

## « in the hand's footsteps »

Ellen Mara De Wachter

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In the 1970s, the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) made a number of small paintings on paper, in the manner of American painter Cy Twombly (1928-2011). Through this practice, at first glance so different from his essay writing, Barthes sought to embody Twombly's manner of producing work: the specific combination of style and substance, the ineffable 'gesture' that makes a Twombly a Twombly. It's not surprising, given Barthes' devotion to text, that he alighted on a painter renowned for making formally abstract works that frequently incorporate handwriting. But rather than seeking literal meaning in the painter's scrawled words, Barthes recognised in Twombly something of the 'allusive field of writing'<sup>i</sup>, in which, as Barthes put it, the text might offer 'scraps of indolence, hence of an extreme elegance; as if there remained, after writing, which is a powerful erotic action, what Verlaine calls *la fatigue amoureuse*: that garment dropped in a corner of the ... canvas.'<sup>ii</sup> A bittersweet enamoured feeling, an identification in which the lover wants to – but never quite manages to – become the loved one, with all that this sense might contain of loss and longing.

Barthes was a master at pulling apart specific aspects of the status quo to rebuild them as alluring theoretical discourse, all the while revealing the subtle dynamics at play in the power of the cultural artefacts that surround us. It is touching to discover Barthes' Sunday paintings – he never saw his versions of Twombly's paintings as artworks *per se*. It's a practice that reveals him as a fan, attempting to replicate his idol's unique skill, to incarnate Twombly's gesture by finding in his body the same balance of intensity and expression, stillness and movement that would have furnished Twombly's work with its beguiling and ungainly sophistication – a characteristic Barthes called 'gaucheness'.

It is often said of Twombly's script that it seems to have been written with the wrong hand, as if the artist had held the crayon in his left hand. Traces of that other, left-handed artist are available in the marks on the canvas, pointing to the existence of multiple Twomblys, or at least a number of available 'Twombly skins' that might be donned by others. Twombly, when he writes with his left hand, is not quite himself. He is somehow incarnating the mythical heroes and villains he channels in the lines of energy he draws and paints. In this play of identity, Twombly reminds us of the statement made by the young Arthur Rimbaud in a letter to his teacher Georges Izambard in 1871: 'I is someone else.'

This process of making excursions into other personae is achieved not by altering or cloaking the body, but by the hand's own movements: and these actions are potentially available to all, not just to self-

professed artists. It is a plurality available through handiwork or mark-making, which goes beyond an act of the imagination to a condition of incarnation: one no longer simply thinks about doing something, one gets one's hands dirty by touching the world.

Barthes explains gesture as the 'surplus of an action' ... 'the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, indolences which surround the action with an *atmosphere* (in the astronomical sense of the word).<sup>iii</sup> Magnus Quaife's longstanding engagement with Barthes' ideas led him to tackle the gestures of both Barthes and Twombly, albeit in different ways. Quaife concedes that his relationship with Twombly's work over the years has been a conflicted one, but following Barthes' example, he has sought to understand Twombly's unique gesture through processes of making, unmaking and remaking Twombly's paintings – as well as Barthes' versions of them. The title of his exhibition *B/Q* is a parallel structure to that of '*S/Z*', Barthes' structuralist analysis of Honoré de Balzac's 1830 novella 'Sarrasine', whose chapter headings also lend Quaife's new works their titles. A typographical chimera, the exhibition's title unites Barthes' and Quaife's initials with a forward slash, evoking the simultaneous complicity and discord between two protagonists of this exhibition's story.

In making new work for *B/Q*, Quaife didn't just paint: he performed an adroit sequence of manoeuvres, some conceptual, others technical, which enabled him to discover what Twombly's and Barthes' gestures might have felt like, with the aim of developing and refining his own gesture. A manoeuvre is more than simply a process: the term refers to tactical movement and comes from the French '*main d'oeuvre*', itself derived from the Latin for 'work of the hand'. The eye and the hand work together in this undertaking, and Quaife speaks of how he 'got acquainted with Barthes' by painting numerous portraits of him on French Ruled paper. It's no coincidence that this 'Papier Séyès', with its 2mm lined square, named after the Parisian stationer who designed it, is used throughout France to familiarise children with the gesture of forming letters: to train their hands how to write. Onto these portraits, Quaife collaged fragments of dissected reproductions of Barthes' paintings of Twomblys. They are embedded in globules of paint, dotted across the surface of the portraits. These photographic vignettes of the fruits of Barthes' painterly labour hover before his face like floating afterimages.

For the vast diptych *LXVIII How an Orgy Is Created* (2015), Quaife adopted a different strategy, which began with the artist slicing an exhibition poster featuring one of Twombly's works into hundreds of pieces. For this elaborate manoeuvre, Quaife developed a set of specific rules according to which he attempted to cut the print into sections following the smallest brushstrokes possible, working intuitively and without speculating on his decisions. Every one of the hundreds of pieces of cut-up poster was used to make the final work, even the minute diacritical marks of the small print caption for the poster image. First embedding each piece of paper into a thick slick of snowy white paint on the left hand canvas, which he had combed through by dragging a saw blade across it, Quaife then removed every fragment by hand,

leaving behind a heavily touched impasto. He then arranged the bits of paper on the right hand panel of the diptych. It's a technique reminiscent of the *'pique assiette'*, a kind of mosaic created from broken plates and assorted shards of crockery, pioneered in the late 1930s by a French grave sweeper, Raymond Edouard Isidore. In common parlance, the term *'pique assiette'* also denotes one who eats from others' plates, pinching titbits from the physical nourishment of his neighbours.

Working quickly, with just a few days to complete the positioning and repositioning of hundreds of elements before the paint hardened, Quaife brought the shreds of paper (Barthes' preferred surface) together with paint and canvas (Twombly's signature materials), marrying them, embedding one in the other, cajoling them into overcoming the fraught relationship between the two media. By peeling the photographic fragments off the left hand panel of the diptych, Quaife left behind a flattened area, a trace or scar. He also lost the occasional shard of paper, embedded too deep in the peaked Italian meringue of white paint, although mostly these abandoned fragments bore letters rather than brushstrokes: the unambiguous letter-forms perhaps already having served their purpose, and no longer providing any mystery. This uneasy marriage between flatness and texture is also performed within the very surface of the poster, in the image of Twombly's work. The photographic reproduction struggles with the heavy multi-coloured impasto of *Untitled* (1990), paradoxically rendering Twombly's abstraction into a representational image. Nor can the flatness imposed by mechanical reproduction make sense of the shadows the work depicted casts on itself, with highlighted ridges entailing shaded vales that contradict the light in the gallery. There is a sensory disconnect in effect across the surface of *LXVIII How an Orgy Is Created*: the flattened focal plane of the photographic fragments reject a focused gaze, and the eye slips off them.

Quaife's dissection of the image of Twombly's painting suggests a forensic attitude, or perhaps even a conflicted and obsessive love for an object of enquiry. It's a fascination that destroys the thing it loves, but then enters a redemptory phase, in which it becomes clear that the dissection was conducted precisely in order to own and to build the thing back up again, albeit in a radically different form.

Quaife's forensic approach entailed five weeks during which he painstakingly cut out the image with a surgical scalpel, with such intentness that the repeated pressure he applied to his cutting tools resulted in the loss of sensation in his finger, an injury hardly mitigated by the sense of pathological boredom he developed over those five weeks. But by carving up the image, Quaife was equipping himself with the elements he would need for the creative progression of his own work, to move from a phase of analysis into one of genesis. One surmises a condition of 'scalpel apnoea', in which Quaife held his breath each time he pressed down on the blade. Other forensic techniques were put at the service of Quaife's diagnosis of Barthes' and Twombly's gestures: photographing, scanning and blowing up prints of Barthes' paintings in search of evidence – a secret message, or perhaps a figure hiding in the foliage of an abstract

pattern as in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 groovy mystery 'Blow-Up'. Or, as with *LXXV The Declaration of Love* (2015), circling through a slide show of extreme close-ups of cut-out fragments of print, in which rosettes of Ben-Day dots become clearly visible.

This investigative energy fuelled a process of thinking through the body; a twofold approach of physical and cognitive investigation through what Barthes termed 'gesture'. Quaife shows us the universal process of unpicking the tight weave of one's appreciation for the work of others, searching for threads that can be transferred into one's own life and behaviour. Children, singing into the mirror, impersonate their idols, testing out identifying gestures. Writers pull apart syntax and rhetoric, rehearsing fragments by hand with pen on paper, in order to emulate an author's charmed capacity to create atmosphere. Doctors operate on bodies and analyse samples as part of research aimed at understanding a particular condition: happiness, disease, talent. All of these methods aim to produce a body of knowledge via an active imagination – and a *becoming* – of another's physical body. It is a tactic Barthes explained with reference to his paintings of Twombly's works: 'I am not directly imitating TW<sup>1</sup> (what would be the use of that?), I am imitating his *gesture*, which I, if not unconsciously, at least dreamily, infer from my reading; I am not copying the product, but the producing, I am putting myself, so to speak, *in the hand's footsteps*.'<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Cy Twombly: Works on Paper', *The Responsibility of Forms*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. P. 158

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. P. 159

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. P. 160

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. P. 171

<sup>1</sup> Barthes chosen abbreviation for Cy Twombly

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