

## Poesis and Performance: Roland Barthes on Cy Twombly

Where does the writing begin?  
Where does the painting begin?  
—Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction: Beyond Art Criticism

Rosalind Krauss staged an opposition between Roland Barthes and an entire field of art criticism when she asked: “So who’s right, do you think? Roland Barthes, or all the others who’ve written about Cy Twombly?”<sup>2</sup> Krauss’ question distills the radical departure of Barthes’ two 1979 essays on the artist from conventional art criticism. Where dominant discourse on Twombly positions him as a literary-historical painter associated with Abstract Expressionism, Barthes charts an entirely different course.

Central to Krauss’ formulation is the assumption that Barthes’ two essays, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper” and “The Wisdom of Art,” still belong to the realm of art criticism—a categorization Barthes outright rejected.<sup>3</sup> He declared that he is “not discussing Twombly in the language of art criticism,” while insisting on its “critical function.”<sup>4</sup> By emphasizing the autonomy of his own approach, Barthes positioned the two essays in an ambiguous space. His resistance to categorizing these essays as art criticism and simultaneous insistence on their “critical function” suggests that the writings

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, “Food Decentered” in *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, “Cy’s Up,” *Artforum International*, September 1, 1994. Krauss continues: “—all those for whom the Latin is serious, to be taken at face value, consumed as erudition, as classical humanism somehow magically surviving amidst the barbarism of the late 20th century, a talismanic flower sprouting from a decaying Roman wall?”

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper” and “The Wisdom of Art” in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid (Barthes, “The Wisdom of Art”), 189.

may approach the limits of the form. This prompts the question: If these essays are not art criticism, then what are they?

Challenging their frequent misclassification as art criticism, I answer this question by arguing for their categorization as “poetic criticism,” to borrow Walter Benjamin’s term. Benjamin defines poetic criticism as a form of criticism coextensive with the artwork itself, where criticism functions doubly as critique and poetry.<sup>5</sup> In Barthes’ earlier essay, “Is Painting a Language?,” he considers the titular question and its inverse: asking whether language can take on painterly qualities.<sup>6</sup> By asserting the painterly potential of language, Barthes presents a systematic theorization of the poetics of critique—distinct from his performance of poetic criticism a decade later.

Engaging the Twombly essays in formal and methodological terms, I contend that their poetic force lies in their performance of numerous qualities that Barthes identifies in Twombly’s work. I reroute Krauss’ comparison between Barthes and other critics to instead draw comparisons between Barthes and Twombly himself. Tracing the overlaps and divergences between their poetics reveals the transindividual and transdisciplinary qualities inherent in the work of both Barthes and Twombly. I seek to identify the isomorphisms between the two activities—painting and criticism—despite and because they are often assigned such opposite polarities.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism” in *Selected Writings: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 116–200.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, “Is Painting a Language?” in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). This essay was written in 1969, a decade prior to his essays on Twombly.

## II. Context: Barthes, Twombly, and the Poetics of Criticism

By not merely writing but also *performing* criticism, Barthes reveals conceptually rich and often overlooked features of Twombly's work while gesturing toward the poetic possibilities of criticism itself. Analyzing these essays as "poetic criticism," grounded in formal and rhetorical analysis, paves the way for insights into the methodological principles and critiques underlying the Barthesian project. This is not a purely descriptive study; it implores the poetics of Barthes' texts to begin reconceptualizing the practice (and crisis) of art criticism formally, poetically, and ideologically.

This reconceptualization of criticism as "poetic" challenges its etymological fixity in judgement, separation, and distinction (c. 5th century BCE, from *krinein*, meaning "to separate," "to judge"). Even as art criticism encompasses a wide array of approaches and methodologies, certain conventions have dominated the field: historical contextualization, formal analysis, and evaluative judgement. Criticism's etymological root narrates the severances and incongruencies laden in the form: between the art object and language, art object and perception, experience and description, between one way of seeing and the next.

Barthes' essays, however, dissolve such hard-edged delineations in service of the more impressionistic approach one might associate with viewing Twombly's illegible language. His method suggests that criticism thrives not through separation but through intimate engagement, not through judgement but through performance. His innovative mode, situated amidst structural shifts in literature, art, and theory of the late twentieth century, upends long-held relationships between these fields.

Critical theory has long offered artists a vehicle through which art could be reworded as concept, and by the 1970s, the imports of linguistic theory provided generative conceptual models for visual art. As the turn toward Conceptualism asserted a certain harmony between visual art and literary theory, the dominance of Structuralist and semiotic theories of signification seeped into American artmaking. One understanding of this conceptual interest in the linguistic and semiological comingling between text and image is indebted to Barthesian thought. By dismantling fixed meaning and decentering authorial intention, Barthes proposed that meaning arises through relational dynamics between language, culture, and interpretation. His Structuralist view of signs within systems of cultural codes provided a new critical framework for reading language within visual domains. This shift opened up ways to read writing in painting—one which positions the reader/viewer as an active participant in the construction of meaning.<sup>7</sup>

This turn toward the conceptual initially appeared to be a movement into an immaterial reconception of artwork, or what Lucy Lippard calls a “dematerialization” of the work of art.<sup>8</sup> Yet the Conceptualist preoccupation with language and concept as visual material cuts another way, too. As Craig Dworkin suggests, this shift could also be understood as a “rematerialization” of language art—recognizing the material presence of written language as foundational to the proliferation of

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” in *Image - Music - Text* (London, UK: Fontana, 1977), 142–48; Heiner Bastian, *Cy Twombly: Paintings 1952–1976*, vol. 1; Krauss, “Cy’s Up.”

<sup>8</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (University of California Press, 1997). “Everything was becoming conceptual,” Duchamp remarked, “that is, it depended on things other than the retina.” This theory of conceptualism suggests that the “things” upon which artwork began to depend were the texts, artists, events, networks, and media that shaped the production, dissemination, and commodification of the work. These “things” essentially became stand-ins for artworks and systems intended not to be seen so much as felt and experienced—consider John Cage’s “Happening” or “Event.” This conceptual inversion of the subject-object relationship redefined everyday objects and peripheral, paratextual, and informatic material as artwork. See Duchamp **quoted by** Dworkin in “The Fate of Echo.” Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), xxvii.

conceptual art.<sup>9</sup> Twombly, who rose to prominence in the New York art world in the 50s just before the full institutional embrace of Conceptualism, diverged from Minimalism's language-evasion and the medium-specificity of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries.<sup>10</sup>

Twombly eschewed the neutral, dematerialized language of Conceptual Art, and instead rematerialized the heft and opacity of language. He distinguished himself through his integration of text and abstraction, with works featuring fragmented, gestural inscriptions that often decentered representational language in favor of its material presence. Twombly's use of text moves beyond mere representation to remain resolutely present—not stripping language of its materiality but rather bringing its substance and form to the forefront. Twombly's writing, which ranges from cryptic scrawls and smudged gestures to legible lines of poetry, demands attention not only literarily or intellectually but also affectively and sensorially.

Barthes and Twombly each contributed to theoretical discourses and intermedia transformations of the 70s, a time when language, subjectivity, and form were radically redefined in the wake of Poststructuralist thought. What becomes clear is that Twombly's mark-making troubles conventional notions of viscosity while inviting a critical mode that is as poetic as it is analytical, thereby prompting a reconsideration of the boundaries between creation and critique. Through close

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Twombly's work diverged from Minimalism's emphasis on pure form and narrative avoidance, as well as Abstract Expressionism's prioritization of immediacy and gesture. His integration of written language, literary references, and mythological allusions situated him as an outlier from the dominant artistic movements of his era. This outsider position was further reinforced by his geographic departure from the New York art world—the epicenter of these trends—when he relocated to Italy in 1957, where he would remain for the rest of his life. Twombly is often understood as a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and later movements, such as Neo-Expressionism and Postminimalism. However, his relationship to these movements warrants further exploration beyond the scope of this note.

reading of Barthes' essays, we can trace how his critical procedure reflects and amplifies Twombly's key textual-visual strategies.

### III. To Twombly: Dedication and Performativity in Barthes

In his two essays on the artist, Barthes discusses drawings and paintings in his usual digressive and discursive style, favoring poetic metaphor and semiological readings over historical context and formal analyses. When citing select works by Twombly from the early to mid-1970s, Barthes resists historical determinism by displacing work from its literary antecedents and immediate art historical contexts. In "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," Barthes writes extensively about *Virgil* (1973) and *Mars and the Artist* (1975), and in "The Wisdom of Art," he discusses *To Valéry* (1973) and *To Tatlin* (1973), the latter of which will be the focus of this section.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, the essay excludes any visual reproductions of Twombly's work, a formal decision that reinforces Barthes' theoretical resistance to representation. The absence of images is not merely an omission but a refusal to adhere to the conventions of representation, a strategic move that foregrounds the relational and conceptual over the visual or material. The present analysis similarly forgoes illustrations, performing the critical strategy under examination. Barthes begins "The Wisdom of Art" by analyzing Twombly's pictorial nominalism in relation to the act of literary dedication, which figures prominently and variably throughout Twombly's oeuvre. Discussing *To Valéry* and *To Tatlin*, he muses:

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<sup>11</sup> Barthes, "Cy Twombly" and "The Wisdom of Art."

Again, nothing here but the graphic action of dedicating. For “to dedicate” is one of those verbs linguists, following Austin, have called “performatives,” because their meaning is identified with *the very action of uttering them*: “I dedicate” has no meaning other than the actual gesture by which I present what I have made (my work) to someone I love or admire. This is just what Twombly does: bearing only the dedication’s inscription, the canvas “vanishes”: *all that is given is the action of giving*—and this scrap of writing to say so. These are limit-canvases, not in that they involve no painting (other painters have explored this limit) but because the very notion of oeuvre is suppressed—but not *the painter’s relation to someone he loves*.<sup>12</sup>

Barthes understands that Twombly’s pictorial nominalism does not operate in terms of analogy (mimesis, representation, likeness), but functions along the axis of performativity. These direct dedications (“To Valéry” and “To Tatlin”) function as expressive utterances—acts whose meanings emerge through their very inscription. These “limit-canvases” are spaces wherein traditional notions of finality dissolve into the relational offering. Barthes writes, albeit hyperbolically, that the canvas “vanishes” in favor of the “act of giving,” privileging the performative dimension of the work over its material presence or pictorial completeness. His essay enacts this theoretical move through its refusal of images; just as Twombly’s canvas “vanishes” in the act of dedication, Barthes’ text forgoes the visual in favor of the conceptual and relational. These linguistic operations suspend reference in favor of action, thus transmuting representation into pure force.<sup>13</sup>

The performative act within Twombly’s work resonates with Barthes’ essay, which essentially reads like a dedication to Twombly—even as it resists fixity and eludes the straightforward identification found in the dedications to Valéry and Tatlin. The “vanishing” of the canvas parallels the structural logic of the text, in which meaning is deferred and the subject (Twombly, his oeuvre, or a

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, “The Wisdom of Art,” 181 [Emphasis mine].

<sup>13</sup> Krauss, “Cy’s Up.”

specific painting) becomes spectral. In framing Twombly's works as dedications that convert the canvas into a space of relationality, Barthes enacts the very dynamics of dedication he describes, transmuting the text into a capacious site brimming with contingency, possibility, and potential.

Twombly's dedications to Valéry and Tatlin are relational, performative gestures which Barthes' mirrors in his refusal to stabilize his subject. Twombly's inscriptions often appear without explicit dedications, forgoing the "to" and leaving only the writer's name, as in *Virgil* (1973). To Barthes, even these names operate within the field of the performative, as they enact the gesture of invocation even without the explicit syntax of giving. Relationality is operative in both practices, each of which privileges action and connection over objecthood. Barthes' assertion that "all that is given is the act of giving" suggests that the decentering of the subject is not a loss, but a reorientation. This formulation of relationality encapsulates Twombly's approach to his literary references, and also, crucially, Barthes' approach to Twombly.

#### **IV. Critical Counterpoints: Heiner Bastian and Mary Jacobus**

Barthes' writings occupy a singular segment of the critical landscape on Twombly. A more prevalent attitude taken by other scholars privileges literary references and operates within a comparatively normative art historical framework.<sup>14</sup> Krauss, aligning herself with the Barthesian viewpoint, posits the German art dealer, historian, and curator Heiner Bastian as an antidote to it. Bastian, who Krauss terms "Twombly's assiduous art-historical amanuensis," worked closely with the artist and shaped the

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<sup>14</sup> Jon Bird, "Indeterminacy and (Dis)order," 484–504; There are, of course, other scholars who generally align with the Barthesian approach to Twombly. For instance, see: Krauss, "Cy's Up."

critical reception of his work. He played a pivotal role in the European exhibition and representation of Twombly, and published several significant writings on the artist, including a well-regarded monograph and catalog raisonné. To her, Bastian is a caricature of “all the others who’ve written about Cy Twombly,” one who represents “that view in its most sick-making, obsequious form.”<sup>15</sup>

Given Bastian’s longstanding proximity to the artist, having published on his work extensively since the early ‘70s, he can be understood as a de facto stand-in for the artist’s intent. As “Twombly’s chosen mouthpiece” (as Krauss rightly identifies him), Bastian declares interpretations of the artist’s work and rejects alternative readings, such as the view of Twombly’s writings as “graffiti.”<sup>16</sup> So when Barthes frames Twombly’s writings precisely as “graffiti,” he enacts his argument from “The Death of the Author,” directly challenging Bastian’s claim that such a reading fundamentally misunderstands the work.<sup>17</sup> Barthes’ rejection of authorial intent manifests in his refusal to accept Bastian’s authoritative interpretations of (and for) Twombly.

While Bastian offers an intriguing juxtaposition to Barthes, especially given his proximity to the artist, literary critic Mary Jacobus emerges as a more relevant counterpoint, providing the most thorough account yet of his text in paint. Jacobus typifies a more conventional mode of criticism, one whose interpretations of written language—a central concern of this essay—stand in striking contrast to Barthes.

Jacobus highlights signified marks, foregrounding iconographic and iconological readings to trace the literary (classical and contemporaneous) sources, references, and interlocutors in Twombly’s

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<sup>15</sup> Krauss, “Cy’s Up.”

<sup>16</sup> Bastian, *Cy Twombly: Paintings*.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142–48.

titles, inscriptions, and other pictorial markers.<sup>18</sup> Like Heiner Bastian, Jacobus exemplifies an analogical approach to Twombly's work, which sharply contrasts Barthes' privileging of the performative.<sup>19</sup> In her 2016 *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*, she locates textual allusions with an eye toward their historical and literary predecessors, contextualizing the artist's quotations, invocations, and lines of poetry with the help of annotations and marginalia found in his personal library. However, by focusing so intently on these literary antecedents, she overlooks relevant histories of abstraction and the broader ways his marks engage with the symbolic function of language.

Where Jacobus attends to the artist's own intentions, Barthes mostly brackets intention-parsing. Instead, he attends to the wider pursuit of the linguistic machinery of textual illegibility and quotations. Barthes implores the *effects* of Twombly's illegibility beyond the staging of his intentions and authorial predecessors, trading in historicization and literal interpretations for conceptually rich analyses, theoretical leaps, and performative poetics.

The difference between these two approaches crystallizes in their contrasting readings of the "room." Barthes, for one, writes that: "Basically, Twombly's canvases are big Mediterranean rooms, warm and luminous, with their elements lost in them (*rari*), rooms the mind seeks to populate."<sup>20</sup> Barthes evokes, but does not so much argue, the spatial metaphor. His figurative speech frustrates a

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> This analogical approach is exemplified not only by Jacobus and Bastian but also by Roberta Smith, whose perspective Krauss critiques through a Derridean framework. Krauss' most convincing takedown of this interpretative method surfaces not in relation to Bastian, whom she presents as the primary antidote to Barthes, but in her critique of Smith. In mounting a forceful rebuttal to Smith's numerous associations with Twombly's marks, Krauss articulates that "it never occurs to Smith that it is precisely this form of semiological overkill, in which she moves from one 'looks-like' to another, that has the effect of undoing semiosis, of scattering and disrupting analogy, acting to perform a violence of the mark that Jacques Derrida would call dissemination: the mark reconsecrated as performative." See Roberta Smith, "The Great Mediator" in *Cy Twombly* (Munich, DE: Prestel-Verlag, 1987), 17–20.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," 182–183 [Emphasis mine].

more complete realization of the metaphor, internally confusing the system it seeks to index.<sup>21</sup> Jacobus, on the other hand, draws on Giorgio Agamben's notion of the stanza as a "capacious dwelling receptacle" to rethink Twombly's paintings as rooms, focusing more literally on the container of the painting as a site for meaning-making.<sup>22</sup> Where Jacobus centers the physicality of the painting to detail a relatively restrained reading, Barthes invokes a more abstract and expansive conceptualization in which meaning can unfold.

Jacobus critiques Barthes as filling "the empty spaces of Twombly's painting with the activity of his own imagination." She acknowledges painting as an imaginative medium, but to her, those imaginative, "capacious" possibilities are reserved for the painter, never the writer responding to the painting. She dismisses his prose as imbued with "nostalgic associations" and shaped by the "activity of his own imagination" as it "drifts between desire and memory." She goes so far as to suggest that Twombly's work induces in Barthes a sense of "euphoria," even a "kind of writerly high."<sup>23</sup>

In evaluating Barthes' prose on her terms rather than his own, Jacobus overlooks the innovation of his engagement. When Jacobus pejoratively labels his expressionist meanderings "Barthesian free association," she fails to notice that his relational stylistics constitute the strengths, flaws, and main force of the two essays.<sup>24</sup> In this way, Jacobus' critiques inadvertently reveal the central mechanism and driving force of his strategy.

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<sup>21</sup> Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 59. A slightly expanded version of this quotation: "read as Barthes reads it, Twombly's painting becomes a license for Barthesian free association."

<sup>23</sup> Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 59.

Deviating from subject to subject, Barthes' writing resides in a connotative and metaphorical realm, in opposition to her comparatively distanced and analytical register of art criticism. Barthes shifts from one look-alike to the next, avoiding semiological deluge by taking polysemy as a starting point; he does not disrupt analogy but takes disrupted analogy as his point of departure.<sup>25</sup> His poetic criticism occupies the interstitial space between artwork and interpretation, where the critic's imagination serves not as an obstacle but an essential component in the formulation of criticism. In this framework, the critic neither imposes nor completes meaning but allows, even encourages, the work's indeterminacy to remain intact.

## **V. The Performance of Critique**

The dissolution of the subject in *To Valéry* and *To Tatlin* is not merely incidental to the act of dedication: it is a necessary condition of its performativity. As Barthes emphasizes, the "act of giving" displaces traditional notions of authorship, reframing the canvas as a site where presence is subordinated to relationality. The performative gesture necessitates a decentering of the subject, which becomes ghostly and atmospheric in its withdrawal, with the nominal subject not disappearing so much as being diffused across the network of relationships activated by the gesture. In "The Wisdom of Art," Barthes challenges the conventional art historical subject-object schema to articulate the conceptual complexity of Twombly's subject:

In classical painting, "what happens" is the "subject" of the canvas; this subject is frequently anecdotal; but in Twombly's canvases, the "subject" is a concept: it is the classical text "in itself"—a strange concept, it is true, since it is desire, the object of love, perhaps of nostalgia.

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<sup>25</sup> Krauss, "Cy's Up."

(...) In Twombly, the “subject” is, of course, what the canvas is talking about; but since this subject-object is only a (written) allusion, the whole burden of the *drama* shifts to the one who produces it: the subject is Twombly himself.<sup>26</sup>

Phrases like “a strange concept, it is true, since it is desire, the object of love, perhaps of nostalgia” are deliberately tentative, punctuated only by hesitation and possibility. The repetition of qualifiers (“perhaps,” “strange,” “it is true”) performs a refusal to pin down meaning, enacting the very indeterminacy he describes. His language, like the visual gestures he narrates, inhabits a state of flux, oscillating between presence and erasure. The fragmentary quality of this Barthesian prose echoes Twombly’s textual-visual vocabulary, defined by partial words, broken phrases, and incomplete forms—traces that suggest a meaning always deferred. Barthes mimes this fragmentation in his own structuring of a thought: rather than presenting a unified, linear argument, these essays unfold in fragments, each pointing toward but never fully capturing its slippery subject. Even the nominal slippage between Barthes’ subject, who he alternately refers to as “Twombly” and “TW,” emerges as a similarly unstable subject. These shifts between surname and abbreviation perform another kind of mutability, as the artist’s identity, like his marks, resist fixity.

Twombly’s poetics emanate from his literal illegibility on canvas, while Barthes’ poetics take shape in his fragmentary prose, itself a form of textual illegibility. In both cases, illegibility functions not only as a stylistic choice but as a fundamental criterion for poetic expression. Barthes describes and performs his embrace of the instability of representation and the dynamism of a subject. The lexical ambiguity of the “subject” and “object” operates on another level, too: the instability Barthes describes becomes a defining quality of critique, as he enacts the unclassifiability he seeks to articulate. Prose like

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<sup>26</sup> Barthes, “The Wisdom of Art,” 190.

“In passing, in loitering (one might say), TW deconstructs writing” imparts the impression that Barthes is reflecting on his own writing, while also, to some degree, “deconstructing” the traditional subject-object schema of art criticism.

## **VI. Poetic Criticism in Practice**

Barthes was right: his writing on Twombly does not quite square with “the language of art criticism.” Inasmuch as these essays can be maintained as criticism at all, they venture into something poetic in their own right, akin to what Walter Benjamin termed “poetic criticism.” In his analysis of German Romantic literary criticism of the 18th and 19th centuries, Benjamin asserts:

It is in this sense that the Romantics called for poetic criticism, suspending the difference between criticism and poetry and declaring: ‘Poetry can be criticized only through poetry. An aesthetic judgement that is not itself a work of art ... as representation of the necessary impression in its emergence, ... has no rights of citizenship in the realm of art.’ ‘This poetic criticism ... will present the representation anew, will once again form what is already formed ... It will complement, rejuvenate, newly fashion the work.’<sup>27</sup>

Arguing that “poetry can be criticized only through poetry,” Benjamin claims that criticism must become an extension of the work it seeks to address. Poetic criticism does more than analyze its object; it actively “rejuvenates” and “newly fashions” the work, engaging with it on its own terms and through its own logic. Likewise, Barthes’ Mediterranean room metaphor functions less as an explanatory device and more as a poetic gesture, enacting the openness and spatial ambiguity of Twombly’s compositions.

Barthes further aligns himself with Benjamin when he contests any fundamental distinction between painting and writing, asserting that “Nothing separates writing (which we believe

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” 153–154. [Ellipses original] In two footnotes appearing throughout this quotation, Benjamin cites *Lyceum* Fragments, no. 117, and *Jugendschriften*, vol. 2, 177.

communicates) from painting (which we believe expresses): both consist of the same tissue.”<sup>28</sup> When he asks “Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?” his aim is not to locate fixed boundaries but rather to destabilize the assumed divisions between the mediums.<sup>29</sup> In his reflections on Twombly, Barthes employs the term *graphism* to collapse the mediums and renew attention to the visual and muscular aspects of writing—both Twombly’s and his own—otherwise obscured by writing’s communicative function.<sup>30</sup> His articulation of the intrinsic kinship between writing and painting reinforces the idea that just as Twombly performs writerly qualities in painting, Barthes performs painterly qualities in writing.

The erosion of disciplinary boundaries was evident in Barthes’ thinking a decade before his essays on Twombly. In his 1969 essay “Is Painting a Language?”, he rejected the then-fashionable notion of interdisciplinarity in favor of a more radical position:

It is not the disciplines which need to be exchanged, it is the objects: there is no question of “applying” linguistics to the picture, injecting a little semiology into art history; there *is* a question of eliminating the distance (the censorship) institutionally separating picture and text. Something is being born, something which will invalidate “literature” as much as “painting” (and their metalinguistic correlates “criticism and aesthetics”), substituting for these old cultural divinities a generalized “ergography,” the text as work, the work as text.<sup>31</sup>

Rather than applying one discipline’s methods to another’s objects, Barthes calls for the elimination of the disciplinary divide between image and text altogether. His provocative vision of a “generalized ergography” (“ergography,” from *ergon*, meaning “work”) proposes a complete collapse of categories: not only between mediums, but between primary works and their metalinguistic correlates. Barthes

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, “Réquichot and His Body,” *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 220–21.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, “Food Decentered,” 21.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Schwenger, *Asemeic: The Art of Writing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 38.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, “Is Painting a Language?”, 152.

outlines a space in which text becomes work (artwork, poetry) and work becomes text (criticism). In Barthes' view, what is "being born" is not a new methodology but a fundamental reconceptualization of creative and critical practices as reciprocal activities.

This assumption of intermedia convergence and affinity for anti-disciplinary thinking gives way to a performative approach to criticism that favors poetics over polemics. Barthes trades in an external vantage point for a critical stance embedded within the aesthetic and conceptual parameters of his subject. His fragmented, lyrical prose mimes Twombly's disjunctive mark-making as to perform the qualities he identifies. Barthes' writing exemplifies what Benjamin describes as poetic criticism, where the critic's role lies equally in poesis and critique. Barthes aligns himself with Benjamin's concept of poetic criticism when he asserts that the gesture refuses a fixed, final outcome:

What is shown is a gesture — the action is transitive, it seeks only to provoke an object, a result; the gesture is the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, indolences, which surround the action with an atmosphere. (...) Let us distinguish the *message*, which seeks to produce information, and the *sign*, which seeks to produce an intellection, from the *gesture*, which produces all the rest (the "surplus") without necessarily seeking to produce anything.<sup>32</sup>

In this framework, the dedication operates in excess of any fixed meaning, confusing conventional distinctions between sign and message. Where the message seeks to inform, and the sign to intellectualize, the gesture generates something more elusive: the "surplus" or "all the rest." The dissolution of the subject and the privileging of performative acts over static representation suggests that both the paintings and essays are constituted by and constitutive of this spectral interplay, where subjects and objects flicker in and out of conceptual focus. The transitive gesture produces this "surplus" of meaning—an inexhaustible energy, a future tense, a site of pure potential. What is at stake

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<sup>32</sup> Barthes, "Cy Twombly," 160.

in both painting and criticism is not completion nor resolution but their continuous act of becoming—an ongoing act of formation that complements and reconstitutes the already-formed. Or, as Benjamin puts it, the presentation of “representation anew.”<sup>33</sup> In Twombly’s paintings and Barthes’ writings alike, we see “all the rest.”

## VII. Conclusion: Toward Poetic Criticism

This singular categorization of these essays as poetic criticism eludes Barthes’ self-proclaimed genre-evasion and the evocative self-classification of his writing writ large. Nonetheless, this essay has argued that “The Wisdom of Art” and “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper” follow in the tradition of poetic criticism, where the critic’s task is not to clarify, simplify, or systemize, but to evoke if not perform multiple, often contradictory dimensions of the work. In spite and because of Barthes’ apparent eclecticism as a philosopher, semiotician, literary critic, art critic, and cultural critic, it is crucial to also recognize him as a *poetic critic*. Within existing scholarship, I have yet to encounter the French writer framed as such, and hope this essay offers a new, if provocative, reconsideration of his methodological experimentation.

Barthes’ refusal to delimit meaning aligns with Benjamin’s assertion that poetic criticism must “suspend the difference” between poetry and criticism, allowing the two to coexist in a shared aesthetic and intellectual space.<sup>34</sup> By suspending this difference, Barthes renews attention to critique as a performative and generative act. His associative mode inhabits the multiplicities of meaning present in

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, “The Concept of Criticism,” 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Twombly's work. His writings thereby extend Twombly's already literary paintings further into the realm of language, and in doing so, affirm the potential of art to become one with criticism.

Over a century after Benjamin's coinage of "poetic criticism," we still await its institutional embrace. Insofar as poetic criticism is acknowledged, the poetic is dismissed as secondary to the "real" work of criticism. Benjamin refutes this devaluation, arguing that the poetic is not merely an attribute of criticism, but its fundamental criterion: a suggestion that all criticism, to varying extents, is poetic. In the Benjaminian sense, poetic criticism is not a fixed genre but an affirmation of the centrality and primacy of poetry within art criticism.

Benjamin's wholehearted endorsement of poetic criticism carries certain risks. The very qualities poetic criticism thrives on—ambiguity and openness—threaten the erosion of critical rigor and the dilution of criticism's evaluative function. Poetic criticism's emphasis on immersion and affect, though generative, obscures the critic's role as a balanced, analytical mediator and risks devolving into an interpretive free-for-all where excessively subjective analyses are detached from the artwork's material, historical, and cultural contexts. More troubling still, the lyrical language and associative logic intrinsic to poetic criticism prompts an attentional shift from art-object to criticism, thereby undermining established historical and theoretical frameworks for evaluating artwork.

To be sure, poetic criticism is not a substitute for art criticism; rather, the term identifies one of criticism's most essential attributes: the "poetic." And the most poetic of criticism constitutes a subcategory of art criticism, with the poetic enriching critique. Poetic criticism lays bare the imprecision inherent in critique, embracing the indeterminacy and ambiguity of translating visual experience into written language. By activating new possibilities, poetic criticism illuminates the edge

of critique, exposing the incongruities between word and concept, and articulating the challenge of representing visuals through language.

In addition to the methodological friction between poetic and art criticism, what is compelling about Krauss' question is what the entire *body of criticism* surrounding Twombly reveals. In "Is Painting a Language?", Barthes draws on French philosopher Jean-Louis Schefer to posit an auxiliary question—one to be asked of, as Krauss so plainly puts it, "Roland Barthes, [and] all the others who've written about Cy Twombly": "What is the connection between the picture and the language inevitably used in order to read it—i.e., in order (implicitly) to write it? *Is not this connection the picture itself?*"<sup>35</sup>

Barthes answers his own question, going so far as to argue that the very practice of painting is continuously "*in the act of language*." For him, "the work of the reading [a painting] is radially identified with the work of the writing: there is no longer a critic, nor even a writer talking [about] painting." There is only "someone who writes the picture's writing."<sup>36</sup> Following this logic, in writing about Barthes, I inevitably write about Twombly—however circuitously. My pursuit of analytical ambivalence, in avoidance of definitive conclusions about Twombly's work, has itself laid certain claims to Twombly's work. For, as Barthes reminds us, "a picture is never anything but its own plural description."

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<sup>35</sup> Barthes, "Is Painting a Language?", 150 [Emphasis original]; Krauss, "Cy's Up."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (Barthes, "Is Painting a Language?"), 151.

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