



*Cy Twombly, Bacchus Series, 2003*

## The Spiracle in Alchemy and Art

Diane Fremont

“There is but one world, only there are many worlds within it, for it exists in more than one way at once; and these different ways cannot be translated into one another.”

(from John Crowley’s novel, “The Translator”)

The problem of “translating the untranslatable” was addressed by the 16<sup>th</sup> century alchemist Gerhard Dorn, with the notion of what he called the *spiracle* – in Latin, the *Spiraculum Eternitatis*, the window or breathing hole into eternity, which Jung writes about extensively as the conjunction of opposites in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. The spiracle is described as a hole or passageway in the field of consciousness that allows the “autonomous dynamism of the collective unconscious” to break through into the realm of the personal unconscious. In this joining, it can, to some degree, be worked and translated into living, material reality, whether through word, image, other expressive means, or through lived life itself. (von Franz, 1980)

I will explore the concept of the spiracle in alchemy and in relation to the creative process, as exemplified in the work of the artist Cy Twombly, who moved back and forth between Lexington, Virginia and his adopted Southern Italy. Twombly’s work also traversed the liminal space between ancient and modern, between literature and visual art and between writing, drawing, painting, photography, collage and sculpture, embodying the idea and operations of the spiracle by linking and overlapping these disparate genres. In the studio, the inspiration of the artist, along with the tools, materials and medium, all co-create the protected space in which this passage and translation between worlds can

take place. They show us ways in and ways out, ways through and ways between – giving entrée to the hidden, the unknown and the not-yet-manifest.

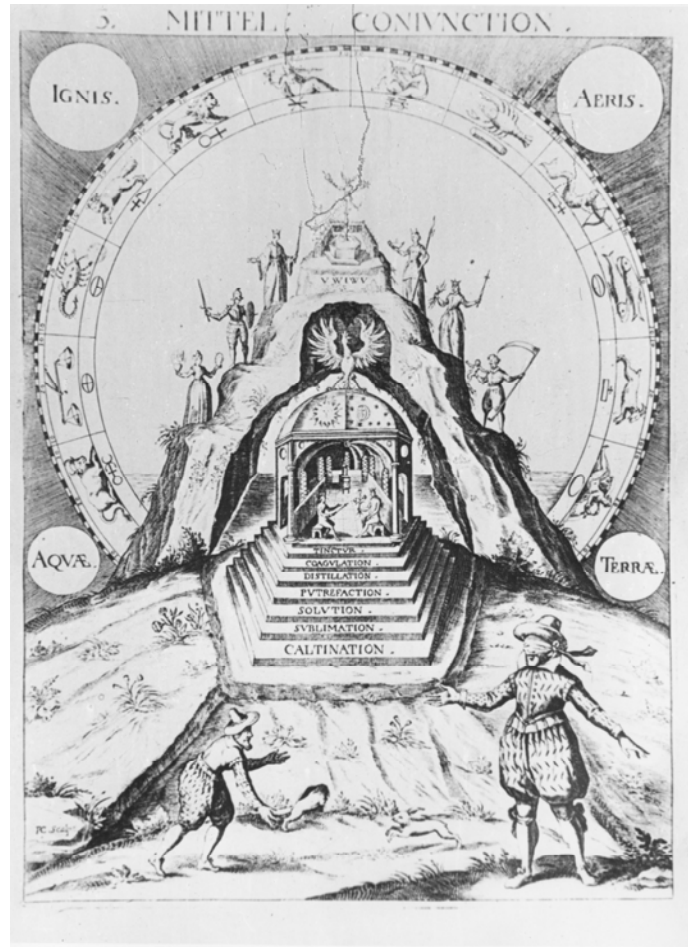


*Cy Twombly's studio in Gaeta, Italy*

The studio, as we see here, provides a multilayered temenos or precinct in which to have this encounter with the Other, while containing and grounding the process in symbolically protected space. The studio, as a space the artist creates and inhabits, becomes an extension of the painting, and vice versa: “The

crumbling, plastery walls have already got paintings in them.” The artist just needs to be receptive, and the paintings begin to make themselves. (Sicilia, p. 408) Once created, the work of art is, in itself, a symbolic spiracle, opening up the viewer to that sacred encounter with other realms, or higher knowledge and experience. The work of art carries the traces and evidence of this journey in its very being, and acts as a spiracle by giving the viewer secondary access to the experience of that passage and congress with the invisible realm.

A spiracle is most simply defined as an opening by which a confined space has communication with the outer air, literally or metaphorically, and is derived from the Latin *spirare*, which simply means to breathe. In nature, the spiracle is a breathing hole found in insects, as well as in some fish and mammals— even the blow-hole of a whale is a kind of spiracle. In geology, the spiracle is a kind of breathing hole for the earth, formed by the explosive transition of gases which carry bits of lava as they work their way up to the surface from subterranean cavities, forming tubular out-croppings.



The hypothetical wormhole (of Einstein's physics) is also a spiracle, a shortcut bridging two disparate points in spacetime, extremely far distances or different universes. This also suggests the metaphorical rabbit hole, as we see at the bottom of this alchemical illustration above. The rabbit hole leads the blindfolded adept into the inner reaches of the hermetically sealed alchemical mountain, which contains the laboratory in its inner sanctum. It also encompasses all the steps or stages of transformation leading toward the realization of the goal of healing and wholeness, while protectively surrounded by the 7 planets and 12 astrological signs, which influence the process.



Dorn conceived of the spiracle as a window to eternity, a mysterious center pre-existent in us, linking us to the cosmos, while opening up and bridging the different levels of body, soul and spirit. Through the spiracle one may journey across the threshold in between the above and below, and bring traces of one world into the other and back again – a kind of conception and cross-fertilization between inconsonant realms. The spiracle links and joins these different levels, rendering it possible to reconcile incommensurable opposites through finding a third – a new space or medium which is neither one nor the other, but both. (CW 14 ¶ 705)



In this illustration, the pilgrim pokes his head through the “window of eternity” and gazes into the “world of timeless order,” leaving ordinary space-time behind. The double wheel, in the upper left corner, demonstrates the nature of the relationship between the two incommensurable worlds, intersecting impossibly at contiguous angles, yet still sharing a common center or hinge-point. Entering into relation with the forces of this mysterious pivot opens up a sphere of seeming miracles, which requires a corresponding attitude of adventurous openness to the unknown.



This attitude is akin to the state of imaginative reverie in pregnancy, personified here in the image of the pregnant alchemist in her laboratory, nurturing in her womb that which she works upon in the alchemical vessel, demonstrating how the inner work of the alchemist was projected outward onto the material. The open window behind her allows the spirit to enter the process, stoking the fire to a blazing heat and creating the billowing folds of smoke into which she gazes in reverie.





*The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898*

This conception between realms is often depicted in paintings of the Annunciation. In Henry Tanner's depiction, the spirit breaks through from an otherworldly realm into Mary's humble everyday world. She receives this presence with reluctance, trepidation, humility and wonder. Young Mary's ear is cocked towards the apparition, as the Angel's announcement of her fate penetrates her body through the spiracle of her ear, just as her womb is being implanted with the spiritual seed.

The multiple tubular folds in the various draperies seem to depict numerous passageways through which the spirit will suffuse her being. In the room surrounding her, the baked earth floor and simple white curving arches, along with the vivid red fabric, emphasize the protective enclosure needed to keep her grounded in the earthly realm and to contain this infusion of spirit. On her left, the blue mantle lies draped, already forming itself into a kind of lap. The

mantle's blue paint was often ground from precious lapis lazuli – the paradoxically celestial stone referred to by the alchemists – representing the materialization of the heavenly spirit.



In the Middle Ages the Virgin Mary was extolled as the “window of enlightenment” or “window of escape” from this world. Jung considered the spiracle as the experience of the self, which enables the individual to touch the collective unconscious, escape from the prison of a one-sided view of life and move towards wholeness. (von Franz, 261) At the same time the eternal can reach into our time-bound world in the form of synchronistic events. The alchemist in his laboratory, as well as the artist in the studio, laboriously set the conditions for these miraculous encounters to happen. (CW14 ¶757) The alchemists felt that the

product of their labor, the lapis, philosophical stone or *medicina*, had a magical healing effect, much as mere raw materials, shaped by the artist, become a work of art, creating an animating and sometimes numinous effect on the viewer (CW14 ¶758)



For the alchemists, the visualization of the self was expressed by the “sky-blue, air-colored liquid” that would float to the surface of the vas, called the caelum, or blue quintessence, which had the ability to spiritualize the “body”. (CW14 ¶763) As Jung puts it: “the alchemist’s labors elevated the body into proximity with the spirit while at the same time drawing the spirit down into matter. By sublimating matter he concretized spirit.” (CW14 ¶764)



*Rembrandt, 16<sup>th</sup> Century*

In Rembrandt's etching, a scholarly alchemist, deeply immersed in his work, has suddenly been interrupted by the vision of a radiant, mirrored disk of light bursting through the window, along with a dark, moth-like apparition. Unalarmed, he carefully records what he sees unfolding before him. This reminds us that the very essence of art-making is the reaching in and pulling out, through this hole or spiracle, the material of the other realm, and doing our best, with whatever means available to us, to translate and shape it into some form we can begin to relate to.



*Cy Twombly, Rauschenberg Combine Materials, Fulton Street Studio, New York City, 1954*

Cy Twombly's photograph shows the Fulton street studio he shared with Robert Rauschenberg from 1953-54, after they had returned from their first journeys in Italy and North Africa. This image epitomizes the magical effect of the spiracle in penetrating the darkness, suffusing the ordinary materials and detritus of life with a spirit that begins to animate itself into works of art, seemingly on its own. John Cage describes this exchange as an unpredictable encounter with the Unfamiliar Other who shortly leaves, "leaving the door open." (Hochdorfer, p. 34)



*Robert Rauschenberg, Combine*

During this shared studio time in New York, Twombly himself said, “Of all forms I like the collage most. It is like a friend which has opened windows to me.” (Hochdorfer, p. 34) This combine of Rauschenberg shows how his collaged images are windows into other worlds, as photographic images and real objects cross over from the real world directly into the picture plane. The buckets ascending the ladder allude to the act of painting, while on the entire canvas there is only one small painted bit, a sky-blue square painted on at the top of the ladder. This creates an opaque celestial window layered onto the more see-through, worldly images, and, along with the ladder, connects above and below,

inside and outside, echoed in the vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines on the canvas.



*Cy Twombly, Interior, Gaeta, 2002*

In this photo, Twombly captures layers of doorways, windows, and ladders to evoke that in-between state of reverie, giving access to and linking above with below and inside with outside, leading us through a kind of tunnel into a light-filled inner realm.



*Cy Twombly, Fulton Street Studio, New York, 1954*

In this collage-like photograph, Twombly playfully juxtaposes his “chalkboard”-style paintings in such a way that they overlap, creating new spatial relationships, crossing their own borders and those with the surrounding space, so that the studio becomes part of the paintings enclosed within the photograph. The two foreground paintings create a dark doorway into the painting behind, while a window of light opens up above them on the left. (Hochdorfer, p. 30-31)





*Cy Twombly, Rauschenberg Combine Materials, Fulton Street Studio, New York City, 1954*

The glowing window in Twombly's studio acts as both "an opening to the world outside, and a potential white surface," allowing the exchange between the real, temporal world and the aesthetic, metaphorical or timeless realm.

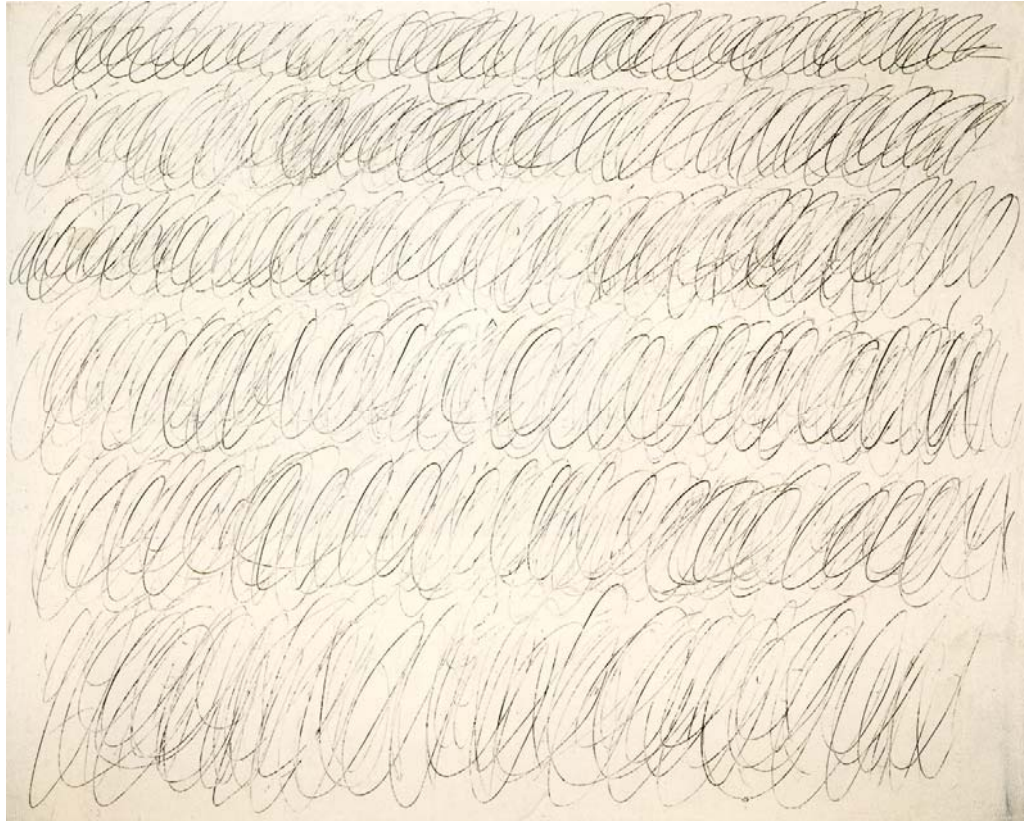
(Hochdorfer, p. 14) Twombly keeps the boundaries permeable between different genres and between subjective, historical and mythological experiences, "as if a specific aspect might shine from one field into another, as through a window."

(ibid.)



*Cy Twombly, Detail of painting*

Paradoxically, the white light of the window also evokes the white paint Twombly used to great effect, creating a screen for the pictorial imagination. In his many-layered paint surfaces, things appear and disappear, creating a kind of mirage, much like the Holy Ghost appearing in Tanner's *Annunciation*, in which you can't be sure what's there and what isn't. (Sicilia, 1989, p. 408)



*Cy Twombly, Untitled, New York City, 1968*

At times Twombly used his white canvases as though he were scrawling penitent exercises into school notebooks. The repetitive gestures of this hypnotic handwriting are akin to the automatic writing that could induce and record trance-like transmissions from the spirit world. Of his painting process, Twombly said, “It’s more like I’m having an experience than making a picture.” (Sylvester, 2000)



*Cy Twombly, Untitled, Rome, 1960*

Other of his white paintings are cryptic diagrams mapping out historical or mythological happenings through marks and gestures scribbled in pencil and crayon, seemingly capturing events as they unfold in the moment. The three drawn windows here act as sequenced spiracles to help draw the ancient past into the immediate present. Roland Barthes called Twombly’s quavering line “an action made visible”. Twombly himself said, “Each line is now the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate—it is the sensation of its own realization.” (Berggruen, p. 148)



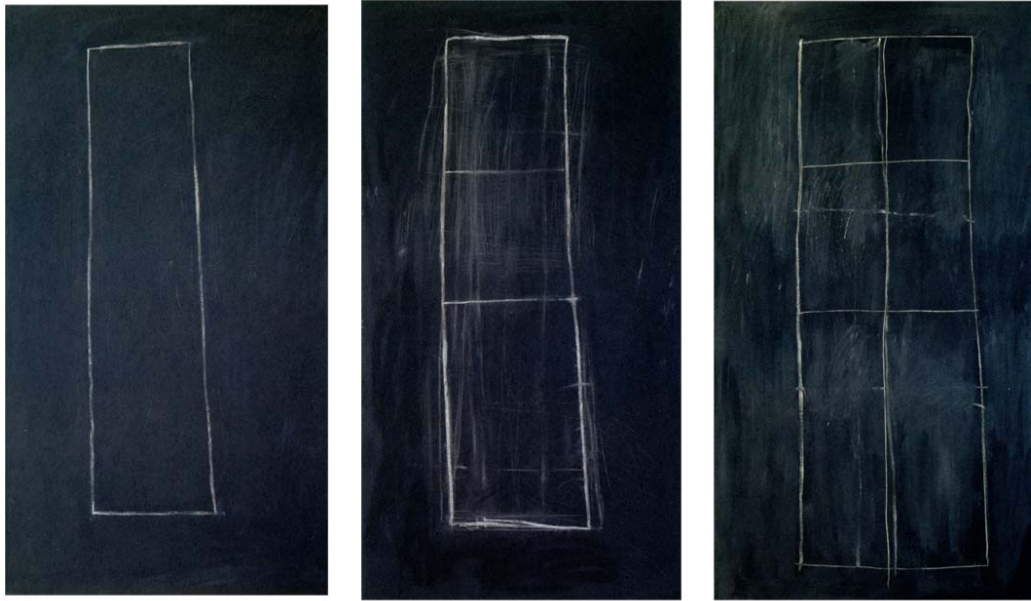
*Cy Twombly, Untitled, Rome, 1987*

Twombly's sculptures, cobbled together from disparate bits and pieces and unified by white paint, are like archaic relics excavated from another time and space.



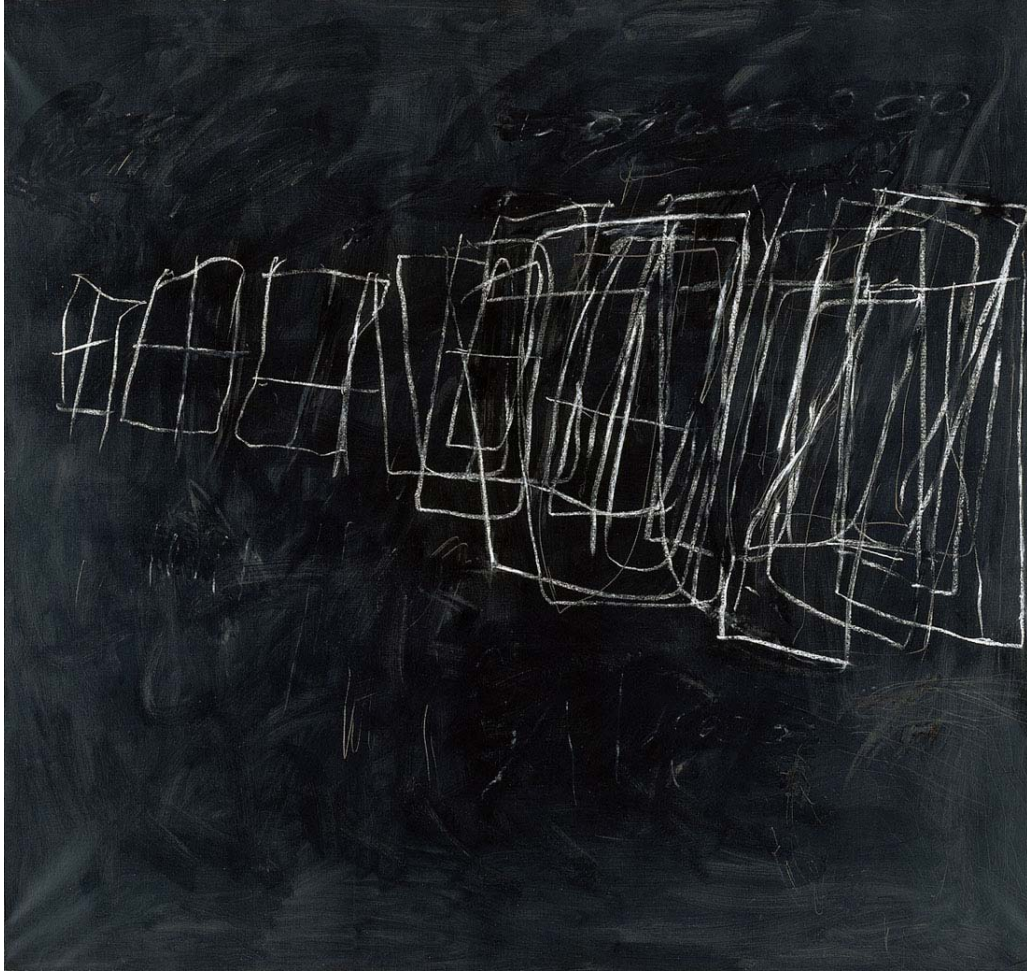
*Cy Twombly, Rotalla, Gaeta, 1986*

The ancient-looking Rotalla sculpture recalls the double wheel motif from the alchemical illustration on page 6, with its mysterious hinge-point drawing us in to what lies behind and beneath.



*Cy Twombly, Problem I, II, III, Rome, 1966*

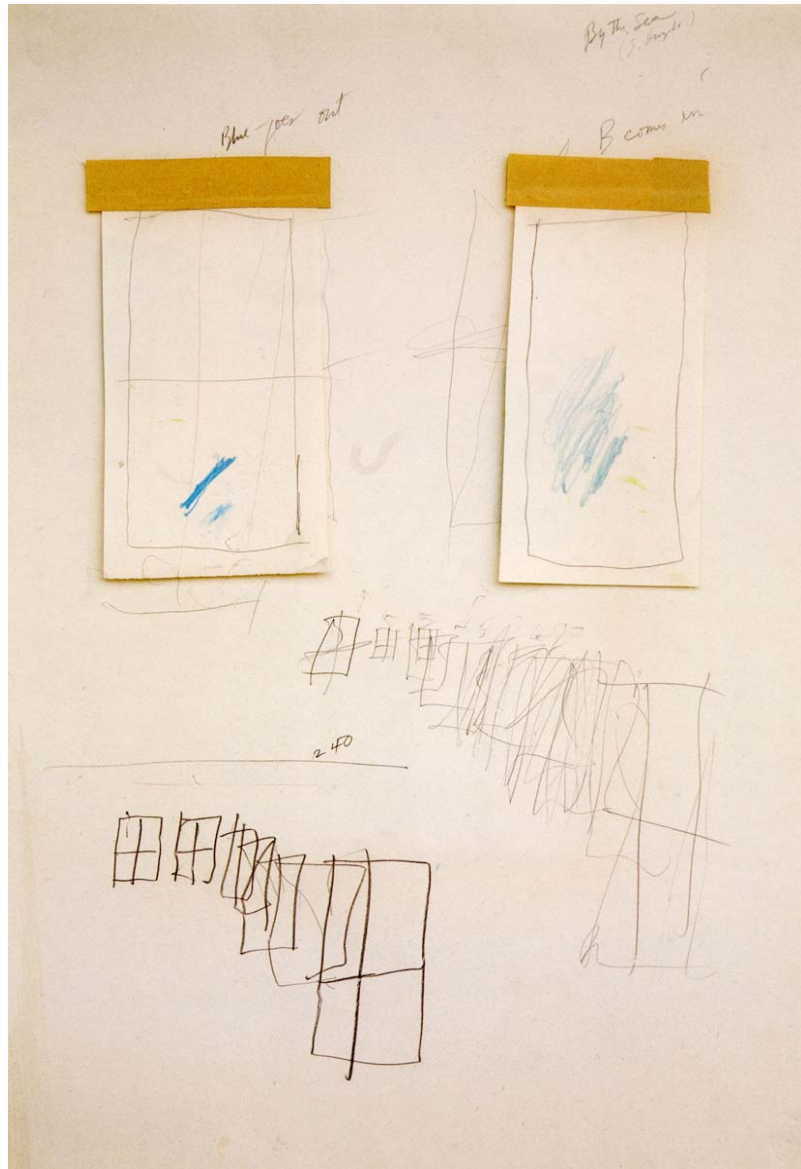
Twombly used the motif of the window throughout his entire career. This triptych of simple paintings begins with a faint, chalky white rectangle sketched onto the dark slate canvas. Then, like a child's mathematical problem worked out on the board in the classroom, this rectangle is divided into three, not simply by adding horizontal lines, but with a series of erasures and re-drawings, creating more animated lines which gradually become a shimmering figure.



*Cy Twombly, Untitled, Rome, 1966*

Then further erasures and divisions are made, as the lines become blurred and the figure begins to multiply in dimension. This image continues that movement, as the windows expand in both time and space, creating windows within windows.



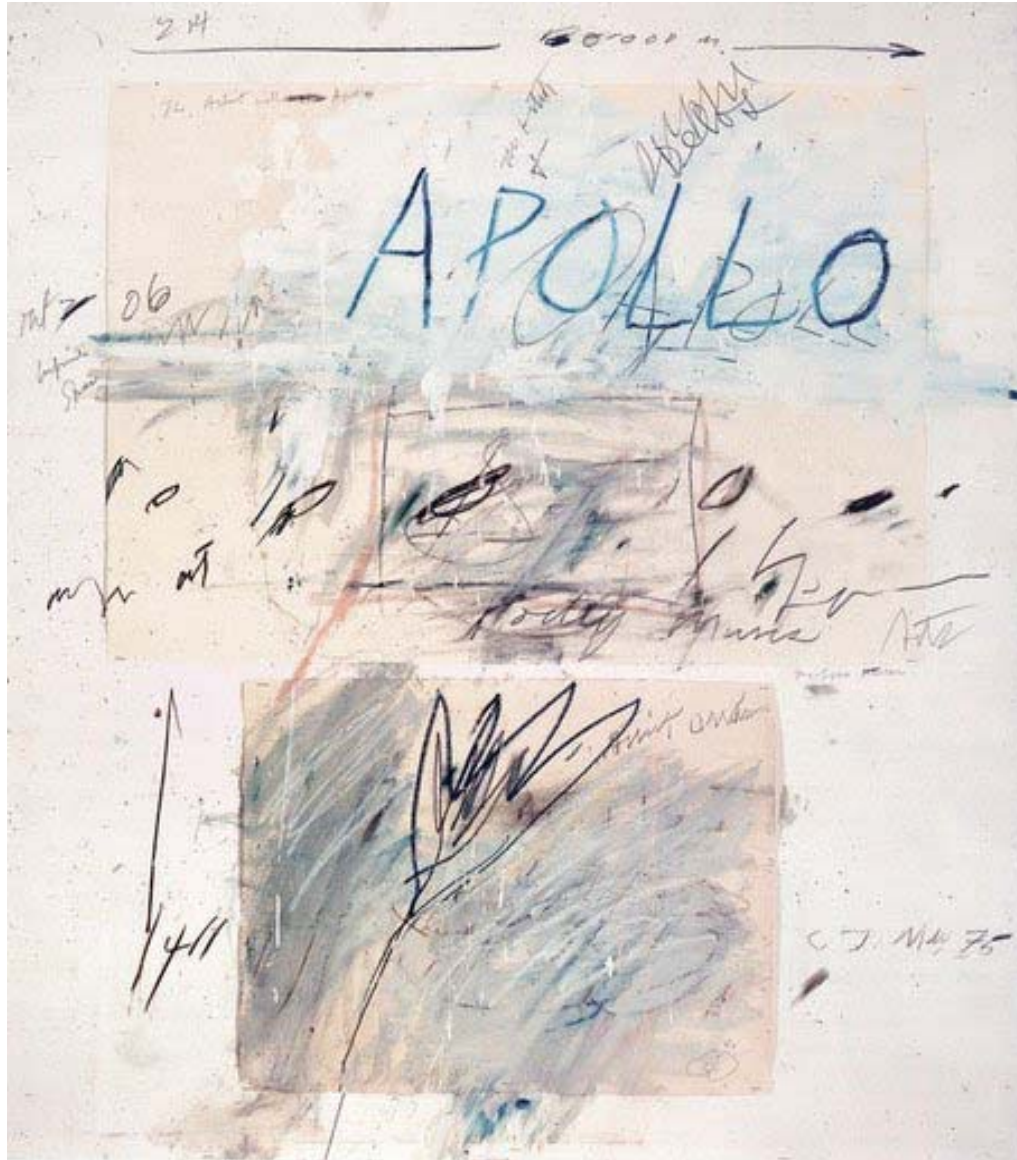


*Cy Twombly, Untitled, Sant'Angelo, Ischia, 1966*

Twombly creates another apparently child-like effect through layering crudely taped cut-out white windows on top of other, pencil-drawn windows, and within these cut-out rectangles are more windows, with faint blue crayoned scribbles, evoking the “caelum”, or blue quintessence appearing in the alchemical vas. Below the collaged windows, two more sets of windows, darker below and faintly scribbled above, seem to emerge from deeper within the picture frame out

This paper is strictly for educational use and is protected by United States copyright laws. Unauthorized use will result in criminal and civil penalties.

towards the surface, reminding us of the infinitely receding reflections in facing mirrors. A seemingly naive diagram ends up conjuring worlds within worlds.



*Cy Twombly, Apollo and the Artist, 1975*

Expanding and crossing dimensions by giving us a view through these windows directly into an experience of the ancient world, Twombly magically calls up the mythic realm simply through writing the name of the god in Cerulean

This paper is strictly for educational use and is protected by United States copyright laws. Unauthorized use will result in criminal and civil penalties.

blue, along with some scratches, erasures and cyphers, evoking a whole dynamic action and narrative. At the same time, these windows framed in everyday markings and measurements contain and relativize that other dimension, keeping us in the scale of the plain sheet of paper and the ordinary, present world, while precisely delineating the incommensurability.



*Cy Twombly, Orpheus, 1975*

Here again, Twombly creates a multi-layered story simply by scrawling Orpheus' name in faltering letters across dense layers of dripping white paint, which blot out and erase some mysterious image, words or event that we can't quite see. The myth of Orpheus deals with the nature of sacrifice and loss, which can open us up to inspiration and creativity. The heavy black quavering line tracing out the O creates a window-like opening, as well as calling up the severed

This paper is strictly for educational use and is protected by United States copyright laws. Unauthorized use will result in criminal and civil penalties.

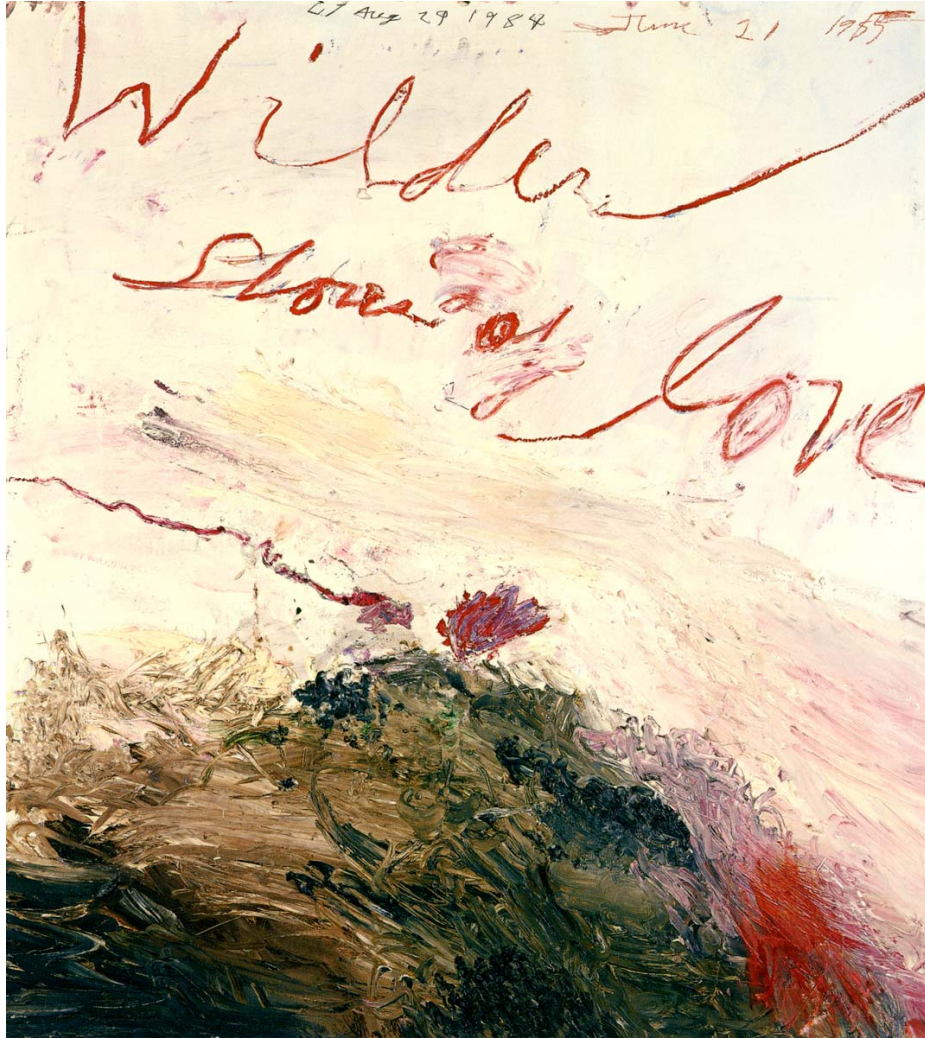
head of the dismembered Orpheus himself, his mouth open in an O of perpetually lamenting song.



*Cy Twombly, Bacchus Series, 2003*

In Twombly's Bacchus series, this O expands, multiplies, and rolls across the canvas in blood-red waves and rivulets, evoking the orgiastic, intoxicating and dismembering frenzy of the Bacchic rites. The overwhelming scale of the swirling loops of red paint required the energetic, full-bodied engagement of Twombly's 6'4 frame in these massive gestures, encompassing life's perpetual

movement from creation to destruction and dissolution, while containing the seeds of regeneration. (Berggruen, p. 149)



*Cy Twombly, Wilder Shores of Love, Bassano in Teverino, 1985*

The red title words of *The Wilder Shores of Love* sprawl slanting across the top of the canvas –while below, heavy, mud-like paint has been slung and smeared into a solid mass or land-form, a seeming record of the gritty turmoil of earthly life. Between the two, flows a torrent of whitish paint, tinged with red,

forming a passageway or spiracle linking the visceral action down below to the airy realm of language and spirit above, allowing for the translation of the inchoate into a physical expression in words. A glowing red blossom-like form emerges up out of the turbulent mass, like the alchemical gold found or made in the chaos of the dung heap. When contemplated, that blossom, like the philosopher's stone, begins to multiply and expand its healing effect.



*Cy Twombly, Untitled (Peony Blossoms), 2007*



*Cy Twombly, Self-portrait, Gaeta, 2003*

The window appears again in this self-portrait from 2003, when Twombly was 75. We see only the back of the artist's head and shoulders, though we can sense his age and frailty as he gazes out the window in seeming reverie. The blown-out light illuminates and diffuses his outline, becoming incandescent as it dissolves into his form. In contrast with the massive dark sculpture looming to his right, *he* seems to de-materialize before our eyes, evanescing into light. In viewing this photograph, we find ourselves sitting where he sits, we look where he is looking, joining in his unfocused gaze and diffused state of being, as we dissolve with him, entering the spiracle, and gaining a glimpse of eternity.

**Diane Fremont** is a Jungian Analyst in private practice in New York City, and a training analyst, faculty member and supervisor at the Jungian Psychoanalytic Association. She is a board member of ARAS, the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, and a contributor to *The Book of Symbols*, produced by ARAS and published by Taschen in 2010. She is a member of the Art & Psyche Working Group, and writes and lectures on the feminine, dreams, alchemy, art and the creative process.

## **Bibliography**

[www.ARAS.org](http://www.ARAS.org) The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, New York.

Berggruen, O. *The Writing of Art*. London, 2011

Crowley, John. (2002) *The Translator*. HarperCollins, New York, NY.

Elderfield, J. curator. (2015) *In the Studio: Paintings*. New York, NY.

Hochdorfer, A., (2009) “Blue goes out, B comes in: Cy Twombly’s Narration of Indeterminacy.” In *Cy Twombly: States of Mind, Painting, Sculpture, Photography*

*Drawing*. Ed. A. Hochdorfer, Vienna. (pp. 12-36)

Hochdorfer, A. (2009) *Cy Twombly: States of Mind, Painting, Sculpture, Photography*

*Drawing*. Ed. A. Hochdorfer, Schirmer/Mosel Verlag, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) Vienna.



Jung, C.G. (1966) *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. CW 14. Princeton, NJ.

Sicilia, Jose Maria (1989) Interview in *Interviews with Artists, 1966-2012*, M. Peppiatt, New Haven and London, 2012.

Sylvester, D. *Interview/Cy Twombly/Rome*. (2000) In *Art in America*, New York. (On [cytwombly.info](http://cytwombly.info).)

Von Franz, M.L. (1974) *Number and Time*. Evanston, Ill.

Von Franz, M.L (1980) *On Divination and Synchronicity: The psychology of meaningful chance*. Toronto.

[www.cytwombly.info](http://www.cytwombly.info) (official website for Cy Twombly's artwork, writings and biography)