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Frances Guerin

## SEARCHING IN GREY

### Cy Twombly's *Untitled* Paintings

It is rare for historians and critics of modern art to negotiate the contours and meaning of colour in an artist's work, particularly when that colour is grey. Following the more popular scepticism towards grey, when the colour grey is discussed, it is commonly claimed to be a non-colour, a nothing, neither black nor white, none and all the colours of the rainbow. Wassily Kandinsky eloquently articulates what others continue to reiterate: "grey is the moment when everything stands still, when there is nothing, no sound, just immobility and a feeling of desolation."<sup>1</sup> Postwar American and European artists also insist that grey creates a space of negativity, a void. Gerhard Richter, for example, an artist whose oeuvre is dominated by a grey palette across his fifty year career begins from the assumption that "The grey painting [...] a painted grey surface, completely monochromatic – [comes] from a motivation, or result[s] from a state, that was very negative. It has a lot to do with hopelessness, depression and such things."<sup>2</sup>

Despite this ambivalence, some of the most notable postwar American painters turn, for a period in their oeuvres, to grey as the colour in which to explore the identity of painting itself. Indeed, Richter himself may begin from the void of grey, but his paintings continue to use grey to interrogate the possibilities and re-articulate the parameters of painting as a form, medium and material at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>3</sup> And in the United States, postwar, post-Abstract Expressionist painters as diverse as Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin **have** continued to push the boundaries, and further the identity of painting on grey canvases. Moreover, all of these artists' use of grey paint has important political, historical and art historical resonances. Thus, in spite of the critical temptation to dismiss grey as a non-colour, as "depressing," "toneless," "immobile,"<sup>4</sup> artists have continued to revel in grey as a space of creativity, a colour in which to pursue the solution to what is painting in a post-painterly world. If painting is resoundingly dead in the second half of the twentieth century, then a

1 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Mineola/NY 1977, pp. 37–39.

2 *Gerhard Richter – Text. Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961–2007*, ed. by Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, London 2009, p. 191.

3 For an elaboration on this argument, see my forthcoming book, *"The Truth is Always Grey": From Grisaille to Gerhard Richter*.

4 These are all words used by Kandinsky to describe grey in *On the Spiritual in Art*.

surprising number of prominent postwar European and American painters nevertheless turn to grey paint in their search for its reinvention.<sup>5</sup>

In grey, these artists, like centuries of painters before them, play with the possibilities of colour as light, they examine the interface of painting and the other arts, undo or subvert their own authority as artists (and with it the authority of painting), engage with the cultural as well as the natural environments that give painting context and inspiration. They also use grey to explore the qualities of modernist painting, usually to critique it, to demonstrate its ambiguities, to illuminate its historical equivalences. Typically, these visions are imagined through a re-working of the painterly and painted concerns of modernist art itself. Even though the said painters are working in a historically post-modernist period, they engage with the hallmarks of modernism in pursuit of its continuation, complication and critique. Everywhere, the tension between surface and depth, figure and ground, the unravelling of repetitions, the relationship between painting and the world, between figuration and abstraction, are the focus of postwar American and European painting in grey. Grey, this colour that has elsewhere been typed as “nothing,” “negative” the “vampire of all colour” is, for these artists, the most appropriate medium for exploration of, reflection on, and experimentation in their medium.

Moreover, grey is apposite to re-imagining the issues of modern painting for three reasons. First because some of the most significant and radical transgressions of European modern art in particular were made in grey paint. Here I am thinking of the shattered images of Analytical Cubism, or Alberto Giacometti’s portraits of the isolated anonymous souls of modern life, or even earlier, Whistler’s pollution-drenched London air in the *Nocturnes*, to name ~~but~~ three examples. The use of grey has a history in modern art and while the specific postwar paintings that use grey may not create direct links with this history, because of its association with the industrial, with modern life, and with the changing role of representation within that world, grey is the opportune colour to explore the world in a post-modern moment. Grey reflects the colour of life in transformation as it is contemporaneously taking place outside of the frame.

Second, grey is a colour, it has temperatures, tones, rhythms and meanings like any other colour, and yet, painters often choose grey because it is the stripping away of all distraction. They are able to interrogate the substance and meaning of painting without the distraction, the assumptions, the weight and hermeneutic baggage of red, blue, or green for example. Grey is not fixed, it both reflects and absorbs light, and it extends the spectrum between black and white, between the extremes of all other colours. Grey is, contrary to Kandinsky’s claim, always in motion, always shifting and constantly evading, always ambiguous. Third, due to its unique characteristics, grey paint is given political, histori-

5 Legend now has it that Paul Delaroche was the first to proclaim the end of painting in 1839 on first seeing the Daguerreotype: “From today painting is dead.” See Douglas Crimp, landmark piece “The End of Painting,” in: *October*, vol. 16, Spring 1981, pp. 69–86, p. 75.

cal and art historical resonance by these artists. Thus, for example, Andy Warhol paints multiple screen-printed versions of Liz Taylor, Elvis, electric chairs, car crashes, race riots, in works that challenge the viewer's numbness to the representation of death and disaster as it is splattered across the contemporary media. The same paintings question the role of painting at a given historical moment: does it amount to just another series of mass produced images? Is it seen as such? Or does painting need to imitate the mass-mediated if we are to attend to it?

Against this background, here I consider the paintings of the American Cy Twombly who, throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, had periods in which he painted only in grey. Twombly's canvases demonstrate the individuality of the colour grey: they use those characteristics that are specific to grey as the medium in which to explore the most urgent questions of painting, at an historical moment when painting is apparently no longer possible. Twombly exploits the unique qualities of grey. He uses grey to absorb and reflect light, to move his paintings through the spectrum of temperatures from warm to cool, transparency to opacity, to create ambiguity, to explore abstraction and to question the possibility of painting at its interface with other media. Twombly's paintings show that grey has a flexibility, an openness that enables these questions to be pursued without the distraction of decoration. And as a result, Twombly's paintings in grey demonstrate the historical as well as the art historical importance of grey. Ultimately, in grey, Twombly contributes to a discourse on the relationship between painting and the natural world, between past and present, and on the insufficiency of representation to the pursuit of knowledge of both. Grey is the colour most appropriate to these visions on Twombly's canvases.

Grey is a colour that is characteristically unresolved. Irresolution can also be identified as an underlying motivation throughout Twombly's oeuvre. In Twombly's paintings, both in grey and in other colours, a search that never ends becomes visualized on the canvas through repetition, motion, erasure, re-visions that even continue beyond the frame. Twombly's is a modernist search of painting, even though the search itself is for painting in a postwar, post-painterly world. Thus, my analysis of Twombly's *Untitled* grey paintings serves a number of goals. I demonstrate that grey can be understood as a colour with its own identity, properties and uses. In Twombly's *Untitled* paintings from the 1950s and 60s, and into the 1970s we can identify the unique qualities of grey, qualities that make the continued pursuit of painting a possibility. And, at the very same time, on the very same grey ground paintings, we find Twombly's belief in the limitlessness of this pursuit, thus the impossibility of a solution.

I make this argument through focus on two concerns as they are realized on Twombly's canvases. First, as a continuation of the ambiguities and contradictions explored by modernism, I demonstrate Twombly's use of grey to envision the ambivalent relationship of the artist to his own authority, and consequently, the authority of painting. Second, through interpretation of Twombly's debt to the modern invention of photography, and



1 Cy Twombly: *Treatise on the Veil*, 1968

in particular, the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, I illuminate how he uses grey to place painting at the interface with other media – for my concerns, photography and cinema, but also music and writing.<sup>6</sup>

I consider a selection of Twombly works best known as “blackboard paintings” that I nevertheless prefer to call the *Untitled* grey-ground paintings from the 1950s, 60s & 70s. These include two works that I understand to be the centrepiece of Twombly’s output in grey: *Treatise on the Veil I* (1968; Fig. 1), and *Treatise on the Veil II* (1970; Fig. 2). I refer to the work as *Untitled grey-ground* paintings to remove them from the context of a schoolroom that inevitably imposes a predetermined meaning on the ground as well as the white wax marks that cover the grey. Critical analysis of Twombly’s “blackboard” paintings focuses on the form, linearity, the geometricality, cursivity, the palimpsestic nature of the white wax crayon, usually translated as “chalk” markings<sup>7</sup>. This then leads to a tendency to ignore the grey surface. Even Heiner Bastian, the pre-eminent Twombly critic, historian, and cataloguer, is preoccupied with the “archetypal symbols,” “ideogrammatic signs,” the “metaphorical pictorial language” of the markings and not the canvases they mark.<sup>8</sup> As a result, discussion of the grey ground paintings has focused exclusively on the white markings; a focus that assumes the grey ground is a blank undifferentiated surface awaiting inscription, description, figuration. In a departure from the majority of discussions, I am interested in the ground, the uneven, sometimes unfinished grey of these *Untitled*

6 It is very common for painters whose aesthetic has been understood as modernist to find inspiration in the aesthetic of photography and cinema. The obvious example is the work, particularly the portraits, of Édouard Manet as the painter of the nineteenth century modernism who is indebted to photography in so many ways, many of which still await exploration. For an introduction to Manet’s response to the cultural milieu, together with the influence of what is known as the Baudelaire aesthetic, see *Manet inventeur du Moderne*, exh. cat. Paris, Musée d’Orsay, 2011.

7 See, for example, Max Kozloff, “Cy Twombly,” in: *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. by Nicola del Roscio, Munich 2002; Robert Pincus-Witten, *Cy Twombly: An Untitled Painting*, exh. cat. New York, Gagosian Gallery, 1994.

8 *Cy Twombly. Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings Vol III, 1966–1971*, ed. by Heiner Bastian, Munich 1994.

Platzhalter?

steht ohnehin  
in der BU?




2 Cy Twombly: *Treatise on the Veil II*, 1970

Platzhalter?

paintings.<sup>9</sup> Although it is impossible to see and to know these works without the white scrawls and lines, my aim is to bring the grey ground into relief. Furthermore, because of the dominance of the white markings on first approach to the paintings, I begin analysis of the relationship that is established between them and the grey ground. Thus, far from bracketing the white wax crayon, I use its relationship with the ground as a point of access to the significance of grey, and subsequently, the relationship of Twombly the painter to his painting and painting in general.

### Figure and Ground, The Artist and the canvas

As if in a violation of, or an attack on the canvas, the industrial painted grey surface of a work such as *Panorama* (1955) is built up only to be carved into with a blunt stylus. Like many of Twombly's grey surfaces *Panorama's* is a thin, uneven wash. And then, even before the paint has dried, Twombly attacks the wet surface with a white crayon, carving it with uneven lines, curves, shapes, the elements of what are referred to as his visual language. Here in *Panorama*, in contradistinction to a sweeping, curving gesture suggested by the title, the white markings are chaotic, indecipherable and unpredictable. And then, a stylus serrates the grey surface in a determined straight line along the bottom quarter of the painting. It scars the grey surface. The *Panorama* paintings are not the only early works in which the grey paint is carved to spoil its surface deliberately. Twombly's ultimate violation of these surfaces, as opposed to or as well as drawing on them, is significant. If only because this gesture of destruction is most often practiced on those images grounded

9 The appellation of "blackboard paintings" was given them in the 1960s by the critics of *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*. For a discussion of the discourse see Richard Leeman, "A Theory of Whirlwinds," in  Cy Twombly. *A Monograph*, London 2005, pp. 167–175.

in grey. And because the grey is never consistent, it moves from dark, almost black greys to lighter greys, and within the lighter scale, grey can be cold and chilly or it can be light and filled with air. These inconsistencies, the fluctuating energy of the grey ground mean that the grey is never really desecrated because it never rests. It is not possible to destroy an object in motion.

On or over grey, Twombly does not illustrate the canvas, he spoils it. In an act of scarring, not aestheticization, Twombly cancels out the grey paint, in a gesture that seems related, but not a repetition of Robert Rauschenberg's erased de Kooning drawing.<sup>10</sup> The two examples are, in fact, quite different: Twombly negates his own painting, whereas Rauschenberg erases someone else's pencil drawing. Twombly's is a gesture of self-desecration of a surface meant to be permanent — industrial paint — whereas Rauschenberg erases a pencil and charcoal sketch, an image that has a palimpsestic fate inscribed in its medium and form. And because the grey is tinted with transience, the gesture of desecration is simultaneously an act of creation.

Rosalind Krauss discusses Twombly's lines and surface markings, especially in the 1950s, as a kind of graffiti, as a visual language drawn from the streets.<sup>11</sup> As graffiti, Krauss understands the lines as a violation of the painted surface that, like the tag on a New York subway car in the 1970s, leave the trace of a criminal presence not only defacing the object being tagged, but engaged in a power struggle with the authorities, asserting identity and command of the urban environment. As she says, it is "always an invasion of a space that is not the marker's own, it takes illegitimate advantage of the surface of inscription, violating it, mauling it, scarring it."<sup>12</sup>

While I agree with the apparent violence "performed" as Krauss would have it on the canvas, the resonance with urban graffiti does not go far beyond the visual. There is something different about Twombly's scratches and doodles that incise and scar grey paint. They may contain a gestural violence, but are motivated by an altogether different logic. Contrary to urban graffiti, Twombly's white markings are not calligraphic, they are intended to remove or deface identity rather than rewrite the surface with a new, alternative identity as urban graffiti does. Twombly's canvas is a surface distressed, a distress designed as flagration of the painting and all it refers to.

Unlike graffiti, Twombly violates his own grey canvas. Unlike graffiti, Twombly is not interested in re-establishing authority; he does not need to give himself a voice where he previously had none (which is the accepted interpretation of urban graffiti).<sup>13</sup> Twombly surely questions the authority of painting, his own authority, the status of painting and its representation of the landscape, or even of urban spaces. In paintings such as *Panorama*

10 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London 2004, p. 372.

11 Rosalind Krauss, "Cy was Here; Cy's Up," in: *Artforum International*, vol. 33, no.1, September 1994, p. 118.

12 *Ibid.*

13 See Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, New York 1984.



or, in one of many other examples in his oeuvre, *Untitled (Bolsena)* 1969 Twombly runs the stylus across a canvas as if to negate the grey ground.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the uncertainty resulting from this re-thinking through violation only happens in the relationship between the white markings and the grey ground. This it shares with graffiti – meaning is only possible in relationship to what it marks.

And yet, the rethinking, the revision, the uncertainty of the process of painting comes well before the stylus or any white medium is run horizontally across the painted canvas. For the grey ground is in fact multiple greys, applied at different times, as if in varied states of wetness. In *Untitled (Bolsena)*, the varied greys, always moving, in different directions, across and around the canvas, from right to left, stopping and starting, also cover over the white lines: here at times it is grey that places the white scrawls and markings under erasure. A different grey washes over the other greys and the lines, rethinking the narrative, adding temporality to the story told by the painting. Thus in this example, the variegations of grey are a performance of creativity, not only of destruction. Shadows are cast by the dark greys and the lightness of air fills areas in the middle of the canvas. It's difficult not to see the lines that dissect this untitled canvas as a horizon, especially because in the work's title we look across to the other side of Lake Bolsena in Italy, the lake at which Twombly spent the summer and autumn 1969, the lake at which he painted this and other *Untitled* works. The greys on either side of the imaginary horizon line are then blown through the wind, caught by the water, drips and flurries of paint come to mimic the natural elements that are always in harmony and struggle with each other. We don't necessarily see the rich array of grey strokes as representing sky and water on either side of a horizon, but we see the movement of the elements within the strokes. Likewise, standing before *Panorama* we may want to attribute the areas of lighter grey, on the left hand side of the painting, around the line drawn by Twombly's non-dominant hand as it moves across the painting to create the landscape, again in time and motion, to the rubbing out of the chalk markings. But it is not. The lighter colour is a rethinking of white by grey, not the other way around. Thus, time spent with these works reveals that Twombly spoils, rethinks, repeats and creates in grey, as much as he does in white, albeit to meet different ends.

Like other artists painting in the late 1950s and 60s, Twombly also directly engages with the expressive gesture of Abstract Expressionism, the gesture that confirms the presence of artistic authority, the gesture that is critically refuted.<sup>15</sup> While artists such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd removed the painted gesture as trace of their presence as artists, Twombly is one of a number of artists who continue to paint, and moreover, who

14 Krauss also draws on *Panorama* to argue for the scatological implications of the supposed graffiti markings. See Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, London 1996, pp. 243–308.

15 See Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," in: *Cy Twombly. A Retrospective*, exh. cat. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1994, pp. 9–64. On Abstract Expressionism and the insistence on gesture, see T. J. Clark, "The Unhappy Consciousness," and "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," in: *id.*, *Farewell to An Idea*, New Haven and London 1999, pp. 299–408.



perform their mind and hand in motion through a temporal narrative driven by erasure and re-instatement of painted gestures. For Twombly, in the *Untitled* works, this narrative is powered by a struggle between greys, between grey painted ground and white markings. Moreover, nothing is resolved on Twombly's canvases. There is no victor to the struggles, there is no conclusion to the narrative, everything remains uncertain, caught in the middle of an exchange between white and grey. Different media, different forms and colours are present and argue with one another on the surface of Twombly's grey ground paintings. Nothing is ever fully erased or independent of the other's existence.

In the struggle, the constant conversation, the stopping and starting, Twombly the poetic painter in deep reflection, on these canvases, emerges as an artist who has no authority, an artist who himself is always struggling, an artist who, like grey, has an identity always in motion, always in the process of being performed. On Twombly's canvases, painting and the accompanying text or written gestures are, for example, characteristically without beginning and end. We see this most obviously illustrated in the curves, coils, and open rolling strokes that cover the large *Untitled* canvases of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The swirling, usually halting rows of uneven coils begin somewhere out of frame and tumble off the canvas either diagonally to the bottom or horizontally to the opposite side of the painted frame. In a painting such as that *Untitled* 1970 held in the Menil Collection in Houston, the sometimes assertive loops made with the artist's left hand are painted over multiple layers of grey paint and still more cursive white script. The layers of white paint, grey paint, wax crayon, chalk, are built up to give the impression of a palimpsestic narrative. It is as though Twombly's mind is never made up, as though he doesn't trust where he is going with his thoughts, as they push the hand forward and intensify the painted narrative, vertically as well as paradigmatically. The choice to paint such uncertainty and unfinished narratives, an uncertainty that pushes the image toward abstraction, is a strategy used by a number of painters in the post-Abstract Expressionist era of American painting.<sup>16</sup> In addition, while Twombly's discourse of discovery and its resultant discomfort is unique, characterized by scrawls, scratches, gestures, what might be called thoughts in paint on canvas, it is not uncommon for his fellow countrymen to use grey in the postwar years.

This erasure of the artist's authority in postwar, post-Abstract Expressionist, and post-modernist American painting, together with the choice to work in grey reflects a reduction which is a simultaneous elevation of the colour grey to an inquiry into the identity of painting at this historical moment. This is an era in which painting begins to lose its hold on the critical, political and popular imagination, and it, in turn, reconsiders its function, turns inwards to self-examination. Within art criticism, anything more

16 I hesitate here to name painters because their techniques, medium and surface are so different from Twombly's. Also because the motivation and broader resonance of their work cannot easily be coupled with Twombly's.

than a flat monochromatic surface had been thought to betray the purpose of painting by seeping into the purpose of other arts.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the popular imagination became fevered by media and politics—television, the press, the continuation of the Cold War, and the threat of Vietnam— and the links were drawn between painting and political conservatism.<sup>18</sup> By turning to grey, artists such as Johns, Twombly, at times Rauschenberg and other such as Marden, sought new meaning, a new identity for painting and its place within institutional politics. Grey was a colour in which the uncertainties of transformation and exploration in this period were pursued. Thus, in a historical moment when representation was focused on radicality and chromatic excess, to reflect on painting in grey was necessarily a political practice. It is a political practice by virtue of its departure from the realm of politics.

### Painting and photography, painting and cinema

In his exploration of the space of the canvas, of the temporality of narrative through the rows of script and scribbles, Twombly's grey ground paintings have been understood as akin to the cinematic as it is echoed in early modernist painting. Kirk Varnedoe claims the "language of flow and fracture" in the grey-ground works made between 1967 and 1971 derive from "the early modernist fascination with the 'cinematic' decomposition of forms in motion, in Duchamp (*Nude Descending a Staircase*, 1912) and most notably among Italian Futurist artists, particularly Giacomo Balla"<sup>19</sup> The motion of ill-defined narrative, obsessively pursued in endless repetition, as if by a madman, through time and fictional spaces, is everywhere prominent in the abstract grey and other of Twombly's paintings. This unmooring of meaning and the pushing of the moving image into the realm of abstraction indeed echoes an understanding of the cinematic from the first decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the grey ground affirms that understanding. The spectrum of greys echoes the unstable hues and gradations of the early, so called black and white, but more accurately grey, cinematic images.

Twombly's two largest paintings in grey, the *Treatise on the Veil*, 1968 Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and *Treatise on the Veil (Second Version)*, 1970, in the Menil Collection, Houston are an illustration of how the grey ground works do more than echo the forms and rhythms of the cinematic as it is envisioned in modernist painting. In their continued pursuit of Twombly's specific process of painting, his belief in painting as a form of being, a presence,

17 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," and other essays in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1989*, Chicago, re-edited, 1995; Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, exh. cat. Cambridge/Mass., Fogg Art Museum, 1965.

18 Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," in: *Artforum*, vol. 15, no. 10, June 1974, pp. 39–41.

19 Varnedoe 1994 (as note 15), p. 40.

and with it his role, the one who realizes that presence, the twin works are imbued with the forms, meanings and medium specifics of the photograph and the cinema themselves.<sup>20</sup> If the other small and large scale grey ground works as I discuss them above are stages for the performance of an interaction between the variegated palette of greys and the obsessive, repeated forms of white writing, the twin *Treatise on the Veil* works stage the engagement between painting, photography and the cinematic. In addition, they stage the unendedness of the project Twombly is always in the process of undertaking: the demand of the artist to make sense of the world by finding a language with which to articulate and imagine it. This quest is writ large across these two 33 foot canvases. For Twombly, the disintegration, the ultimate search to solve the problem of painting, to find what he calls an essence in and of painting, is played out in the traces of his own process of thinking. Once again, the search is witnessed in the struggle between surface and ground, across the repetitions of the two paintings.

But first, the *Treatise on the Veil* paintings have been most intelligently analysed for their references to music, another medium that is everywhere influencing the rhythmic and tonal qualities of Twombly's paintings. The two paintings are said to be inspired by Henri Pierre's 1951–53 French *musique concrète* composition: *The Veil of Orpheus*.<sup>21</sup> Pierre's recording is iconoclastic: a recording of electronic sounds, voices for magnetic tape. Originally belonging to the ballet, *Orpheus 53*, *Treatise on the Veil* must, somehow be about Orpheus' descent into hell. It might also refer, as the catalogue for Tate Modern's 2008 Retrospective *Cycles and Seasons* suggests, to the lifting the veil of Eurydice, or to the tearing of Orpheus to pieces.<sup>22</sup> Again, albeit from a different perspective to the ballet narrative, these paintings might be understood as caught in the middle of violent acts.

Twombly is said to have been struck by the musical fluidity and temporal duration of Pierre's piece. Nicholas Serota has described the two painting's broad horizontal extension with inscribed mathematical measurements as akin to a musical score, the "representation of a timeline without time".<sup>23</sup> This explanation sits well with another: the markings tear the grey fabric of the veil, the fabric of the canvas, and thus, the time of cause and effect narrative. Seen through this lens, grey is the subject, the fabric, the fluid movement, while the white lines search for rationalization across the grey subject. In addition, Twombly's use of the figure of the veil, if only by allusion, might be understood as the return of one of the most common uses of grey paint since medieval times. In particular, Leonardo da Vinci and his followers insisted on the refinement of painted draperies in the depiction of the human figure, and ever after, fabrics, cloths, veils, and linens have been meticu-

20 This idea of painting as a realization of an "experience with its own innate history" was articulated in one of Twombly's rare texts about his work in 1957. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 27.

21 See, for example, Leeman 2005 (as note 9), pp. 204–205.


22 See also Jeffrey Weiss' review of the exhibition, "Cy Twombly. Tate Modern, London", in: *Artforum*, v. 46, no. 10, October 2008, p. 370.

23 Nicholas Serota, *Cy Twombly. Cycles and Seasons*, London 2008.

lously studied by painters.<sup>24</sup> For Renaissance and post-Renaissance artists, fabrics held so much potential that they were the preferred motif for the depiction of movement and volume, the effects of light and shadow. Fabrics could infuse compositions with drama. Simultaneously, artists were always careful to evoke the sensuality of the material. Most often the studies of fabrics were done in chalk, silverpoint, and highlighted with white on grey or blue-grey tinted paper. Thus, the veil and its variations has a long history as a site of aesthetic and formal exploration. Eventually, in the work of Jasper Johns, the canvas itself would become thematized in grey paint, a paint that repeats the canvas as fabric to which grey is applied.<sup>25</sup> Even if the connection is only forged in my narrative, surely the power of variegated grey paint in *Treatise on the Veil* has a place in the history of art's long preoccupation with the veil?

Accordingly, does not Twombly continue to interrogate painting and what is painting, especially because in the two *Treatise on the Veil* paintings, the material on which and with which the work is executed become indistinguishable. Twombly's canvas also creates an abstract and poetic form, just as draperies and fabrics did in the Renaissance, draperies and fabrics which assumed the role as subject of the image, rather than defining the figure they covered. When the grey abstract surface becomes the subject of painting, the push to abstraction is complete. Nevertheless, the fabrics, folds, breaks, textures of Twombly's grey in the *Treatise on the Veil* paintings are preoccupied with movements of a different kind: they echo the movements, undulations, cessations and re-startings in the narrative which is the treatise of the title. Twombly's two paintings might, accordingly, be anchored by centuries of painting in grey. And yet, they also extend this history: they realize the push towards abstraction begun in the studies of fabrics and linens, as well as imagining a whole new subject matter.

Heiner Bastian sees the *Treatise on the Veil* paintings as Twombly's reference to the "philosophical hyperbole of gradations of the void wherein night, silence and isolation are as exquisitely calibrated as an algebraic formula."<sup>26</sup> The said algebraic formula and calibrations refer to the numbers, measurements and calculations along the horizon line that segments both paintings a third of the way up. Bastian may be correct in his assertion about the silence and isolation of the upper two thirds of each painting, although the intense activity of the grey washes suggest anything but stillness and silence. Notwithstanding the claims about the void, Bastian also gives the impression that the paintings envision a mathematical precision, a calibration. The numbers on the canvas correspond to the rectangles they measure, but beyond this formal articulation, their larger significance is

24 See Leonardo da Vinci's *Draperly for a Seated Figure*, 1470. On the use of cloths, draperies, veils and so on in the history of art, see Paul Hills, *The Art of Discovering: Curtains, Veils and Draperies in the Italian Renaissance*, Forthcoming. I also discuss grey veils and cloths at length in chapter two of ~~my forthcoming book~~, "*The Truth is Always Grey: From Grisaille to Gerhard Richter*." 

25 I am thinking here of Johns' grey catenary works, but the same could be said of the flags and targets.

26 Bastian 1994 (as note 8), p. 31.

debateable. In keeping with Twombly's tendency, there may be a quest for precision and regulation, but like the Orpheus legend and the music that describes it, there is never an achievement of the sought after precision. At least, this precision stops at the level of formal articulation. Indeed, the numbers and markings appear to be completely contained, held within their own logic, their own process of unfolding.

This ephemerality and ineffability of meaning in a pair of paintings whose only reference to figuration comes in their ambiguous titles, makes them consistent with the works that come before and after both the 1968 and the 1970 versions of *Treatise on the Veil*. In spite of the pursuit of logic and meaning across the surface of almost every one of Twombly's works, the goal is never reached. If it is reached, the goal is always compromised, either within the given painting, or in the next painting in the series. Moreover, this lack of destiny, the unresolved search that may not even have a goal in the first place, are critical to the paintings' hermeneutic depth.

The difference of the two *Treatise on the Veil* paintings from the works that are painted in their midst, and yet, as exemplary late 1960s/early 1970s canvases is the suggestion of logic and rationalization through measurement.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, the possibility of establishing logic, of being able to rationalize the logic of painting is an illusion. This is Twombly's representation of what is ultimately inexpressible and ineffable, as it is represented in his ongoing search for a "visual language" with which to make sense of life and the world in painting. Painting and writing are placed in a dynamic struggle on Twombly's canvases, and here in the *Treatise on the Veil* mathematics and movement are added, such that their worth is measured against each other as together they refute the possibility of finite representation. Beyond markings that are apparent measurements of the rectangles, the relevance of the white numbers is questionable.

The search for a mathematical formula as the pursuit of abstract painting of course, has a history. As modernist painters, Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Piet Mondrian, and Robert Delaunay all believed in the equation of scientific truth and abstract painting, hence the geometry of the shapes that cover their canvases. And for all of these artists it was colour, the relationship of one colour to the next, that lead to the truth. Even though Malevich and El Lissitzky found the so-called truth in black squares and white on white forms, thus the temptation to assert that they moved away from colour in an effort to locate the truth, it is in the relationship of black and white to colour that the spiritual resolution is found.<sup>28</sup> For Twombly, however, the truth is more ambiguous, it is not scientific, and neither is it ever a single grey. Scientific rationality might be the goal, but the process of realization is carried out in grey, through grey, on grey. This is what makes grey so

27 The triptych, *Problem I, II, III*, 1966 would be an obvious companion to the *Treatise on the Veil* canvases. Twombly always paints several works at the same time. This means that the works are not only painted in series, and belong in the community of paintings that surround them, but that they are always accompanied by others that would not otherwise be recognized as their siblings.

28 *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes 1912–1928*, ed. by Anna Lawton, Ithaca/NY and London 1988.

vital to Twombly's canvas: grey is the uncertainty of process, grey is the medium, ground and carries within it the *raison d'être* of painting. Painting has none of the alliances with science that were imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century, painting has none of the alliances with mathematics that are imagined as being displayed on Twombly's canvases. And Twombly convinces us of this through the enactment of a struggle: a struggle between line and form, colour as abstraction and figuration, a struggle between mathematics and music, between painting and photography.<sup>29</sup> In his departure from the more traditional concepts of painting such that painting has a life of its own, a history of its own, sensations of its own, Twombly's use of grey is both a venture into the unknown, as well as an extension of the abstractions in grey painting that have come before him.

In addition to the relationship to music and mathematics, perhaps the most fertile of the relationships played out across the six panels of both instances of *Treatise on the Veil* is that of photography and painting. Again, it is common for artists, especially painters to see painting in its relationship to photography and other media in a pursuit of what is painting, how it functions in an historical moment when painting apparently no longer is possible, a historical moment when photographic based media dominate the cultural and visual imaginary. Bastian writes Twombly told him that *Treatise on the Veil* was inspired by a Muybridge photograph given to Twombly by Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>30</sup> The photograph apparently depicts a veiled bride passing before a train — an object in motion. Bastian does not elaborate on the influence of Muybridge's photograph on the paintings, and it's difficult to see it in the images themselves. Moreover, there is no apparent image of a veiled bride crossing in front of a train in Muybridge's oeuvre. Therefore, rather than seeing a specific Muybridge photograph in *Treatise on the Veil*, there is another of Muybridge's images that enable us to see a relationship to photography more broadly in Twombly's paintings.

Twombly was no stranger to photography. Ironically, his photographs are closer to paintings, exploring and discovering, not reproducing, the world he sees.<sup>31</sup> The photographs are always blurred, as if in the ultimate gesture of negation of the objectivity of the medium. The blur is also a distancing device, an insurance against the viewer's desire to become immersed in the photograph. In Twombly's photographs, it is as though photography is another medium through which to explore painting's eternal search for a visual language to understand, to reiterate nature, or at least to attempt such a vision. These photographs tell more about painting than about photography. And for Twombly, painting is grey, always in motion, always in search for a definition.

29 See, for example, Yves Klein, "War between Line and Colour, or Towards the Monochrome Proposition," 1954. Reprinted in David Batchelor, *Colour*, London and Boston 2008, pp. 118–119. Wassily Kandinsky *Point and Line to Plane*, Mineola/NY 1979.

30 Bastian 1994 (as note 8).

31 Laszlo Glozer, *Cy Twombly: Photographs 1951–2007*, Munich 2008.

Muybridge, in contradistinction, used photography as a scientific tool, to make sense of the world, for its truth and authentic representation of the world. Thus, in an image, or series of images, of which there are countless examples, the movement of animals and people are frozen in time through the use of stop motion photography. Muybridge is the scientist who discovers that, for example, when four-legged animals run, all four legs leave the ground at the same time. He is a scientist who uses a camera as a scientific tool. And in the photographic camera's ability to see with a precision not available to the naked human eye, Muybridge becomes the physiologist who develops an understanding of perception. For Muybridge, stop-motion photography is always a scientific pursuit, an attempt to document and to create new forms of vision.<sup>32</sup>

Given Twombly's apparent belief in the inability of painting and representation to arrive at an end point, ever to realize itself fully, even in spite of its innate completion and perfection, it is unlikely he would attach importance to the truth of photography, to its scientific pursuit of absolute knowledge. Given the blurring and abstraction of his own photographs, their reduction of a play of light and shadow on a non-existent surface, it seems unlikely that Twombly would turn to Muybridge in the belief that photography might articulate a precision that painting cannot. This is pure speculation, and it is a speculation that I evidence in the role of representation, its relationship to truth, to absolutes, to other media on Twombly's canvases. Given this, I would argue that it's not photography *per se* that interests Twombly, but the relationship between painting and photography. And of course, grey is the only colour to imagine the space between the two.

This relationship between painting in grey and photography, particularly, photography of Muybridge's era, is more convincing if Twombly's sibling *Treatise* paintings are placed in conversation with a different set of Muybridge images: the photographs of the *Bridal Veil* in the Yosemite Valley in California. Muybridge photographed the *Bridal Veil* in 1872, on a number of occasions, at different times of the year, different times of day, from different perspectives. There is no consensus on how many times he photographed the *Bridal Veil*, but he published hundreds of examples.<sup>33</sup> The most readily available and often reproduced of these is *Bridal Veil #6*.<sup>34</sup> Curiously, Twombly's two paintings each comprise six linked panels. The serial placement of six still images (or frames) might be seen to mimic the illusion of moving images for which Muybridge is better known. Or perhaps Twombly's six frames with the horizontal line striating them one-third of the way up the canvas mimic the movement of the waterfall from which Muybridge takes the title of his photographs?

32 Marek Pytel, "Eadweard Muybridge: Inverted Modernism and the Stereoscopic Vision," in: *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 11, issue 1, 2013, pp. 71–82.

33 Rebecca Solnit, *Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, New York 2003, p. 83.

34 Every google search for Muybridge's *Bridal Veil* on the World Wide Web results in images of no. 6.



At the same time, Twombly's *Treatise on the Veil* paintings are contrary to Muybridge's photographs, particularly, his interest in motion, change, the passing of time. The six static Twombly canvases are just that: discrete canvases marking a physical rift, a discontinuity that severs the continuity of the wax crayon made to look like a chalk horizon line, a line that, in turn, dissects a shifting and multifarious grey field. The five seams in the treatises remind of the distinction of painting as static and the kineticism that Muybridge made it his life's work to capture on film. In addition, the Yosemite Valley, the Bridal Veil is characterized by its verticality. The granite walls of the soaring rock faces are vertical, thereby making the natural formation and the waterfall, vertical. This verticality, which Muybridge captures in a number of the photographs, is both mimicked in the five seams of Twombly's six juxtaposed panels, and cancelled out by the horizontal chalk line that awkwardly dissects them. There is motion across each work, between the two, and yet there is a stasis reinforced by their two-dimensionality. The relationship is one of contradiction; it is grey.

It is said that a unique feature of the Bridal Veil, what draws Muybridge back again and again, is the extraordinary effect of the light on the geological formation. On the north side, the granite is yellow, and on the south, it is grey. Richard Lehman, another leading Twombly scholar, claims the grey of Twombly's monumental paintings is a re-presentation of the screens against which Muybridge photographed his subjects in motion. This could well be the case, but there is another possible interpretation: Twombly's varying, moving greys, the washes and vibrations of grey represent the changing face of the mountain as the sun moves across the Yosemite Valley in the course of a day. The two radically different greys of the respective *Treatise on the Veil* paintings are notable in this context: the dark, dense green-grey of the 1968 version are in direct contrast and conversation with the luminescent, light and air-filled greys of the 1970 version. The two works, facing each other at Tate Modern's exhibition in 2008, are like night and day, darkness and light, the natural cycles of day. As the sun moves across the Yosemite Valley, as day passes into night, the Bridal Veil also changes its tone, temperature and density when it is captured in Muybridge's photographs. Such a reading of the two paintings makes sense within Twombly's larger fascination with the representation of the unfathomable, sublime and mammoth natural formation, a formation that denies logic rationalization, (and eventual representation).<sup>35</sup>

When the two *Treatise on the Veil* works came face to face for the first time in London at Tate Modern, the communication between painting and nature, painting and photography, was played out in the space between the two canvases, across the room. Like Muybridge's still photographs, Twombly's paintings never make meaning on their own. Like Muybridge, Twombly's search within the unsurpassable beauty of nature, is carried

35 Solnit notes the unusual formation of the Yosemite rock formations as they are represented in Muybridge's images due to the removal of the horizon line. See *Ibid.*, p. 86

via a repetition of images, a strategy he borrows from the technologically reproducible image in the middle of the nineteenth century. Twombly always paints in series and cycles, and with the *Treatise on the Veil* paintings there are two, a repetition. As if to establish a dialogue with Muybridge, Twombly journeys into the wilderness of nature, and has no expectations about its possible taming, its rationalization. He is compelled to repeat, to re-present, to re-produce as if in a quest to find a definitive viewing position for an ultimately ungraspable natural phenomenon. The search must continue, but ultimately, the destination will never be reached because like nature, the essence of painting is contained within itself, removed from its viewer. The same might be said of the wondrous and sublime geological formations in the Yosemite Valley, and the repeated attempts to “capture” their magnificence, to understand their logic in 1872.<sup>36</sup> And so, nature, photography, grey painting are all repeating and mirroring each other in Twombly’s articulation of the process of painting across two *Treatise of the Veil* paintings.

Thus, in conclusion, like centuries of painters before him, Twombly uses grey as a vehicle in his search to create movement, light and shadow, dimensionality, to explore the interface between painting and other media, wax crayon and chalk, images and text. And he uses these uncertain spaces to navigate the interface between painting and photography, the moment where photography becomes cinema. On and in relationship to the grey canvas, Twombly also realizes his own effacement, the inability to resolve his ambiguous relationship to painting, the relationship between painting and the world, particularly the natural world. Twombly’s concerns are likewise those of other postwar American painters: to examine the limits of painting, its interstice with (and challenge from) other media, with the world around it, a relationship marked by ambiguity and contradiction is a project often assumed by postwar American painters in grey. Far from being nothing, a void, a vampire, and all the other derogatory names it has been called, grey is, for an artist such as Twombly, on these canvases, the essence of painting, the vehicle for exploration. In the realization of this pursuit in grey paint, Twombly and his contemporaries defy the *status quo* of belief in the death of painting and simultaneously refute the rise of new media as the future of representation. Twombly looks back to the birth of photography in its stop motion and static forms, as well as to other movements in modern art from the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the turn to the past, he is able to reimagine pictorial space and narrative in a series of erasures that recommence the pursuit of meaning and identity in and of painting at the end of the twentieth century.

36 Muybridge was not the only photographer fascinated by the Bridal Veil in his time. See, for example, the albumen prints of Carleton Watkins from 1870 of the Falls.