

**Grey/Polychrome: Cy Twombly, Modernity, Classicism, and the History of Art**  
**Dr Frances Guerin (Film Studies, University of Kent) in conversation with Professor Ahuvia Kane (Royal Holloway)**

*Part of the Making Space for Art series, organised by the Centre for Visual Cultures and Royal Holloway Picture Gallery.*

**Professor James Williams:** Okay. Welcome to the last event in our Making Space for Art series. It's great to have such a big crowd actually on this very hot Monday for conversation on and around Cy Twombly with two speakers, one internal, one external, who I'll introduce shortly. The format of this conversation is relaxed. We're going to have first of all a short presentation from our first speaker, Frances, and then Ahuvia the same. Then there'll be a chance for them to converse immediately around what the other has said, and then we can open it out to general discussion.

Let me introduce our first speaker then, Frances Guerin, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Kent, Canterbury, and the author and editor of a number of influential books. I'm just going to list them if you don't mind, *Frances: A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany*, 2005. Edited volume, *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, 2007. *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany*, 2011. The list goes on. I'm going to get there. Edited volume, *On Not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture*, 2015. Her most recent book that was published earlier this year, *The Truth Is Always Grey: A History of Modernist Painting*, by Minnesota.

This is a groundbreaking book. I've read it, I know it very well, tracing the unique history of grey in modernism, but also going back to Medieval Renaissance painting. It's a revising of the history of painting, Western painting in so many ways. It is enormously exhilarating to read, so I recommend it. In fact let me just plug the discount on the book available with a code. It's on this flyer, as you leave. I want to add also that Frances is the author of an amazing blog, one of the best art blogs around, called FX Reflects, which engages with a lot of the shows that come up in Paris and other cities too. Another feather in your very wide cap, Frances. Our first speaker, Frances Guerin.

Our second speaker/interlocutor is Professor Ahuvia Kahane, professor of Greek at the Department of Classics here. Co-director of the Centre for Reception of Greece in Rome. Ahuvia is also like Frances the author and editor of many critical works, too many to mention. Again just a few: *The Interpretation of Order: A Study in the Poetics of Homeric Repetition*, 1994. *The Chicago Homer*, 2001. *Homer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 2012, and forthcoming *Epic, Novel and the Progress of Antiquity*. I should also mention Ahuvia, I didn't notice until I checked you that you are the co-editor of the Oxford English-Hebrew Dictionary. That's you?

**Ahuvia Kahane:** Yes.

**James:** Okay, great. One of your current interests is on painting and in particular Cy Twombly. It's great to have these speakers here. We've thought about it loosely as a kind of set of provocations in a very constructive way. That Frances will be speaking on Twombly

grey and the modern and Ahuvia on Twombly polychrome, and antiquity. Trying to make sense of those connections and apparent opposites will be the challenge today. Perhaps if I could ask then Frances to present first, and then we can sit around the table and then we're all together. Okay, Frances.

**Frances Guerin:** Thank you, James. Thank you for the very generous introduction. Ignore my little notes to myself, I'm like here I am, exposed. What better artist to be exposed with than Cy Twombly. I'm going to talk for about 12, 13, 14 minutes, not long. I'm going to read what I wrote. Over the years that I've been studying the paintings of Cy Twombly, I've watched critics become and I quote "radically destabilised by their encounter with Twombly's paintings". His work stirred outrage in the 1960s and '70s, confusion and dismissal in the middle decades of the 20th century. Eventually only in 1994 at nearly 70-years-old did he grow to prominence as a leading postwar American painter.

Still today critics have radically different and often mutually exclusive opinions about Twombly's work. This is something that I think Ahuvia and I will talk about later. It's because Twombly's work fits nowhere. It fits nowhere. It certainly fits nowhere in the neat line from Pollock to Warhol that the definition of post-war American art depended on. Europe accepted him much earlier, he moved to Rome in the late 1950s, and Europe accepted him and promoted him. All of which is to say that I'm not fully convinced. Although I'm convinced, I'm not fully convinced, I'm ready to be persuaded on what I've written about Twombly in the past. To me this is an opportunity to keep thinking about Twombly and to change my mind in the way that he changes his mind across time.

That said I'm still interested in the grey. It's difficult to see. I'm still interested in the grey. I'm not only interested in the color grey of the background, and some of his other most iconic works from the 1960s and '70s. I'm interested in the grey as the unknown, the grey as the moment of impossibility and the absence that defines the in-between spaces of the journey that we as viewers undertake together with Twombly's paintings. When I talk about Twombly's paintings, I'm talking about a single painting, and a group of paintings, and also his paintings as a body of work. Because in many ways now that he's dead, that circle it has been completed but of course it's still ongoing.

I want to suggest that the color grey best embodies all of his work, and I'll explain what I mean by that. A lot of the most convincing work that has been written on Twombly begins with who he was and where he lived and place. Here of course place is very important for Twombly as well. As you see, many of the untitled works are untitled and then the name of the place. Of course he lived between, he lived in Rome, but he also frequently went back to Lexington, Virginia, and the identity of these places of Italy and America and of this ancient world, and of course the modernness of Virginia influenced his work.

I want to think of his work in terms of the path that he travels between two points, between Lexington and Virginia, between then and now. Of course between his devotion to classicism, to romanticism, to the Renaissance, to early modernism, to poetry, to writing, to art history, to photography, and as I argue in *The Truth Is Always Grey*, to the cinema. Twombly is a vulture in this way. He digests, he takes from many different places, digests and re-envision all that he sees, touches and feels. I think that grey speaks to the uncertainty of the passage between these touchstones. It's that work in-between, as

opposed to the location at either end, that is where Twombly's work sits. Not ever offering us a comfortable, stable ground on which to stand and look at what is always in motion.

When Ahuvia and I first began our dialogue I was interested in the fact that Ahuvia is a classicist and a cinema historian. I was thinking, so we bring these two very different perspectives to Cy Twombly's work. At that moment I took on the task of insisting on the modernness of Twombly's painting. I began to think, what is it that makes his work modern? The white circular motion of the untitled works of the 1960s and '70s, of course, remind us of futurism, of Balla, of Severini, of Boccioni, all of whom, of course, were inspired by the poetic as well as by machines.

In Twombly, motion made the picture differently in the energy of the line, in the motion across space, in the fanaticism of the impulse to get to the other side of the canvas. The inspiration of the kinetic is always identifiable in these lines. Another influence or another touchstone to Twombly, is perhaps Marcel Duchamp and works like this, echoing the idea of movement and speed, and the idea of capturing those moments in-between, if you like, and of capturing time and space in an image.

For all of these similarities, Twombly hesitates unlike the others. The velocity and intensity of the urge to draw and the uncertainty of the future line is often truncated in the moment that we watch and find Twombly on the canvas. He starts to think, perhaps changing direction, erasing and running crayons into paint, as we see on the left-hand side. Alternatively, it doesn't really fit in with the Futurists. Alternatively, these chicken scratches in the dirt, and that's a quote from Twombly that I was saying, that Ahuvia and I were talking about earlier.

He and the woman who curated his work in Houston at the Cy Twombly gallery at the Menil [Collection], went and visited the Sistine Chapel, and it was a private viewing for the two of them and they went in. As they walked out over lunch, he said, "It makes my work look like chicken scratches on the dirt, doesn't it?" He had this way of always debating his work. Alternatively, these chicken scratches in the dirt can be seen as closer to a surrealist automatic writing or automatic drawing. The mechanisation of thinking, or in this case, not thinking.

Twombly's work can be seen to represent an underlying unconsciousness as a truth that is ultimately discoverable, but of course, Twombly is not sure. Anyway, he's not a surrealist because there is no truth to Twombly, and there is no resting place from which to know that the journey across the canvas in time and history as well as the power and size of the canvas and the paint – there's no place from which we can know what has been accomplished.

Twombly's enormous panels, these three are not so big, they often continue from one canvas to the next. He repeats the thought and the problem endlessly, reaching across the stand often of Twombly's lifetime as a painter. All of his works come in series and multiples. Even if a work appears to have a beginning and an ending contained by a frame, that frame can for Twombly often be just a stretch above. There's always another and another work, often with the same title, as if the loops continue from one painting to the next, as though Twombly is still thinking about the previous painting on the next canvas.

Of course, here we see on the left Twombly rekindling thoughts from 40 years earlier, where he retakes up the form of the circles. Twombly believes in his work as a living and changing and fluent entity, and this is the belief that I think we find evident on the canvas. His work is not static, never finished, and so the difficulty of categorizing it and understanding it, calling it modern, becomes an impossibility. Hence, I gave up on the idea that I could identify the modernness of Twombly 's work.

Giorgio Agamben, talking about sculpture on the left, Gaeta is a small fishing village just outside of Rome. Giorgio Agamben has argued that Twombly gives form to the caesura. He says that the works don't simply represent a caesura, they are a caesura. "In its movement, the caesura exposes the inactive core of every work, the point of which the will of art supporting it seems almost blinded and suspended. It is like the movement of falling beauty has no weight. It is not the work of gravity, but an inverse flight, like the one Simone Weil had to think of when she asked, and I quote – Agamben quoting Weil – "Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise. What wings raise, a certain power can make things come down without flight."

Following Agamben, I included the slide on the right because Twombly will give the same title to paintings and sculptures across time. Following Agamben, Twombly's is the body of work in which the what is never said. The spaces on the canvas that are left blank become as important, if not more so, than those on which the white or colored lines, or the swatches of paint and conscious coloring, create a narrative in which the infinite motion of the artist is made visible. We might colour Twombly's caesura in grey.

Further to explain this, I want to talk about these two images. In two canvases, in which we might be tempted to claim that they capture the exact opposite. *Orpheus* on the left and the *Treatise on the Veil*. The one on the left, *Orpheus*, follows the myth of the poet, musician, prophet, with his ability to challenge and seduce. The other on the right, a *Treatise*, mathematical lines measuring a grey background, recalling the equations of Pythagoras or Archimedes.

The one in white, the color that is Twombly's equivalent for light. The other in this panoply of greys, his color for self-reflection. One is looking out with the other looking inward. However, if we look closely, how different really are they? Is the O in *Orpheus* anything more than the form of the letter? As Roland Barthes argues, the strokes in Twombly's work are childish, irregular, clumsy. "Such markings are recognisable as letters in formation, they don't carry meaning, they lack comprehension of a word." That's Roland Barthes's argument.

Accordingly, *Orpheus* is not only about the myth of Orpheus. In fact, Orpheus is not even to be found anywhere in the image, but his name is taken up as an evocation.

Anyway, it's not really that legend that interests Twombly. It's Rilke's *Sonnets*, written in a frenzy of creativity, the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, these are his inspiration. Twombly claims an affinity to Rilke, which is shaped by the shared interest in the River Nile, the expatriate sensibility, and their commitment to high modernism. As *Sonnets* are Rilke's masterpiece, so O could be Twombly's claim to his status as a painter. Giotto's demonstration as we've learned through Vasari, his demonstration to Benedict XI, the Pope. Vasari claims that the O

is his demonstration of his brilliance, being able to replicate the perfect O is the claim for Giotto's identity as a master.

Of course, Twombly's claim to his own artistic brilliance, is like lines faltering, it is always open to debate and reinterpretation. Oh, you can't really see this on the slide, but at the top of this painting it's this colored wash that looks like clouds, always caught in a thunderstorm, the tears of death, and that it's dripping down the canvas, very subtle dripping down the image. Tears of death and mourning, straining the canvas, and so O becomes transcendence in failure. The measurable movement of the circles of time around the earth being rained on, and the infinity of time and space, all in the same breath on the same canvas.

The *Treatise on the Veil*, this is his second version, is the very opposite. Of course, as I would argue, there are no opposites because it's a body of work in which there's no stability. What is this veil, what is the *Treatise* of the title? There are many explanations, including a number given by Twombly himself. He told Heiner Bastian, who did his *catalogue raisonné*. He told Heiner Bastian, "The painting was based on my bridge photograph of a bride running across train tracks that was given to him formerly by Robert Rauschenberg." He told Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, who's the curator of his work at the Menil Collection in Houston, he told her he was standing on a hill just outside Rome, he looked down and he saw a bride having her photograph taken. He told Richard Leeman that he was inspired by the lifting of the veil of Eurydice and Orpheus's consequent descent into hell.

The white wax crayon lines have also been interpreted as being about time and about the movement through space, and also the unpredictable rhythms of the abstract sounds recorded on a magnetic tape as part of Pierre Henry's opera, *The Veil of Orpheus*, that he did in 1953. This enormous canvas which you may have seen at the... The first time the two versions were put together was at the Tate. The way that they were exhibited in that exhibition in 2009, curated by Nicholas Serota, was interesting. I don't know how many of you saw that, but if you go into that room, it was absolutely impossible – I'm seeing some nodding – it was absolutely impossible to look at them both or even one because of the closeness of the room.

Twombly has applied paint to this enormous canvas in his very unique way – a piece of cloth in this one and oil and a dilutant to create unevenness and unpredictability. As we walk in to look at this painting, especially as the two were exhibited at the time, what are we meant to look at? We can't see it in one glance. The line becomes like the O, a marking on the canvas. Heiner Bastian, who did the *catalogue raisonné*, argues that the line is a calculation and demonstrates Twombly's debt to the mathematicians. Of course, as we remember, we can't read that line.

The painting, I would argue, sinks into motion, in order to look at it, we need to walk along it. Once we do, what are we going to be looking at? The aleatoriness of the grey background, or the more controlled hands of the lines that are not figurative, what do we do with it? The excitement and energy of grey paint as we move across the canvas, affects us unavoidably. Up close we see the smearing and erasing, the smudging as Twombly has moved across, in what feels like minutes earlier.

We can see him and feel him on the canvas, he's so close, he's almost there, especially in moments of intensity where he's built up the paint or when he's gone over it again and again, rubbed away with a rag. As Roland Barthes argues, "Twombly is contiguous with canvas, not through a projection, but through a touch which always remains light." The grey paint leads us inevitably to Twombly's point. Of course, he's always using his fingers to apply and drag and smudge and smear the canvas, it's always a very, very physical experience for him as well as us.

I want to suggest that Twombly's painting is this journey, the journey across that we metaphorically have across a painting such as the *Treatise on the Veil*, the second version. Even in works that move right to left such as this one, which is in the Menil in Houston which takes up this whole wall. Even though it appears to begin and end if only with stretcher bars, it's not the point of departure or the destination that matters. Because often, there is no end, just an infinite longing and an endless search for a solution to a problem that is never revealed. Discoveries that are made as we together with Twombly, detour from the path that is given by the line of the painting.

My last slide *Bolsena*, this journey that we go on in time and space with Twombly, the painter is embodied in grey. Grey doesn't simply represent the journey, it is the journey, it is a color that is always in motion, it eludes definition, it is a living, breathing entity on these canvases. If white is the light, grey is the expanse of the unknown. To extend Agamben's notion of the caesura, grey, both the colour and the painting, becomes a vessel for meaning, not just the ship that transports us, but its progression across the sea.

The frenetic energy of grey in a painting such as *Bolsena* is instructive, the water of the lake at Bolsena becomes the seat where he went on a vacation one summer. It becomes like the sea in this painting, it is agitated and turned up. With the white line approaching a horizon, the mark of measurement and human control over a phenomenon that we can never fully understand.

Our instinct is to hold on to the line but the discovery is in the intimate grey because the line is never as reliable as we want it to be. It falters, divides and splinters, like fireworks as it's exploding across a dramatic body of water. In the grey background, however, we are invited to immerse ourselves in the senses, energy of paint on a canvas and the surprise of the accidental discoveries along the way. Thank you.

[applause]

**Ahuvia:** Oh yes, that'll be useful. I'm going to change the title of my talk.

[laughter]

I'm going to call it, modern polychrome but maybe something like grey modern definitely but— I'm going to pick up on what Frances was saying about the moment of the possibility or perhaps Giorgio Agamben's comments which really— I'm a great fan of Agamben, but I should have paid more attention to the caesura. Really, what I wanted to suggest was that for Twombly, grey is as colourful as polychrome and in the same way that his paintings are sculptural, you could extend it to any number of opposites and that his very sensual painterly work is about as intellectual as you get.

I think Frances already showed us some of that, in that, it's most just— Which is both grey in the untitled, and red and blue in the *Bacchus*, the famous *Bacchus* here, those of you who know it, is both a child scroll and yet a reflection on modernism, and some of the fundamentals of modernism. In that mechanical repetition, there's both the modernist machine or Delaunay, but equally the totally non-mechanical. The wondrous thing about Twombly for me, I'm so glad that I have the opportunity to exchange or to take part in a discussion with Frances. Because normally, they are opposite, all of these things, modern and ancient, painterly and sculptural, written and visual.

Twombly manages somehow miraculously, and he's the only artist that I know that can do so, so effectively, to play with all these toys as if they were just part of one big Lego set. I again will try to keep this very short. What do I do?

**Frances:** Point it towards the computer.

**Ahuvia:** Okay, this is a quote from the great late Svetlana Boym, from Harvard, who died far too young, not too recently. She objects to modern, postmodern and she talks about the off-modern, off as in off-kilter, off-Broadway, off the path, off way, off-brand, off the wall, occasionally off-colour. Very simply a detour, an off-colour detour, but Twombly understands that in the most constructive way. Perhaps that's just one thing that I wanted to suggest, was that antiquity is one of the places – or the reception of antiquity, or his readings of antiquity is one of the places – where this comes together.

This is Twombly towards the very end of his life, whether he's coming and going, it's not very clear. He is going in one way and then he's coming into being. Behind him, he died in 2011 as you know, is the great enormous ceiling, which is the second ground canvas that he paints at the Paris Opera. It's a very untypical Twombly in the Salle des Bronzes. It's sculptural, it's very painterly, and it's very colourful. In those colours, if you look at his 400 square metres, it's absolutely gigantic. Totally atypical, but atypical is typical Twombly.

You see the sky, it's effortlessly figurative. It's the sky and the heavenly bodies and you can't see it very well here, but there are the names of some of the great Greek sculptors in this painting. It's a painting about the history of sculpture: in grey is Phidias, the master of the— This strange mix of images and words, which is totally natural to the Greeks, this is of a famous cup, which actually was part of the Twombly exhibition just recently in Athens about antiquity and modernity. Ancient to modern is very hot these days in Twombly's—

Twombly understands that grey is colourful, that colour is grey, that writing is visual, that what you see is written up, and the Greeks understood that. That's I think one of the things that he picks up from antiquity, not because he's interested in antiquity, he's not an antiquarian, he's not a lover of antiquity. He's interested in stuff and there's lots of stuff in antiquity as much as there is in the modern world. Here's a bit from the Parthenon Frieze, and it's an elegant grey. I've been talking to Frances and wondering whether the modernists in a bizarre twist could have taken their notion of modern greys, modern elegant whites from a fantasy of antiquity and its grey marbles.

Which of course, is a fantasy, because in antiquity a Greek sculptor is painting. This is Alma-Tadema and the Parthenon Frieze. It was all painted, it's all polychrome. This is what we

would call kitsch, but nonetheless, the statue of Athena in the Parthenon and probably what it looked like. Again, the statue of Zeus at Olympia. It's not just that it has colour and being painted, but it has colourful woods and stones in it. Here's elegant Venus de Milo, the emblem of whiteness and greyness. That's a modern fantasy because she would have been painted, and she would have had a "hello big boy" kind of eyes. Because that's as unclassical as the moderns would have thought of them.

That's just really to say that all of these things, and grey and polychrome, they're all intermixed. He saw that— this is a trial from the [Divine] Dialogues exhibition at the Cycladic Art Museum in Athens very recently, which brought together some important pieces. He sees right through the greyness without trying to force her out of her greyness, of, in this case, the Venus Anadyomene, rising from the water, which of course is the title of some of his paintings. He writes it in bold red, creating this impossible but totally natural mix, just like the scroll, which is both grey and intensely colourful, both. They're totally mechanical and totally unmechanical, but totally modern and very ancient in its—

This is Barthes, who's often quoted, and wrote, of course, on Twombly. You can see the smear in 50 days. I'll talk about that at the end in a moment or two, just to show you one more amazing mix of Twombly's and this red smear. We all remember, what was it, in 1992 when one of his paintings was smeared over with lipstick? Do you remember the date, Frances? Anyway. That of course, on the one hand is destroying his art, but at the same time, the perfect comment both in its colour and its erotic intensity. This is what Barthes says: "Ideas are not shiny metallic figures, in conceptual corsets, but rather faint shaky strains" – this is about Twombly – tenuous blemishes on a grey background.

This works completely against this separative ideology of modernity. Heidegger, in a famous essay, talks about the difference between antiquity as text and modernity as an image. He says, "The fact that modernity is an image is the defining element of modernity." Twombly sees right through that I'm afraid and he says, "No." In fact, he— Where is it? Let me just give you the quote. He disappears quite famously in— No. In Mary Jacobus's famous book about Twombly and reading. Twombly says, "When I go to Lexington people always ask me about what I do." He says, "I read. I paint. I do these things and I always make references and that's just what I do."

One of the nice things about this highly recommended book that came out by Mary Jacobus is that she shows how carefully Twombly read by looking at his library. I think if you look at each one of these, you will see how greys are colourful, colour images are grey, writing— Now, in one way this is very simple. Writing his scrolls are painterly, and his paintings are writerly. I just want to show you, maybe I'll end here, one example, and there are many of those. The virtual painting of course, is significant because he's not really writing, but his painting virtual. The one painting that I want to show you is one of the huge items in that series that is also in Paris, *Fifty Days at Iliam*, normally housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

It's 10 enormous canvases, each one about 3 by 3 metres. They occupy, in fact, two rooms and they're set. They are a comment on— I keep saying Homer's *Iliad*. Frances rightly corrects me to say, "It's never direct. It's through Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad*." I just want to say one tiny little detail in which he is combining the greys, in a sense writing is,



writing has no colour. Twombly knows that writing is polychrome. We have very few ancient paintings. We have a few scraps of ancient sculpture. Most of what we have is writing, but in that writing, we have intense colour.

In a sense, when we talk about grey and polychrome, the answer is, yes. I'll give you just one last example of that, and this is one of the images on the series. We could talk in great lengths about this. You see the red smudge? It's one of its most intensive, just a lack of colour, and then there's a little bit of, let's call it grey scrutiny under that. If you look at the detail, it says light a fire that consumes all before it. As a philologist, as a student of texts, the thing that interests me here is the word that seems most least interesting, but most historically in a literary sense, and philosophically is the most, and that's the word "light".

That's the signal that he is quoting from the Homeric similes which are visual medallions in the great narrative text of, in this case, Homer's *Iliad*. Sorry, I just jumped. Where is it? There it is. Sorry, we need to go back to the slide and I'll show you the actual text from Homer. There it is. That light is philologically this emblem, the sign of the simile. The simile is one of the most visual elements in the writing of Homer, which is highly visual anyway.

That's to say, is Twombly a philologist? A scholar? A painter? If you asked him, he would laugh you off and go rolling in his paint. He wouldn't give it a second thought. He is both this intrinsically scholarly, learned, worldly, I would say grey, in the best possible sense a scholar, but at the same time, the most intensely colorful and emotionally intense painter that I know at least. I think that's a good stop point.

**James:** Great.

[applause]

I'd like to invite you and Frances to the table if that's all right, and I'll join you. We can talk into the microphone there.

**Ahuvia:** Do you want to sit in the middle? That way, Frances and I don't fight. You'll keep us apart.

**James:** I would like to invite you both to comment what you want to do with what the other has said really. I can see you're already in dialogue. What particular things now, hearing yourselves speak live, stand out for you in your presentations?

**Frances:** I think the first thing that of course I want to be combative, and I say [chuckles] when you— Move the chairs apart! It was interesting what you said about the modernist misinterpreting classical sculpture for its greyness. What immediately came to me was Mantegna and whether the misinterpretation actually comes a long time before modernism.

Which is an interesting way to get to Twombly, because for Twombly, in a way, that's why it's never about the opposite of modernist or— because there are always these stop-off points on the way. Where it goes from classicism to the Renaissance to romanticism to modernism. It's that idea that we were talking about before, that modernism isn't this

constrained, limited phenomenon, that it actually goes way, way back. I don't know. It's just like when you talked about [crosstalk] it's Mantegna, Mantegna, Mantegna!

**Ahuvia:** I couldn't agree more. I suppose it's a different reason. I actually agree entirely. One of the wonderful lessons of Twombly, I think, is that he shows us that everything, every dialectic, every opposite, has a middle ground or a history, or that missing bit in the middle of it. Ezra Pound likes to think that he has killed the past forever. What he's doing is in fact, writing a wonderful ancient epic in many ways in the *Cantos*, especially in the first *Cantos*. When Immanuel Kant writes what is enlightenment? His catchphrase is *sapere aude*, have the courage to think for yourself. He does it in Latin, and it's a quote from Virgil.

All these things have a history which then emerges, and at some point, we feel that we need to look forward rather than back, but we are a product of our pasts. I don't know if you will agree with that. I think that one of the things that Twombly teaches us, even his exceptional modernism, he knows the lessons of modernity and modernism. It all does have a past, not a past in the sense of being a classicist. I don't think Twombly thinks of himself as an antiquarian, that would be absurd, just absurd. He's looking forward, but he does it with his stuff and he carries with him everything that he does.

**Frances:** It's interesting. What comes up for me in you're saying this. Bearing in mind that he was so shunned in the United States, in the immediate postwar period when they're all getting into abstract expressionism and eventually war. Obviously, what's happening for a lot of those people, and I'm thinking Pollock, because there's a great similarity there, is the break with the past. They're out there saying, "No, we're breaking with the past, we're doing something completely different." I just wonder whether or not one of the reasons that there is no place for Twombly within that, for lack of a better word, canon, although it's probably not the right word. Within that art world, is because he makes the history which is integral to someone like Pollock. He makes it visible. That's not trendy.

**Ahuvia:** I entirely agree.

**Frances:** It's interesting.

**Ahuvia:** We're talking about Lexington and Italy. Lexington itself is a very strange place, because in one sense, this is Lexington, Virginia where he was born. In one sense, it's a little Southern town. At the same time, it's a very patrician— Robert E. Lee is buried there and Stonewall Jackson is buried there. Robert E. Lee's horse is buried there. People bring the horse, what's this idiom, I forget, bring apples to the horse's grave. It's there on Washington — It's very aristocratic in a Southern way. We were talking about the little diner where Twombly used to eat when he was— And you're saying, "Yes, he didn't fit." He wasn't a New Yorker. He was a New Yorker. He was friends with Rauschenberg, very close to Rauschenberg, of course. He was also an Italian aristocrat, and Franchetti, his wife, Baronessa Franchetti, was as aristocratic as you get. That didn't work at the time. Now that we're moving ahead of that, forward, beyond that, the things that Twombly can, has— You can now enjoy them.

**Frances:** Which then comes back to the thing then of, because we've moved past Greenberg. American art has moved past that moment where it needs to prove itself and

say, “Look, we’re different. We’re doing something and it’s exciting. It’s on the edge. We’re leading the way.” That period, that is over in the 1990s. The American art world is able to then extend itself to the European influence of someone like Cy Twombly.

**Ahuvia:** I would entirely agree.

**James:** Can I just ask both of you because it’s the same question, the fact that both of you referenced Barthes, that crucial article that Barthes did for a catalog, it was for an exhibition in the early ’70s. That’s become a kind of sacred text, can I say that, in Twombly studies. Both of you reference that engagement with it approvingly. You are not deconstructing what was Barthes’s post-structuralist turn. He needed Twombly, it seems to me, and a pat on the back, you’re cynical about that.

I don’t want to be cynical because it’s an amazing text and Barthes was doing amazing things. He needed someone like Twombly to make that turn, to smear the lines, to degrade, to hesitate, to fall, to do all those things, which both of you, in different ways, are endorsing in the process. We talk about great as this process. You also use the word truth, and the truth is always grey. Is there any irony in that at all, at least on your part, Frances? How do you ultimately reconcile yourself with Barthes’s reading, which is so supremely seductive, as a post-structuralist text?

You were talking about art history of Greenberg, post-Greenberg, Jacobus, et cetera. You both come back to Barthes, and I just want to know where you stand, perhaps on that, in relation to Twombly.

**Ahuvia:** I think that’s a really interesting point. I also think that in a sense, some of Barthes’s comments on Twombly are not quite Barthes. They’re not the post-structuralist Barthes. I connect very well with the word truth in Frances’s title, because, if you want, Barthes and now Derrida are dead. We’re not now, in this, whatever you want to call it, postmodern, but in the post-Deleuzian world.

One of the things that the people came after, let’s say, the death of postmodernism, partly Agamben, Rancière, partly the whole range of philosophers that reintroduced – Alain Badiou most famously – they reintroduced, having known very well that Macherey – well, okay, more complicated. The generation after Althusser. One of the things they reintroduce is notions of truth, of foundation. Not in a, let’s say, positivist way, not in a logical way. This isn’t the Barthes that says, “Oh, well, the author has... It could be this voice, it could be that voice. We don’t know who speaks the author.”

It’s passed that into a magical concreteness. When you look at Twombly, he’s not an amorphous mixture of stuff. There is a commitment to truth in there. That was premature and unrecognised I think, in the ’70s or even up to the ’90s, where the idea that you could have a really scholarly, intellectual bit of scroll that encompasses the history of painting and modernist painting or even sculpture, on the one hand, very intellectually, and maybe antiquity on the other and do so without any apologies. Without creating, you can still hold on to the bit. That was too strange.

Now, that we’ve moved on, it’s become I think bigger, I don’t know, maybe it’s come into its element. It fits very naturally in today’s, sorry for the pompous word, philosophical

environment. That's one of the reasons why you see so much – the Mary Jacobus book, and the Pompidou exhibition, and the exhibition in Athens. There's a forthcoming book from Yale that Carlos Basualdo is doing, the director of the Philadelphia Museum.

**Frances:** Can I say something? I am along the same lines, but because my world is completely different, I would use different language. For me, the attraction of the Barthes is, art historians are so weighed down by the limitations of their discourse and of their disciplines and institution, that they have to interpret him. There's this limitation, again and again, through the desire to interpret what Twombly is doing, and then all that the next one can do is displace that interpretation, and come up with a new one.

The real concrete example of what are the viewers saying is Rosenkrantz's reading, with all due respect, when she reads Twombly, she completely misinterprets him, because she cannot read. I talk about it, she reads the lines as graffiti. The kind of art history that she does within that modernist frame and her commitment to modernism, she can't expand to this, what I call the vulture-like Twombly with his very learned appropriations from all different periods. It's like that doesn't fit her fixed notion of what modernism is.

The truth, of course, this is Kiefer, "The truth is always grey." That's a quote from Anselm Kiefer. We were talking earlier about in a way Kiefer and Twombly, that creates a really nice dialogue that no one has ever played that out, but it's incredibly provocative. For Kiefer, truth is always ironic. I think here it has to be with Twombly. It has to be as well for the reasons that Ahuvia is saying that we now, I think, live in this— For me, art history in a way is no longer— It can't stick to those very rigid boundaries because of the advent of visual culture and all of the visual— Not only the discourse around art history but the art that is produced today just doesn't work, so it's— I'm kind of echoing what all of you are saying but in a different language.

**James:** Then both of you, I think, you're both saying that this is the time finally when one can decipher Twombly without trying to interpret him to use Barthes's terms, and we can do that because we're in this post-Deleuzian world.

**Frances:** Or Foucault. It's almost like a revival of the Foucauldian approach to, if that is possible, to the image where truth becomes something which happens across, for me, across the canvas, across the— In a kind of unraveling in opus. In a kind of unraveling and unraveling and that sort of process of— It becomes in what is shown on the canvas as opposed to any fundamental— I'm getting myself into trouble here, so I'm not Foucauldian and I could say so [chuckles]. I've got to stop there but I do think that that's a potential avenue of exploration of this planet that we're allowed to do now.

**James:** Okay. Well, maybe this is the chance to open it up. I'm sure there are lots of questions, thoughts— Eric.

**Eric:** Just there's too much that I want to ask you but I wonder what your thoughts are on a particular feature of Twombly's work that has always struck me has been really unique, and that is the coexistence of a cumulative process but also reductive one, as there seems to be this really sophisticated understanding of how you can see something very powerfully by precisely not completing, but by leaving empty spaces.

I'm just thinking about— I know Ahuvia, you've worked on the ruin and the fragments, and I'm just wondering to what extent that plays into your respective understandings of Twombly's work and perhaps the relationship if any that colour plays in that complex scenario.

**Ahuvia:** Well, this is a really interesting and actually a difficult question.

**Frances:** My first impressions are, and maybe you can feed off this, but my first impression is that that speaks very nicely to what Ahuvia was saying about sculpture and the canvas and paint becomes something that is very physical as well as very intellectual and that is manipulated with the hand. He doesn't use a brush, not all the time anyway, rarely, and so it has that physical— And that it also, I think, also creates the unpredictable, so he's— It's almost like those moments where you see him thinking and he'll throw a piece of paint on that and then he'll— I don't know – massage it a bit and then move on somewhere else.

This is not answering your question but I'm wondering if Ahuvia can pick up on that.

**Ahuvia:** The best that I can suggest and I think it merits a lot of effort is that— What I started was with Frances a description of what was it, the— How did you do you call it in the beginning of your talk? The impossibility of— Twombly's – sorry for the pompous word – phenomenology is one where he always recognises unproblematic, the missing beat. The caesura is— I don't know, I need to go back to Agamben, so I shouldn't really talk about it...

So whether he scrolls the word Virgil – okay, I'm trying to pretend that I can get into Twombly's head here. It is not converting Virgil into a painting or the painting into the name Virgil. Barthes, I think, saw some of the way in which he layers it, and it is precisely layering because there's the reference and then the reference outside in the title. Barthes talks about that. Twombly knew his Virgil – Jacobus, who looked at his library quite closely perhaps too much as a text – it's the flipside of Rosenkrantz – you're not supposed to read Twombly as a text any more than you're supposed to read his scrollings as images.

It's somehow that word Virgil and the layering of it which Barthes again saw rather well, I think, is this weird hole with a W8, a spooky kind of a hole that works together even though it's clearly just a name scribbled on a white canvas. I think the frame of looking at Twombly as fragment or as a source and quotation. I'd like to think it's a wrong frame, and then what Twombly teaches us is that it's the wrong frame, and that's actually taking us and the lost history of art, or the collapsed history of art as you were describing it, it forward actually.

It's a new step, at least Megan is interpreting, maybe I'm taking it in an idiosyncratic way—

**Frances:** The other way you could say to counterbalance, to add some balance to that very intellectual response. Often those places on the canvas, you talk about color, often they're browns and yellows and people have read them as like excrement because the physicality and the sexuality and the corporeality of Twombly's paints is something that we haven't really talked about, but there are genitals everywhere, there are body parts everywhere, and there are piles of brown, clumps of brown paint.

There's also that element of it, so it spends that register from the very physical materiality of my body or his body in the here and now back to antiquity in these philosophical,

intellectual, digesting and expelling and expressing of the materials that he's read and seen and experienced – neither of which answers your question.

[laughter]

But that's of course what it provokes. I've got to say also, here's the admission, the very first piece that I wrote on Cy Twombly was as a graduate student in 1994 in a class on cultural studies and it was the exhibition at MOMA, and I was doing this cultural studies class and I hated it and I thought, "I'm going to write on Cy Twombly."

It completely worked and I talked about the three-dimensionality of the painting and how he'd process art of painting and comes into a space as well and he confronts us and he confronts our own physicality because we want to put our finger in and go like that, so there's physical engagement that he's enticing us into having.

I don't know if it's articulated quite like that in my graduate school paper. But I've always thought of that three-dimensionality of his work as somehow in this language of engaging and confronting our identity and subjectivity, and who we are in front of the painting.

**Ahuvia:** Instead of the excrement, which is absolutely there, the sexuality, the penis, which is actually an ancient and a figure but it repeats itself. Here's what Twombly says. It's so intense, those Vs and As and all, but this is a quote from an interview with David Sylvester: "I spelled it Illian, there is no Illian, which is not the correct, it's 'um', but I wanted the A there, and look it in Achilles which figures throughout and Venus is the exact opposite of that." You kind of translate these mad, excremental, erotic scrolls. Of course, it becomes the V1978, it's exactly the right period for the moon. That excrement is immaculate [chuckles]. Sorry.

[laughter]

**James:** Okay. Let's move on to something else, more questions. Yes.

[laughter]

**Speaker 4:** I can get you out of the shit but I'm going to get myself in shit now. I saw an extraordinary exhibition which I don't think either of you will have liked. Which is a kind of saccharine reappropriation of Twombly and it was at Tate Liverpool, I don't know if you saw it. I was telling Eric about it earlier, it was Turner, Monet, and Twombly and it was called 'Later Years' or something. It was telling some kind of narrative of Turner as proto-Impressionist Monet, and then some long, extra-long modernism kind of thing, and there were lots of blues, as you can imagine, there wasn't any grey and stuff like that.

I was wondering actually about what's happening to him now, I mean about thinking about him in these ways, and Frances, you were talking about a post-periodisation and the fact that it doesn't end and it comes around and recycles. That exhibition seems to me to be quite a very different exploit, that they were trying to place them in some lineage and closing him down. The recent exhibitions that you're talking about seem to be opening up again. I don't know, I just wondered how you would have responded to that.

**Frances:** I didn't see that exhibition but he is often connected to Turner. Turner can be placed as the father of abstraction. Twombly is all about water and the sea and air and light and color. This is the stuff of his ideas.

**Speaker 4:** Monet did the London Houses of Parliament [crosstalk].

**Frances:** I just see the connections and the other thing, the saddest thing about Monet is that we all know the water paintings in the Orangerie. At the end of his life, the abstraction in his work was just extraordinary, and he was radical. Monet was radical at the end of his life, was just doing something quite extraordinary and I can absolutely see, I don't know which paintings they had in the exhibition, but—

**Speaker 4:** I think the usual suspects really. [crosstalk]

**Frances:** That's the problem. Usual suspects, but you could do a really extraordinary exhibition and show, bring out the abstraction and the daring and risk of Monet.

**Speaker 4:** They didn't.

**Frances:** They didn't [laughs]. When you couldn't, it's potentially very generative. Twombly, his later work is filled with those colours and light. What you don't see in Monet, which I think is so, instrument is probably the wrong word, but, core to the Twombly late works, is memory. His work is all, to me, the light. His light works, so all about memory and his own life and the painter making these extraordinarily huge canvases that look back all of the time in history and in his own work, and that. The dripping and the tears. That's not where Monet goes at the end of his life.

**Speaker 4:** There was some dripping in it.

**Frances:** Oh, was there some dripping?

**Speaker 4:** They're very small rooms, so you're quite constrained with what you can see.

**Frances:** I think that would be a potentially exciting way to go. That's the great thing about Twombly. You could do so much with him, but what's happening to him today, I don't know. The Mary Jacobus book was the latest one that I have read and it wasn't. It's a nice book and it's beautifully produced. I don't think it's really saying anything that we—

**Ahuvia:** The archive work is [crosstalk]

**Frances:** She's done the archive.

**Ahuvia:** No, no. I do agree. That show which I haven't seen, but has a wonderful catalogue, is by Nick Cullinan from the National Portrait [Gallery] and two others. What strikes me there is that it wasn't really sufficient. You're right. There was such an emphasis on colour, but the instinctive reaction that I had to this was somebody taking colour or not even colour, plain blobs of stuff, could be excrement or— and just sticking in all the canvas and for Twombly, it's that act of putting himself in one way on the canvas.

I'm not a Turner expert or a Monet expert, or even anything more than an amateur admirer, but I can just see them smudging there with the emphasis, not on the color, not on the image even, not even on the viscosity, but on this passionate engagement between the hand, a soft medium, and a flat surface or something like that. That's very Twombly, I think.

**Frances:** [unintelligible 01:17:40] and Turner, did they bring that out?

**Speaker 4:** I can't actually remember. I can't actually remember, it was very compelling.

**James:** We have time for some more questions.

**Speaker 5:** [unintelligible 01:17:58] film a few years ago, [unintelligible 01:18:07] *Her* and the main character in the film is a writer whose name is Theodore Twombly, so [unintelligible 01:18:14] composing letters which have different scripts and fonts to them. Then there's no story to [unintelligible 01:18:20] visual letter into this experience [unintelligible 01:18:26] is in love with her, her voice. [unintelligible 01:18:27] If you've seen the film, if you know the character to associate [unintelligible 01:18:33].

**Ahuvia:** What film again?

**Speaker 5:** It's a film called *Her*.

**Ahuvia:** *Her*.

**Speaker 5:** [unintelligible 01:18:38] it's about written text, how that goes beyond the visual [unintelligible 01:18:44] the whole, it's very tactile [unintelligible 01:18:47] these other things in terms of perhaps integrity [unintelligible 01:18:51].

**Frances:** There are two things that come to mind. One is Peter Greenaway who of course is the filmmaker who examines— I haven't seen the film, *Her*. There's someone who examines script and writing as image and writing as frame and document and his works are interesting in that. The other thing is, for all of this talk about writing in Twombly as being read as image, it just comes, bounces off what you're saying rather than talks to the film. His writing is also, it's a handwriting, it's identifiable.

When he writes you a letter, of course, he doesn't, but people talk about when he writes them, the letter and their name and address is on the letter, you can see it's that very distinctive, exact same script that is in the painting. It is and it isn't just an image, it also is him and identifies him. In that sense names, which doesn't answer your question, but if—

**Speaker 5:** Sorry, my question was, there was a question in it [crosstalk]

**Frances:** [unintelligible 01:20:25]

**James:** I will now, it sounds interesting. We have a few more minutes, for any further thoughts, questions? [silence]. Frances, can I come back to you then, in terms of the book, and Twombly is a key part of this book, did he actually provide the spur for you, in terms of thinking about [unintelligible 01:21:01] and there's so many other examples of grey, and you mentioned Kiefer, but I mean, is Twombly, the person, the artist, whatever it is, we're calling Twombly, that propelled you?



**Frances:** This is an interesting question. If you look on the University of Minnesota, they've just posted on their blog, the story of how I came to it. I actually came to it through Giacometti. Then Giacometti dropped out, but of course, Giacometti and Twombly are not unrelated because, I don't know, I'm assuming people are familiar with Giacometti's work. His work is scrolling and scratching. It's this continual working over again, and again, and again. The grey is just luminous. His grey is multicolored. It creates space in his canvases. It creates depth. It's just this extraordinary use of grey, but he fell out of— He fell out because I was much more focused on the idea of American modernism that attains the centerpiece.

If I write another volume, maybe I'll begin with Giacometti.

**James:** Another book. Okay. Well, I think on that point, we should maybe end, I'm aware it's 6:30 and we're out of time. I just want to thank Francis and Ahuvia for a wonderful dialogue and mutual provocation and opening up so many important questions. Thank you so much.

[clapping]