured in the fifth part of the series. Based on my argument of the evolutionary quality of the \textit{Ferragosto} series, \textit{Ferragosto V} must be seen as the point where the landscape is ultimately horizonless.


An introduction to this writing is as follows: \textit{This conversation among artists Francesco Clemente, Brice Marden, and Richard Serra, with an intervention, from the audience, by Julian Schnable and moderated by Kirk Varnedoe, was held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, on 4 October 1994.} (p. 235).
The Derridian ‘Veil’

Jacques Derrida describes the veil in his text *The Double Session*. The hymen/veil (these terms are interchangeable) exists as the white space of the page, the space that contains *everything* already and when the first mark is cast upon the page it is silenced, ruptured. A discussion commenced in the first chapter departs from the Derridian notion of the veil as a blank page (the philosopher’s blank page) and situates it within the context of painting, ‘Twombly soon comes to erupt the virginal veil of the canvas.’ It was already apparent Twombly had been reading Mallarmé, the French poet of whom Derrida set his conception of the veil off of. In Kirk Varnedoe’s essay on Twombly, he solidifies this point: “Twombly had begun reading Stéphane Mallarmé, the prime poet of empty whiteness, shortly after his arrival [to Rome] in 1957, and the increasing self-consciousness of his commitment to the white monochrome painting was made explicit in a statement he published a few months later.”80 It is in this statement that Twombly alludes to his eruption or contamination of this ‘white space’ that later leads the reading of the eruption of the virginal veil as described in the surfaces of *Ferragosto’s IV and V*. It is within these surfaces Twombly will directly oppose Varnedoe’s reading of Mallarmé’s “empty whiteness,” proving the whiteness to be anything but empty.

In a continuation of the artist statement produced by Twombly in 1957, and introduced in Chapter one, Twombly continues:

To paint involves a certain crisis, or at least a crucial moment of sensation or release; and by crisis it should by no means be limited to a morbid state, but could

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just as well be one ecstatic impulse, or in the process of a painting, run a gamut of states. One must desire the ultimate essence even if it is “contaminated.”

Twombly draws out psychological element inherent within the act of painting, described as both ‘sensation’ and ‘release’, and sets his fifth Ferragosto surface within the framework of ‘desire’ and ‘essence’, psychological elements that come to dominate the page. How, though, does Twombly erupt the virginal veil? He first sets it within the structure of his painting. The whiteness of the first two Ferragosto’s that has been discussed to exhaustion within this thesis, then, in Ferragosto V, Twombly allows the white space to disseminate, or to fall away. The powerful gesture is now smeared across the canvas and seems to absorb the passion and sensation of Twombly, performing. He is illustrating the burst hymen, the ‘blank page’ that is anything but, that erupts in pure primordial release. This is established by the surface of Ferragosto III, the turning point within this series that depicts a fury of white washed smears and gestures, ones that can be read as tremors under a blank page ready to erupt in the juicy fleshiness of Ferragosto’s IV and V.

The Inscription of Gender

Twombly’s description of the contaminated ultimate essence opens to a reading of the Lacanian scatological smear, and therefore a reading of gender within his canvases. As continued from Chapter 2, the necessity of performing gender within the surface of the Ferragosto canvases underlines their quality of inclassification, one that will leave Twombly’s Ferragosto series frozen in the slippage between absence and excess. Twombly inscribes gender within his canvases by explaining his male surfaces as

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81 Ibid., 27.
rampant with shapes of phalluses, or even his continual theme of the sketched boat, and “the female is usually the heart or a soft shape, and certainly very painterly.” What, then, could possibly be more painterly than *Ferragosto V*? Nicholas Cullinan describes this as one of the heaviest paintings of Twombly’s career, an, “orgy of impasto clods” and a reminder that “Twombly associates heavy painting with the feminine.”

*Ferragosto V* no longer necessitates the use of definitive diagrammatic drawings of feminine sexual organs (i.e. breasts) to define the canvas as feminine. He already assigns gender at the level of the materiality of paint. If the term ‘heavy’ is a locater for feminine surfaces, than his light, confetti surfaces early in the *Ferragosto* series are male. Which is to say, in *Ferragosto V* Twombly’s caressing of the canvas, his clawing, his announcement of the bodily presence he had with the canvas is what announces this to be feminine. The paint isn’t applied with a brush, the phallus that has dominated painting since the Renaissance, but instead with the importance of the use of Twombly’s hand, and the activation of his body as well as the viewers. Every gesture is soft, has rounded edges, and is completely resistant to the delineation of form; meaning, it becomes impossible to tell where one gesture ends and the next begins.

Femininity hasn’t always dominated the *Ferragosto* series as it has in the last canvas. Supporting even further the notion of the simultaneous evolutionary quality and singularity of the *Ferragosto* canvases is the proposal that *Ferragosto’s I and II* are

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dominated by their own masculinity. First, these canvases are ‘light’. Form, line, and gesture fall as confetti across the dominant white space, and as I previously argued, the forms fall as visual interruptions across the monochrome canvas, literally penetrating the viewer’s field of vision. The forms themselves act as phalluses. Second, the forms are definitive. They are tightly wound bursts of energy developed from pencil, paint stick, crayon, or brush; and when the fingerprint is first introduced in Ferragosto II is not yet fully erupted. The forms have some distinction of boundaries dividing one from the other, and retain some evidence of his earlier, fully diagrammatic drawings. The sharp edges of form uphold Twombly’s image of the phallus. Third, and as if to drive the point home, Twombly’s form describes the phallus; erect penises converge with one another across the surface of the canvas. A form here or there may seem as though it is a breast, a scribbled out cloud, but upon closer inspection, the absence of clotted paint within these forms alludes to the description of the testicle instead. A shift occurs in Ferragosto III and acts as a precursor to the full engorgement of clotted femininity that encapsulates Ferragosto V. The canvas exists in a state of ‘heavy absence’ the paint is clotted and layered on the surface, yet it visually cancels itself out in its utter neutrality of color. Flesh tones engorge the physicality of the canvas later, in the penultimate canvas, Ferragosto V. It is as though, within these canvases, Twombly creates a physical and sexual encounter enveloped by the materiality of paint. Therefore, Twombly’s gesture performs sexuality.
Performing the Baroque

Set within the discussion of the performative quality of Twombly’s Ferragosto series is the conception of the Baroque. Richard Leeman’s monograph on Cy Twombly devotes a chapter rich with arguments on formally how Twombly’s work can be described as Baroque. Yet, Leeman fails to acknowledge how Twombly’s work performs the Baroque, how it evolves to this baroque quality. In this chapter entitled “Baroque Profusion” Leeman begins with a short 2004 quote from Twombly that simply states, “My baroque period…” and continues to focus on Twombly’s Ferragosto canvases.84

Peculiar about Twombly’s surfaces, that which I have argued from the start, is this sense of control and power he claims over the canvas, that which only is visible in the differences from one canvas to the other, yet not innate to the surface itself. To elaborate, Ferragosto V appears as though it is paint seeping straight from the weave of the canvas itself, Twombly’s refined hand is lost in the power of the gesture. Yet, the choice to create this overwhelming sense of eruption in this canvas is Twombly’s, it is the specific framework he sets his work within. The heavy, fleshy, quality of Ferragosto V with its formless gesture seems to be the result of a passionate performance of the hand; one that directly recalls the art historical moment of the Baroque. This mirrors the fleshy and corporal qualities within the artwork of this period that functioned as propaganda to return the laity to the Catholic Church, a reaction to the Counter-Reformation.

Incidentally, living in the shadow of St. Peter’s, the heart of the Catholic Church, Twombly is creating the Ferragosto series on the same soil where the Baroque hit its

heyday, some 300 years earlier. Perhaps then it becomes clear as to why Twombly titled this series after the subversive Roman holiday, Ferragosto. The Pagan holiday that was taken over (covered up) by the Roman Catholic Church, then originally a day to honor Diana, the goddess of fertility, and transformed to a holiday in which to honor the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the idealized ‘sinless’ woman. Ferragosto parallels the Counter-Reformation, and the art of Catholic propaganda. Thus, Twombly’s sense of performing the baroque is another stake in his method of situating his work in direct conversation with history, and all the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church.85

Acts of Levitation

Ferragosto III exists in the cleavage between absence and excess. As previously discussed, strands of paint are clotted on the surface, yet cancel themselves out with their neutral pigment, and in a sense, Twombly’s work levitates. The surface of Ferragosto III seems to resist the total physicality presented by the clotted paint, and the dominance of white space in the early Ferragosto paintings immediately initiate the sense of ‘rising above.’ Leeman quotes Varnedoe on the levitation of Twombly’s ‘baroque’ works:

‘That intuitive choreography helped transmute whatever elements might connote base corporeality into an overall feeling of lightness, staying unfailingly uplifted until the end’. (To anyone taking a good look at this works, this ‘connotation’ will

85 A note on the reception of Twombly’s Baroque-inspired paintings: In his chapter “Baroque Profusion” Leeman recites Twombly’s poor US reception, “…when it is the first time that the wider public has been presented with an extensive view of the work of an artist with a reputation of being ‘difficult,’ and one whose genre of ‘Baroque Culminations’ (…) had not left exclusively good memories in the United States. From the failure of Nine Discourses on Commodus at Castelli in 1964 to the first retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1979, a substantial number of American critics had continued to reproach Twombly’s painting for being ‘Europeanized and precious’, as Leo Castelli himself said of Commodus, at a time when the only ‘real’ art was American (…).” 126-127.
seem an understatement.) ‘His former passion for Soutine and Kokoschka has now been aerated, though, by a sense of expansive levitation that denies the heaviness of physical concerns [and keeps] their sensual intensity from ever becoming turgid or weighty’.  

Although Twombly describes his last in the *Ferragosto* series as the ‘heaviest’ of all his paintings, he maintains the weightless quality. One that is resistant to the physicality of the clotted paint, one that Leeman and Varnedoe write so freely about. How does a canvas like *Ferragosto V* maintain weightlessness, and why was Twombly so intent on achieving this? Perhaps, again, Twombly returns to the underlying formal themes of the Baroque, namely, that of the open form. One that unravels, welcomes, evokes passion, Twombly pushes this conception of the open form to the extent of a complete unraveling of form. If the baroque is responding to, and reacting against the work of the Renaissance, where the unifying one point perspective of Raphael creates perfect geometric space and form; Twombly does the complete opposite, the grid falls apart, and form seems as though it could be lifted off the page, strand for strand. Twombly creates a sense of ripeness within his works that reinforces their corporal physicality, yet it forces them to levitate; the Ferragosto becomes a celebration of the Assumption of Mary

In the evolution of the *Ferragosto* series, the work that seems the most ripe, rotten, and fertile, also seems to exist in a complete state of levitation, and in this sense, Twombly performs the history of the Ferragosto. In Twombly’s revolving engagement with diametrically opposed terms, most specifically, the embodied physical experience and the simultaneous levitation of the *Ferragosto* canvases (the later canvases in particular) he addresses the underlying dichotomy of absence and excess that dominates

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86 Ibid., 126.
the whole of this series. Directly returning to the argument that Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida perform, is that no space is ever neutral it is always, already set into motion by some accident. For Derrida, excess is a symptom of what is lacking. Which is to say, the blank space of the page is an excess of the veil. Derrida utilizes this term often in reference to the split between what is on the surface, and what is underneath. By ‘excess of the veil’ I suggest that, according to Derrida, everything is always, already beneath the surface, every thought, every word, everything is already contained under the veil. This means, the white space of the page, the ‘blank’ space, the veil, is therefore symptomatic of excess. It signals the page has yet to be willed to silence, and this occurs only once the first mark is laid upon it. Derrida often utilizes the term ‘hymen’ in place of veil, to him these terms are interchangeable, and perhaps the term ‘hymen’ links the bridge between Derrida and Twombly in a more apparent manner. Twombly’s silence is not literal; he has in fact burst the hymen in the Ferragosto series therefore celebrating the perpetual fertility of the goddess, Diana, she whom was originally celebrated during Ferragosto, the diametrically opposed female to the Virgin Mary.

Twombly and the Old Masters

Twombly often calls upon the old masters within his work, both directly in his repetition of masterworks such as his endless series from 1960 entitled The School of Athens (fig. 8), and indirectly in his color palate that recalls the Baroque paintings of Peter Paul Rubens. Rubens inaugurated the fleshy embodiment of painting that came to define the Flemish baroque. Twombly is often associated with Raphael because of his School of Athens series. Yet, this comparison doesn’t hold weight in the formal qualities
of the *Ferragosto* series. Of all the masters Twombly’s strokes have summoned, it is Rembrandt (fig. 14) whom he calls upon the most. It is for the very reason that Rembrandt, the 17th century Dutch painter for whom paint unraveled, simply painted the human psyche. The loose strokes and dripping paint that Rembrandt employed disrupted the tight form that was so favored in 17th Century Netherlands. More decidedly so, Rembrandt is thought to have also equated his paint with excrement, which encapsulates Twombly’s physical assignment to the clotted materiality of paint. “Rembrandt did in fact advise people who came to watch him paint not to draw too close for fear that the smell of the paint would make them ill. The anecdote, adroitly twisted by the art historian to suggest that Rembrandt himself compared paint to excrement, is not without significance.”

Leeman goes on to suggest the political upheaval between Venice and Florence and the role color played within this, “colour [as] suspect on the grounds that it is deceptive, irrational, subjective, uncontrollable –indeed, insensate in the etymological sense of ‘outside the sense’, because sense (meaning) comes from *disegno*, as much *interno* (from the mind, giving form) as *esterno* (the manifestation of that form in line.)” Therefore, Rembrandt’s affinity for mud-like color is reflected in Twombly’s separation of line and form; a dichotomy built off of the institutional tradition that line and color equal form. For Rembrandt and Twombly, form is an object to itself.

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87 This Thesis will use Rembrandt’s 1654 *Portrait of Jan Six*, and an exemplary piece of his oeuvre.
89 Ibid., 132.
The Impossibility of Classification

Both in his citation of histories by way of the handprint, and in his unraveling of form (that then leads to yet another citation of history, the fluctuation between the Baroque and the Ferragosto) Cy Twombly announces himself as a completely unclassifiable painter. He achieves this first, by way of his citation of the master painters, the previously discussed connection to Rembrandt, Raphael, and even the landscapes of Poussin. Twombly, by transplanting succulent characteristics of these matters to his modern day Post War Europe, enters them directly in conversation with the problem of the monochrome, Manzoni’s materiality, and Lucio Fontana’s necessity for the exploration of space. This collapsing of the ‘lineage’ of art history is precisely what Twombly uses to dismember histories overriding structure from within the frame. For Twombly, the handprint directly cites the cave paintings at Lascaux yet his treatment of the surface, the corporality of clotted paint places Lascaux in conversation with Piero Manzoni, who commented famously on the connection between paint and excrement with his 1961 sculptures entitled Artist’s Shit (fig. 12). Twombly therefore exists in the cleavage of time and a collapsing of space. But the heart of Twombly’s genius witnessed in the Ferragosto series is his achieving what the masters could not, potentiality. Yve-Alain Bois writes of this subject:

Courbet and Cézanne after him searched all their lives for the means of translating in paint their tactile interpretation of the germination of all things. They each isolated – as a chemist would do – the elementary particle they needed to forge a pictorial language that would convey their haptic apprehension of the world (...) but they still belonged to an era when the scene, in the end, had to congeal, to become whole (...) Cézanne was convinced that he had failed – the heterogeneous dispersion of his ‘sensations’ – is what a century later lead to Twombly’s joyous
Bois continues to suggest that the corporal materiality is what Twombly utilizes to “see like a newborn child.” Twombly’s smearing of the paint with his hands, forcing the form to become completely unraveled as the gesture dictates the space, is just what Cézanne had been searching for. Preventing Cézanne and Courbet from achieving this truly organic experience with the work was the necessity as Bois puts it for the scene “in the end, had to congeal, to become whole.” This conception of ‘wholeness’ was not a possibility for Twombly in the geopolitical stance of post war Europe, so he instead, forces the picture plan to recall. Memory itself is innately fragmentary, and this is exactly where Twombly posits his position for line and color to undo form.

_Ferragosto III_ marks the shift within the series for Twombly. This canvas not only marks a shift in the sexualizing of the canvases that Twombly employs within the _Ferragosto_ series; male becomes female, quietude to rupture. This canvas also marks the point, in its transformation to femininity; the appearance of the monochrome dissolves to the ruptured landscape that reflects Poussin, and the loose form that recalls Rembrandt.

Even more importantly, this is the canvas in which Twombly stakes his claims on the shifting dichotomies that simultaneously frame and rupture his series, a reflection of the pagan to Christian. By asserting a physiological quality to the work, as reflected by the scatological smear, Twombly achieves what history couldn’t, the pure impact of the body.

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on the work of art. *Ferragosto V* remains “rapturously disgorged” and is unanimously agreed upon as the most explosive of the series, any evidence of landscape begins to fall, to tumble into the organic fleshiness of the body. It is within this surface that Twombly fully utilizes the Derridian veil, the rupturing and engorgement that balances within the slippage between absence and excess, exactly where Twombly places the totality of art history.
CONCLUSION: THE LASTING EFFECTS OF THE ‘FERRAGOSTO’

An examination of Twombly’s entire oeuvre would last decades; it’s fragmented, spit into groups, and categories. Still creating new work today into his early 80’s, Twombly’s oeuvre spans from the 1950’s to 2010, and continues to evolve. The majority of scholarship addresses Twombly’s production from 1950 to the mid 60’s and suggests that, perhaps his most pivotal years were the early ones. The problem set adapted by the artists of Post-War Europe paved the way for contemporary art today, notions of trauma, collective memory, and fragmentation.

The urgency to examine Twombly’s *Ferragosto* series derives from his necessity to address the stakes of both American and European painting in the 1960’s. Together, these geopolitical ‘zones’ present problems of collective memory, fragmentation of the ground (and an impossibility in renewed ‘wholeness’), the reconceptualization of the body, and a need to constitute space from what is not there (an example of this would be Fontana, slashing his canvases). This ‘problem’ of painting is singular to a post war Europe and not America. A divide created in the wake of world historical trauma vis-à-vis the detonation of the atomic bomb and the Holocaust left the fragmentation of the ground singular to Europe. In the *Ferragosto* series Twombly mediates these conditions vis-à-vis the revolving dichotomy of absence and excess. This takes on many forms throughout the series, through the implication of the past, the eruption of the white canvas, and the formless gesture; one comes to realize Twombly’s motivation is to attack painting from within the frame. He literalizes this notion of ‘unraveling’ by evoking the heat and disintegration of Rome in August, within each *Ferragosto* canvas. At the same
moment the heat has reached its maximum and the city begins to decay, Twombly’s Ferragosto series evolves to the point where, in Ferragosto V, paint seems to melt directly from the canvas. Twombly’s Ferragosto paintings exist in a state of perpetual decay, and his paintings become temporal, as though they will rot from their very supporting structure.

The following questions informed this thesis: How does Twombly deconstruct the history of painting from within the binds of the canvas, and why is this necessary? Twombly’s necessity to dismantle the history of painting derives from the condition of Post-War Europe, as well as the collective American response to Jackson Pollock; both situations necessitated a reconstitution of painting. The geopolitical arena of post-war Europe was consumed with a fragmented notion of both the ‘ground’ and the ‘body’ as a response to collective trauma in the wake of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Holocaust. In America, Jackson Pollock had moved the painting from its vertical stance on the wall, to a horizontal ground; the painting symbolically moved from the arena of culture, to that of nature. In the immediate wake of the formation of these new conceptions, Twombly was left to respond to both. In differentiating himself from his European contemporaries (Yves Klein, Peiro Manzoni, and Lucio Fontana), Twombly’s problem set included the European dichotomy of absence and excess, the material body, and the entirety of the ground; in addition, his gesture became his anti-signature (a mark that identified his work, yet led to no further reading). Erupting the history painting was the only viable response for Twombly.
How does Twombly deconstruct painting? He must first use the structure in order to rupture it. Twombly adheres to the traditional square canvas on the wall, flooded with paint, graphite, and charcoal, tools that constitute a traditional method of painting. Twombly then ‘unteaches’ his trained and refined hand, and forces himself to paint with what Roland Barthes termed ‘gauche’. His gesture becomes formless and unattached, and never comes together to form an entire composition; his monochrome characteristic of the early Ferragosto’s isn’t a full embrace of the historic monochrome. Twombly’s all-over composition of Ferragosto V still retains characteristics of a bursting focal point, and thus counteracts the conception of the all-over structure (or, anti-structure).

Twombly then builds each canvas off of one another. Each canvas in Twombly’s series operates as an independent ‘frame’ within a moment in time. This is to say, the Ferragosto series doesn’t immediately present itself as a landscape where the viewer must approach all the Ferragosto panels at once. The line that goes off the edge of Ferragosto I isn’t automatically picked up again in the same position on the surface of Ferragosto II. Twombly’s series must be read in an evolutionary way, in that each panel exceeds the formal qualities of the previous canvas.

The evolutionary status of the Ferragosto series is where Twombly sets himself apart from his contemporaries, and ultimately dismantles the traditional notions of painting, namely, the compositional and serial continuity that constitutes ‘good form’. Twombly has already formally deconstructed painting, and then by imbedding it within history, he completely dismantles it.
Roland Barthes wrote of Twombly, “what is real, to which TW’s [Twombly’s] work continuously recalls you, is producing: at each stroke, TW blows up the Museum.” Roland Barthes is among the scholars I situate myself against, and the aforementioned passage written by Barthes encapsulates this gap. Barthes focuses on the singular ‘graffito’ alone as Twombly’s vehicle with which to deconstruct painting, yet fails to acknowledge the multiplicity in Twombly’s attack. Consequently, within this thesis, I pose the multitude of Twombly’s deconstructionist habits, down to the very titling of his series that imbues it with history. By repeating ad infinitum his own acute sense of history, Twombly dismantles it.

Twombly’s attack on painting lies within the framework of it, including its history, dating to the prehistoric cave paintings. The way in which Twombly dismantles painting mirrors Jacques Derrida’s dissection language, and philosophy. For Derrida to deconstruct philosophy he must do it from within the ‘framework’, and the book becomes Derrida’s tool. I find the connection between Twombly and Derrida, and between historicism and post-structuralism to be inextricably linked. Derrida’s submission to the blank page, and subsequent defeat of it, mimics Twombly’s provocative and evolutionary treatment of the ground within his Ferragosto series. History becomes another framework with which Twombly dismantles painting, and this is reinforced by the history of the ‘Ferragosto’. The pagan holiday to honor the gods is appropriated by the institution of the Roman Catholic Church as a day to honor the assumption of Mary; yet Twombly’s use of Roman numerals as a method with which to organize this series (one

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that predates Catholicism) creates a supporting factor against the institution. Twombly, again, ‘blows up the Museum’.

Chapter 3 includes a roundtable discussion hosted in 1994 by Kirk Varnedoe at the Museum of Modern Art. This discussion is vital in understanding the reception of Twombly’s early paintings, in the contemporary present. In this, Francesco Clemente produces an accurate and succinct reading of Twombly’s paintings where he insists on the acceptance of the ‘fragmentation of the self’ in Twombly’s paintings. “…You don’t have this sort of male identity presence in the world. You can be more passive. You can let everything break down. You can live not in the continuity of the self but in the gaps of the self.”92 Clemente recognizes Twombly’s slippage and utter inclassification, yet it is one that scholars have delayed in picking up. Twombly allows his work to exist in the fracture of the ground, the very problem set forth by Post-War European artists.

The questions posed in the introduction of this thesis, and responded to within the body, set a frame within which to ‘read’ Twombly’s oeuvre. This is necessary today in conceptualizing the current condition of the contemporary artist to whom which trauma and void are circumstances to which they must respond. Although much has changed in the political and cultural framework in the aftermath of World War II, and the pivotal year of 1968 that mark cultural, political and institutional upheaval; much stays the same in the conditions of society. The strands that connected the American Abstract Expressionists and the European Artists in the 1950’s and 60’s, also bind artists today. Twombly’s early Roman work is a departure point from which to commence further

study of contemporary artists. The *Ferragosto* series acts as a tremor, foreshadowing the shift within painting that would pave the way for the contemporary problem set, namely, a necessity to emerge from the frame.
Fig 1. Cy Twombly: *Ferragosto I*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 166x201.5 cm, 1961 (Daros Collection, Switzerland).
Fig 2. Cy Twombly: *Ferragosto II*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 164.5x200.3cm, 1961 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)
Fig 3. Cy Twombly: *Ferragosto III*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 165x200.5cm, 1961 (Daros Collection, Switzerland).

Fig 4. Cy Twombly: *Ferragosto IV*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 165.5x200.4cm, 1961 (Collection of Samuel and Ronnie Heyman).
Fig 5. Cy Twombly: *Ferragosto V*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 164.5x200cm, 1961 (Private Collection).
Fig 6. Cy Twombly: Panorama, house paint, crayon and chalk on canvas, 254x340.4cm, ca 1955 (Private Collection).

Fig 7. Cy Twombly: The Italians, oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas, 199.5x259.6cm, 1961 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York).
Fig 8. Cy Twombly: *School of Athens*, oil paint, oil-based house paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 190.3x200.5cm, 1961 (Collection of the artist).
Fig 9. Robert Rauschenberg: *White Paintings (Three Panel)*, oil on canvas, 182.8x274.3cm, 1951 (SFMOMA, California).
Fig 10. Jackson Pollock: *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, oil paint and enamel on canvas, 221x300cm, 1950 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

Fig. 12. Piero Manzoni: *Artist’s Shit (No. 004)*, tin can with paper wrapping and unidentified contents, 48x65x65mm, 0.1kg, 1961 (Tate, Liverpool).
Fig. 13 William Holms: *Twombly in Pompeii*, Summer 1957.
Fig 14. Rembrandt Van Rijn: *Portrait of Jan Six*, oil on canvas, 112x102cm, 1654 (Six Collection, Amsterdam)
REFERENCES


