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“Fear of Knowledge”

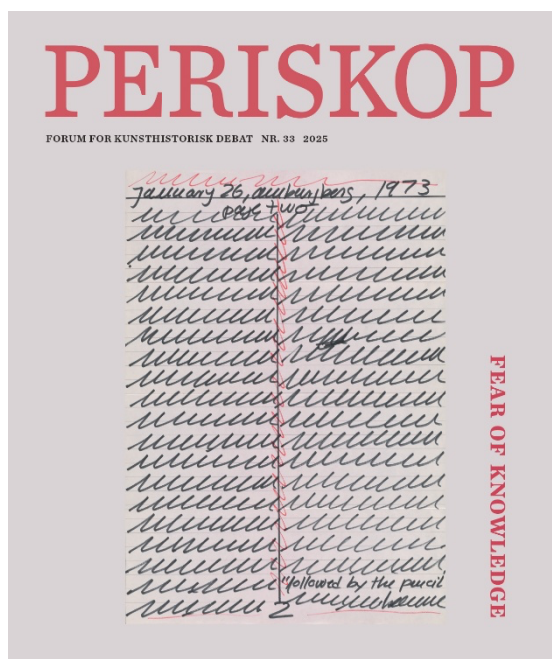
Titel: Reader, Collector, Creator: Books in Cy Twombly’s Artistic Practice

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Reader, Collector, Creator:

Books in Cy Twombly's Artistic Practice

[Twombly's] worktables are covered with oil crayons; pencils; tubes of pigment; postcard reproductions of boats and marine scenes; a big Manet art book open to a page that shows a boat painting; stacks of other art books (Ensor, Whistler, Turner); and a book of modern Greek poems in translation, turned to George Seferis's 'Three Secret Poems'. [...]

Several lines of one stanza have been altered by Twombly, with some words inked out. A section of the edited and spliced poem (with a few new words added by Twombly) is written on the canvas of Summer [Quattro Stagioni], in Twombly's inimitable, childish scrawl.

(KAZANJIAN 1994)

This is what Dodie Kazanjian witnessed when she visited Cy Twombly (1928-2011) in his studio in Gaeta for a piece in *Vogue*, in 1994: the chaotic mess of a studio¹ full of art materials and books gathering different references on art and poetry, all wide open during the creative process. As the above description shows and it is also widely acknowledged in the artist's literature, Twombly was an artists' and poets' artist. His extensive library included many volumes of literature, travel books and – as one might expect – books about art and artists. This rich collection not only reveals what an avid reader he was, but also shows his diverse taste as a book collector of valuable editions and different translations of well or less known writers.

Contrary to the belief that knowledge could hinder the artist's imagination,² this paper aims to demonstrate, through the example of Twombly, that books, which embody both a tangible and an immaterial form of knowledge, can not only be a source of creation, inspiration, and learning but also play an active role in late twentieth-century artistic practice.

For the purpose of this article, tangible knowledge refers to knowledge that is concrete, explicit, and easily communicated or documented. This means that it can be written down, stored, and transferred, as in the case of a book. In this sense, a book embodies the material aspect of knowledge that the notion of tangibility suggests, serving as a physical repository of explicit knowledge that can be shared, referenced, and transferred across time and space. In other words, books are considered physical objects containing tangible knowledge, which can be held, transferred, or collected in libraries. At the same time, I consider their content an immaterial form of knowledge: once read by their owner, the content – and thus the books – become the reader's knowledge. It is knowledge that leaves the book's pages and integrates into someone's existing understanding and personal experiences, which cannot be easily articulated. Examining the central role books play in Twombly's creative process will reveal how the artist's works engage with and intertwine these different notions of knowledge in profound and dynamic ways.

Twombly Collector

Various photographs of Twombly's apartments witness the artist's passion for books. Books were not only an object on the bookshelves but also found in every room. Much more than a mere decorative element, they were a vivid part of his life and not an artifact to collect. They were an object to live with, like for example most of his sculptures, which were kept in his studio until after his passing.

As recent research and academic interest in the artists' libraries have shown (see Le Men 2016),³ an artist's book collection not only shows its owner's personality, taste, knowledge and culture, but it also participates in the artwork's genesis (*genèse artistique*). In Twombly's case in particular, it presents a key element in his process. Despite the fact that few important studies have given limited access to his books and sources,⁴ Twombly's book collection has never been catalogued to this day. Still, tracing the poetic lines that Twombly used in his paintings could establish a partial but long list of his books which included, among others, Sappho; Theocritus; Ovid and Virgil; John Keats; Saint-John Perse and T. S. Eliot; Ezra Pound and Fernando Pessoa; Constantine P. Cavafy, George Seferis and Rainer Maria Rilke. Most, if not all of these names, will be familiar to

viewers of Twombly's work (Jacobus 2016, 1) as their lines could be often used by the painter in his own work. Just like his pictorial surface, his library would mix up Greek bucolic poets with modern Greek authors, German literature and haiku poets with writers from the Middle and Far East.

Later in his life, Twombly admitted that he also collected some rare editions of poets such as Eliot and Pope. He had proudly affirmed to Nicholas Serota: "And now I have a nice collection of books – a first edition of *The Wasteland*, little volumes of the first of the *Four Quartets*, and I also have a facsimile of *The Wasteland*" (Serota and Twombly 2008, 50). Indeed, apart from these volumes, Twombly's collection also included a first edition of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (1949); the 1698 edition of John Dryden's Virgil; the 1720 (2nd ed.) of Alexander Pope's *Iliad* and a second edition of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624) (Jacobus 2016, 243). Quite interestingly, among the painter's books, one can also find various translations of the same poet, especially his favorite ones. This could explain the number of different editions of bucolic poetry and Rilke's translations in English as well as more than one volume of Sappho's and Archilochus' fragmented poems. Different translations could offer the artist a way to catch up with a text whose original version would be inaccessible. This shows his wish to capture the essence and meaning of the poet's words as well as his interest in approaching the text from multiple viewpoints. His attention to the original can be also traced in quotes on canvas, written in the original language of Latin, German or Spanish poems⁵ and presumably copied from bilingual editions in his library. Twombly acquired these translated editions throughout the years and the oldest acquisition could date back to the 1950s.

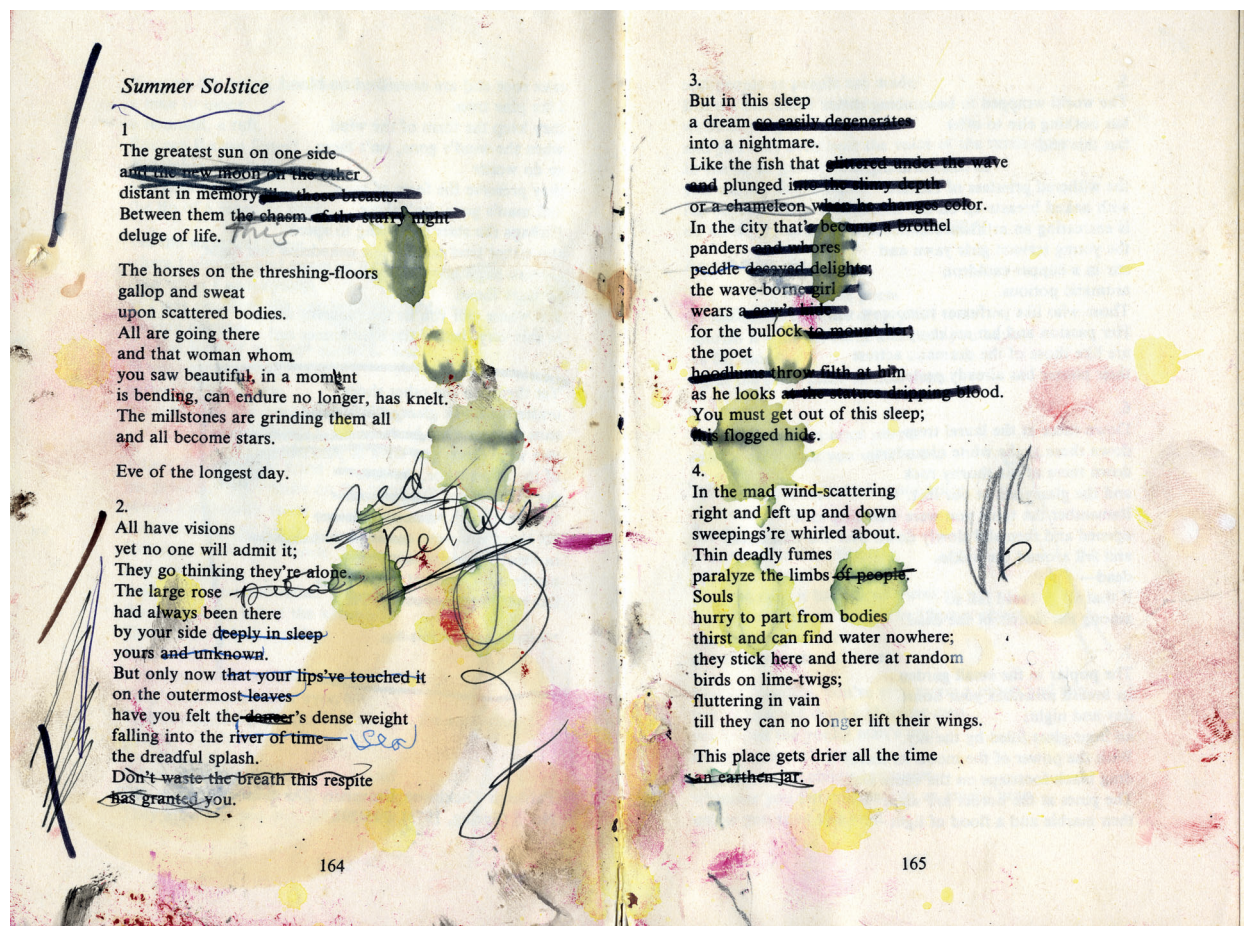
As is the case in the ancient sculpture he was collecting (Kondoleon 2020, 18), Twombly does not seem to have the eye of a collector. He purchased books of his taste which do not appear to have a specific value as a collectible or serve the purpose of collecting per se. Indeed, he could combine secondhand books, "inexpensive paperbacks, bilingual translations, or fine editions" (Jacobus 2016, 2). His approach is that of a reader who enjoys having an original edition of the writer of his liking. As Jacobus has remarked, his "collection of poetry is eclectic and unsystematic, linking past and present. Poets of the Antiquity jostle with twentieth-century European literary Modernism" (Jacobus 2016, 2). In a way, his book collection sums up his own poetics. Just like his library, his art combines past and present, high and low art, 'noble' poetry and graffiti stains, as we will see later on.

Twombly Reader

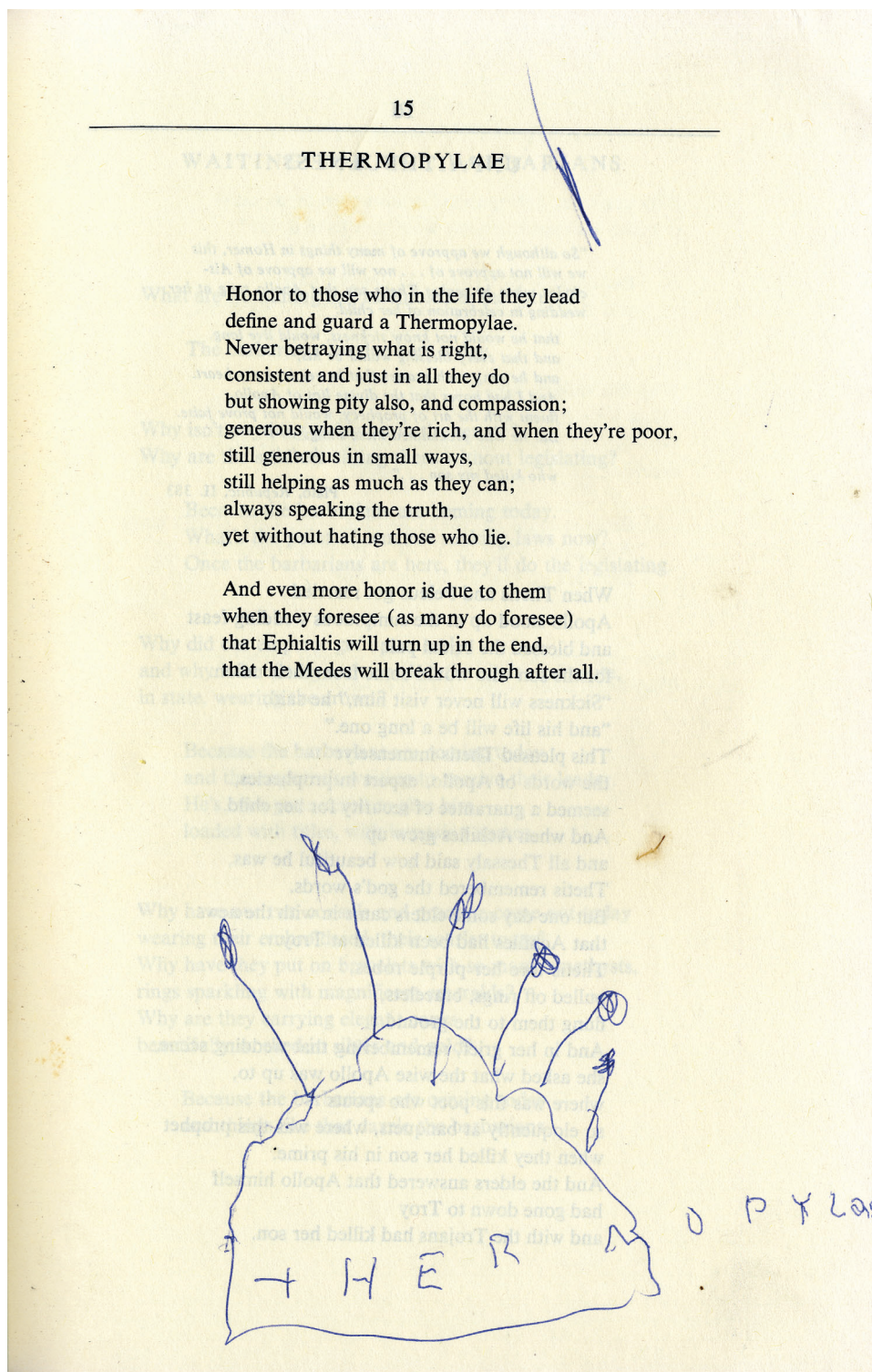
The study of the books found in Twombly's collection could allow us to explore the artist's creative process. In fact, the painter uses the book as a support that he turns into an artwork. This is thanks to the "treatment" that the book pages undergo, proving the painter's "active" reading: words and phrases that do not align with his preferences are removed, while others are replaced with vocabulary that better reflects his pictorial world. Passages that capture his attention are highlighted and set apart from the rest of the text, enclosed in boxes, ready to be used in the future. As a result, those pages full of marks and lines from his pencils, stains of paint and the artist's fingerprints become an original work, just like any other work on paper drawn by the painter [1].

He pays attention to every single word. For example, in his copy of Seferis' *Summer Solstice* (B) "falling into the river of time" [1], the word "sea" replaces

[1] George Seferis, "Three Secret Poems", in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 164–65; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press. Courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.



[2] "Thermopylae" in C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, ed. George Savides (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 15; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press. Courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.



the erased “river of time” and thus completes the poem (Jacobus 2016, 7). The added new word might fit better with the artist’s vocabulary and taste, given Twombly’s attachment to the sea, where he would often spend long periods of time before moving to Gaeta, a small town on the Tyrrhenian coast. Thanks to the new word “sea”, another meaning is added to the poem and reveals Twombly’s interpretation of the text. At the same time, this attention to detail, to the poem’s each word, shows a long procedure which precedes painting. On the latter, the viewer could possibly find these exact lines copied on canvas. This treatment of his books becomes the first stage of his creative process.

Apart from the notes next to the text, his books often contain quick drawings that suggest motifs to accompany a poem. These motifs are drawn as a reaction to the poetry’s images, showing the immediate impact some words would have on the artist. For instance, next to Cavafy’s *Thermopylae* [2], a strange form appears, a form that grows in three dimensions in the sculpture that carries the same name in 1991 [3]. These notes express the painter’s first impressions, reflecting his reading. Once the artist finds a powerful and inspiring text, these pages function as a sketchbook to trace his thoughts and inspiration, giving birth to the motifs of his future works. This is also the case for his copy of Seferis’ *Summer Solstice*, where one finds the inscription “Boat for Lucio” and a quick drawing which might be showing a boat [4]. The boat is introduced for the first time as a motif, combined with Seferis and a reference to his Neapolitan gallerist and friend Lucio Amelio, who passed away in 1994 (Leeman 2004, 254). This becomes a preparatory drawing for *Untitled*, a painting from 1993 dedicated to the artist’s friend [5]. In these pages, one can already trace all the elements that constitute the finished painting. Poetry is not only a condensed phrase (Serota and Twombly 2008). As his books show, it works as a source of inspiration and a

[3] Cy Twombly, *Thermopylae*, 1992, bronze, edition 3/3, (137 x 89 x 66 cm), Menil Collection, Houston © Cy Twombly Foundation



11.

The ocean they call calm
ships and white sails
a breeze from the pines and the mountain of Aegina
a panting breath;
your skin was slipping on her skin
easy and warm
a thought hardly made immediately forgotten.

But in the shallows
a harpooned octopus spurted ink
and at the bottom—
if you could imagine how far
the beautiful islands extend.

I was staring at you with all the light and darkness
I possess.

12.

The blood is now bursting
as the heat swells
in the veins of the ~~feathered~~ sky.
It seeks to pass through death
to find joy.

The light is a pulse
continually slower and slower
you think it is about to stop.

13.

A little longer and the sun will stop.
The spirits of the dawn
blew in the dry conches;
the bird chirped three times
three times only;
the lizard on the bleached stone
remains motionless
looking at the scorched grass

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[4] George Seferis, "Three Secret Poems" in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 169; copy marked by Cy Twombly.
Reproduced from Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint* (Princeton University Press, 2016). © Princeton University Press.
Courtesy Alessandro Twombly.
Photo British School at Rome.



[5] Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1993
(Acrylic, lead pencil on wooden
panel, 195,5x 152cm) © Cy
Twombly Foundation

stimulus for the creation of certain motifs that later become his pictures, like seeds which are planned to grow later on.

After all these additions of words, notes, marks and sketches, looking at these pages makes one realize that the editing of the text also concerns another aspect, a visual treatment accompanying the artist's reading. The white large margins of the book leave a lot of space for the artist to add his marks, and they are usually filled with colors, stains, fingerprints from the artist's hands on the pages of the book. The richness of the surface proves that the painter had the copy in his studio and probably consulted these pages while painting. The book does not only inspire images; the text itself becomes a motif next to any other mark on the page – a page which can be seen as a purely pictorial surface.

At the same time, books become the subject matter of his oeuvre. As already briefly mentioned, their content, concerning most often poetic verses, is rendered on canvas and turned into a pictorial motif. Twombly keeps his 'study' on poetry: his choice of lines all together with any kind of change or erasure of the original text are meticulously copied on the painting, thereby preserving his initial reading and personal interpretation. For example, in *Untitled* seen above, various passages from Seferis' *Three secret poems* are carefully transcribed along with the artist's notes and changes one could find in his copy. Writing becomes a synonym of drawing, as the written word functions as a structural element of the painting's composition – and even sometimes the only element of the composition. The words are his subject matter and the object, the tangible material he selects, treats and transfers from one medium to another, as a form of tangible knowledge that enriches the artwork and, at the same time, is transformed to a pictorial entity.

Twombly Creator

If Twombly's viewer is more or less familiar with these aspects of the artist's work (aspects widely commented in his literature), one is less familiarized with Twombly's activity as author and creator of books. Apart from collecting, using the book as a means of support as well as content for his work, Twombly created his own books. Less studied and rarely shown in exhibitions, the wide public had not been able to discover them in their totality until the publication of the last volume of the artist's drawings' catalogue raisonné (Del Roscio 2016). Twombly made more than ten books towards the end of his career. Most of them were begun in December 1983 and completed in 2002; only the last three were started in 2002, with two completed in 2002 and one in 2003. As they were completed more or less during the same period of time, all of his books share astonishing

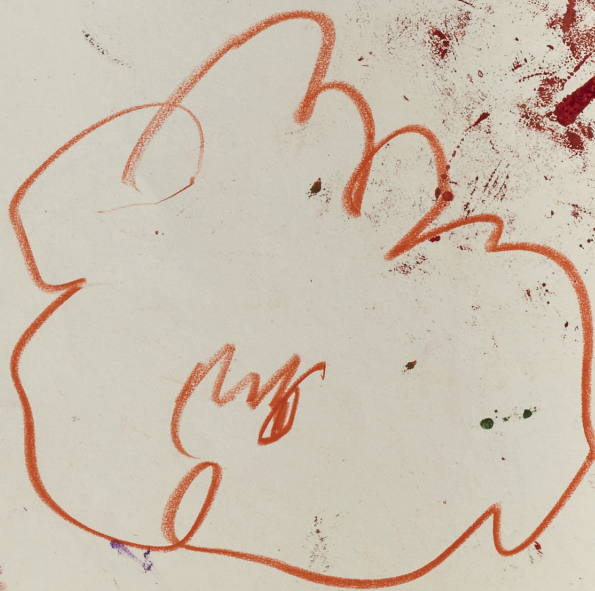
similarities presenting a resemblant color palette, common motifs such as the flowers (tulips, chrysanthemums, peonies) – which are also present in paintings in the early-mid 2000s dealing with the same forms and subject – as well as fragments from non-western poets, especially from the Middle East and Far East (Yukio Mishima, Omar Khayyam, Tan Taigi).

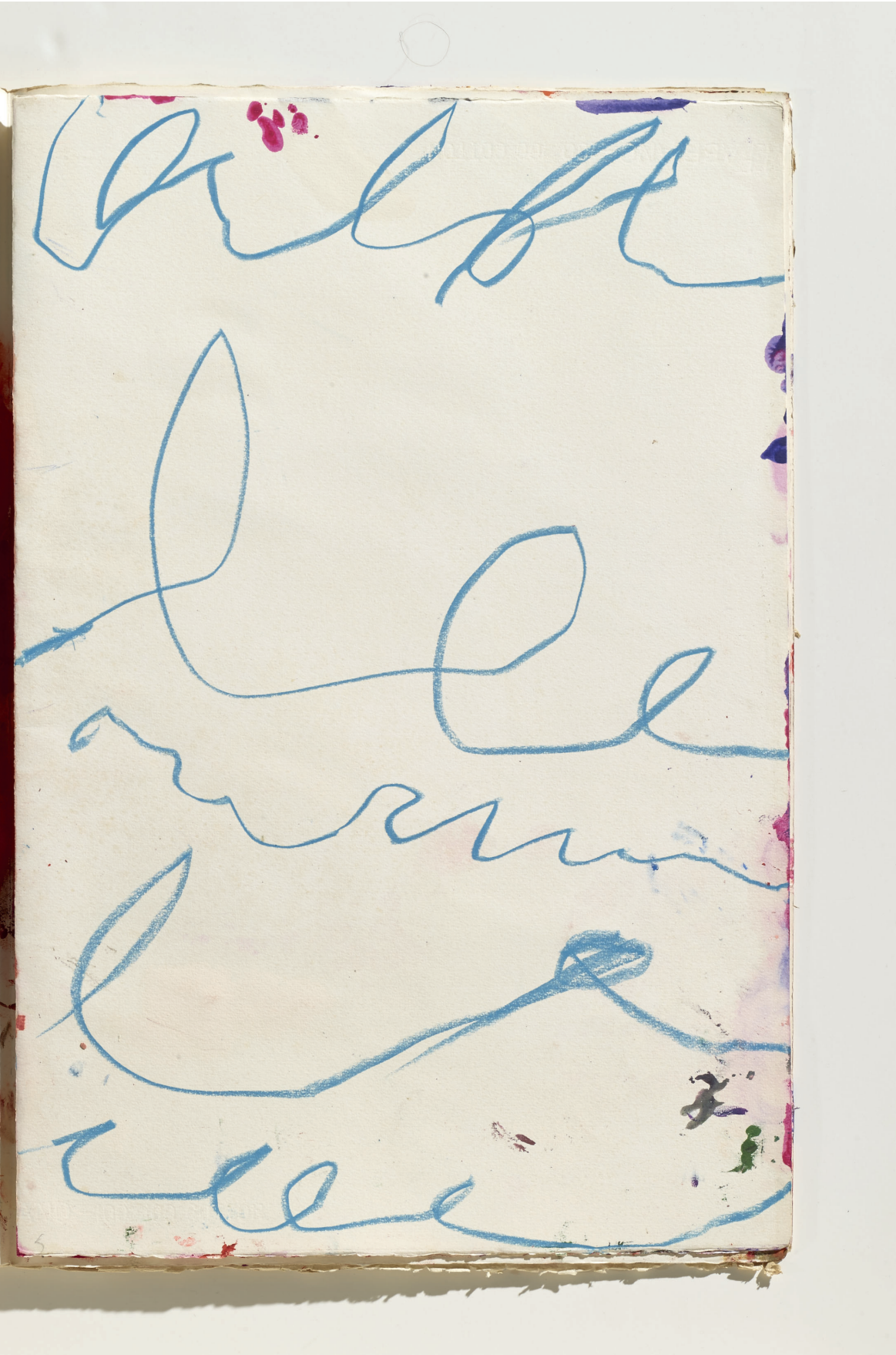
All of his books are conceived from scratch as an ensemble thought to be presented together, as an entity and as an object. He thus draws on both sides of handmade paper sheets, which he later folds together, arranging them in a sequence. As all of them are unbound and even though the pages are numbered, the artist had rearranged the sequence of the pages multiple times throughout the years, playing with different compositions that the combination of two pages could create. A unifying element of all the books is their handcrafted quality, emphasized by the paper's irregular size and texture, which lends each sheet a distinct physicality. This physicality evokes a tactile experience, inviting the viewer not only to touch the pages but also to witness the artist's own 'touch' – as the paper, soaked in acrylic paint and marked with wax crayons and pencils, bears traces of his hand. The result is a unique object that cannot be reproduced or printed in multiple copies. It is an original work of art that combines painting and poetry as in the rest of his oeuvre but, in this case, in the format of a book.

The painter's turn to the medium of the book can be understood in connection with his interest in making series of drawings and prints with the intention of reuniting them in albums or portfolios (Del Roscio 2016, 9). However, contrary to these earlier series of drawings, the books present coherence and esthetic continuity as an ensemble limited in its space, format and length. As I shall show, it is a work of art to touch and explore, with a beginning and an ending, inviting the viewer to "read" it until the end. The numerous books he created, along with his continued engagement with them later in his career,⁶ demonstrate the artist's intention to explore the book form as a creative space. Indeed, this experimentation with the medium and format opened up new possibilities, not only for his drawing as practice, but also for the text and image relationship which had always been a fundamental aspect of his work from very early on.

Take for example *Untitled (In beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002 [6-7]; Twombly presents a book as far as the format and the material are concerned and, even though there is no binding, its folding arrangement shows its aim to be presented as a book. The painter explores the page. The white sheet is a picture plane bursting with smears of colors, flowerlike motifs and Twombly's particular trembling line, which sometimes either marks the pages purposelessly or forms letters and words of poetic verses. The painter suggests a certain order (writing

The mistle
of the peony gold
607
into me
Sunlight





[6] Cy Twombly, *Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002.
Pages 19-20, Wax crayon, acrylic,
pencil on handmade paper with
irregular size, (57,3 x 38 cm).
© Cy Twombly Foundation



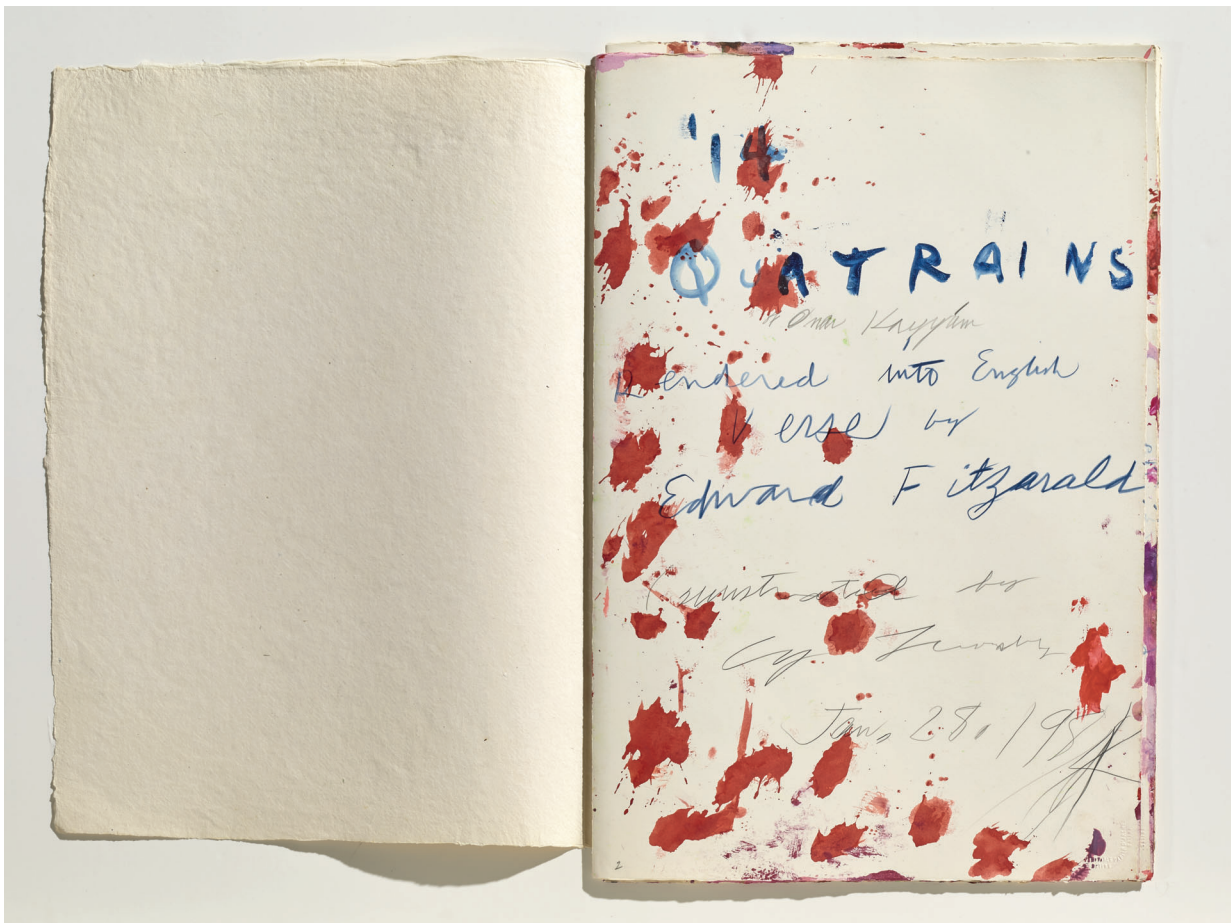


[7] Cy Twombly, *Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)*, 1983-2002, Pages 21-22, Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on handmade paper with irregular size, (56,3 x 38,1 cm), © Cy Twombly Foundation

down the number of each page at the bottom), although, as mentioned earlier, he would experiment with the visual and aesthetic aspect of the resulting combination of pages: each double page, when folded and thus divided in two, constitute a half composition to be combined with another one. This means that, as Twombly turns these drawings into a book, the format gives him the possibility to experiment with an infinite variety of combinations; in this way, new compositions emerge any time he would change the order.

Throughout the pages, the painter reveals the lines from a prayer (part of a nine-day Navajo ceremony called the *Night Chant*), combined with a short haiku by Tan Taigi also copied.⁷ This union of text and visual elements on a page puts his book in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste* as it was established by painters like Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and Henri Matisse, who combined their drawings with words from great poets. Nonetheless, as in many cases in Twombly's

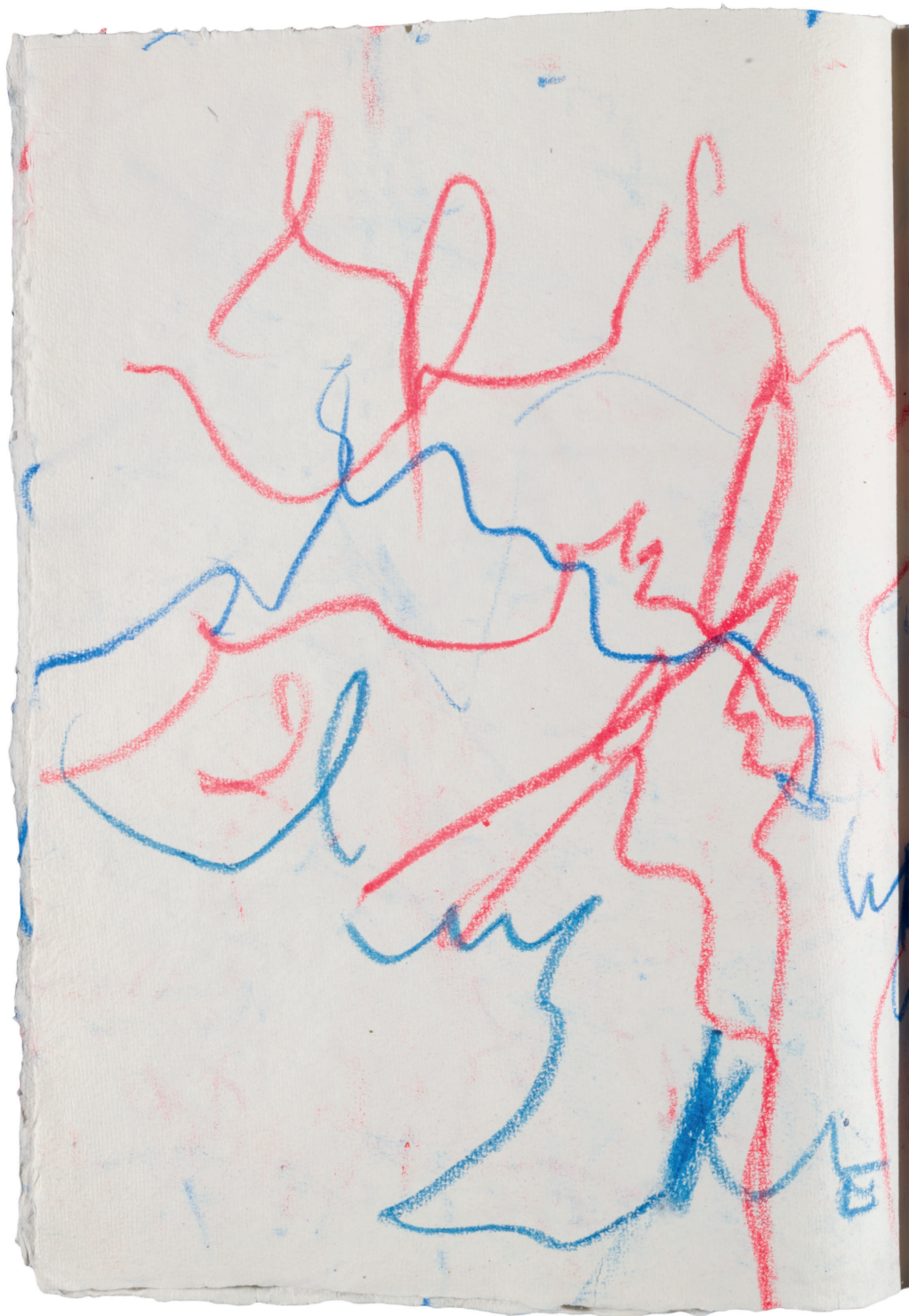
[8-9] Cy Twombly, *Rubaiyat*, 1984-2002, back cover and cover, Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on handmade paper with irregular size, (57,2 x 38,3 cm), © Cy Twombly Foundation

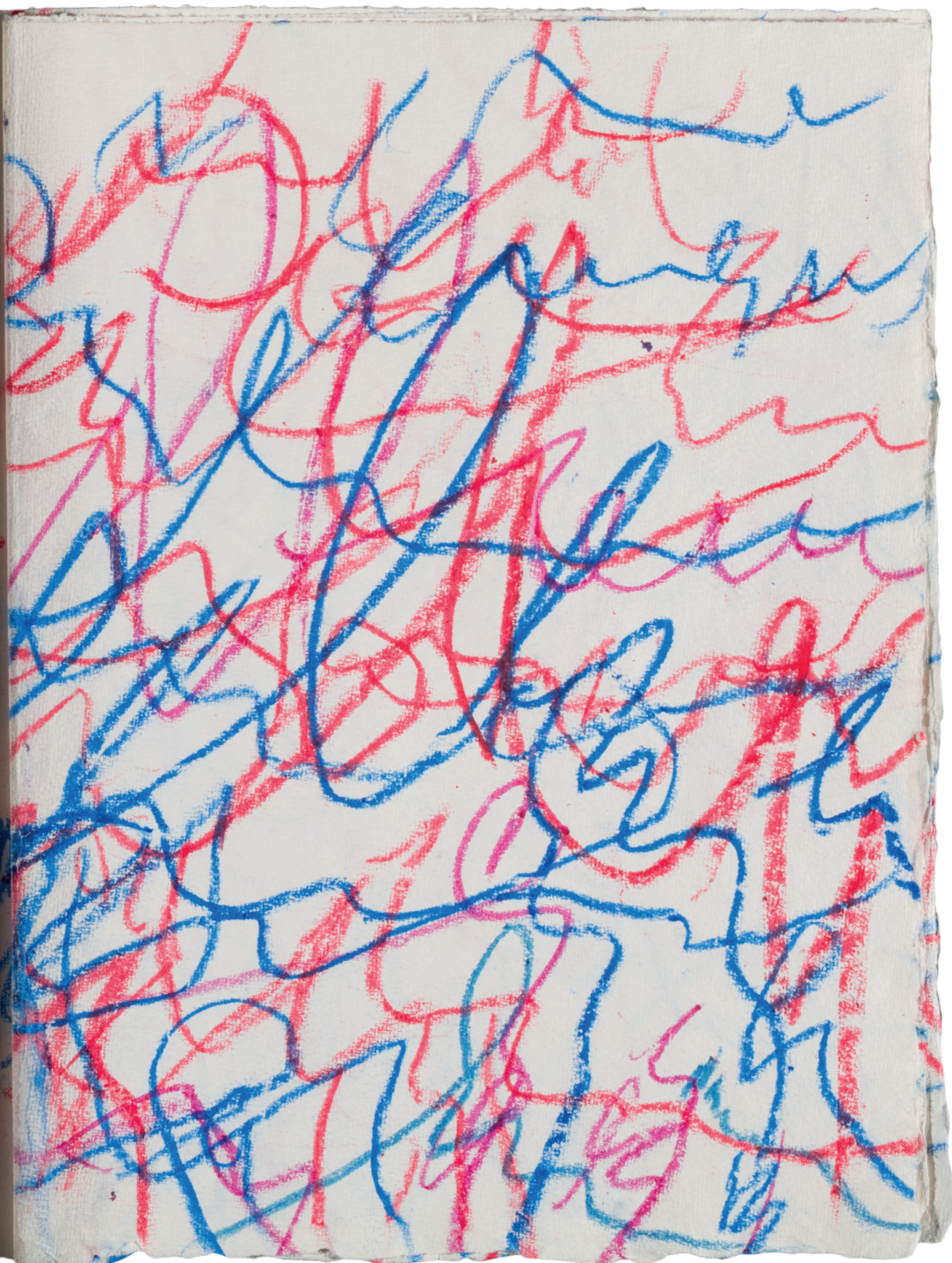




work, the poems he includes are often difficult to decipher due to his illegible handwriting, what Roland Barthes once described as the writing of a left-hander (*écriture gauchère*) (Barthes 1985, 163). The artist keeps the poem's messages to himself, choosing not to share them with his audience. The viewer is restricted to observing the written verses without being able to read them. As a result, poetry is reduced to a mere motif [8-9]. In this way, the verses that originate from a book as a material form of tangible knowledge become what Twombly absorbs and holds dear. This immaterial knowledge is then transformed into the content of his artist's book, while simultaneously taking shape as motifs within another tangible object – the *livre d'artiste*.

The pictorial value of poetry is an even more dominant aspect in the handmade book *Untitled* (cat. Rais. No. 146), 2003 [10], whose reader/viewer follows





[10] Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 2003, Pages 3-4, Wax crayon on handmade paper with irregular size (39 x 28, 5 cm), © Cy Twombly Foundation, © Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

the 'adventures' of a blue and a red line unfold on its 18 pages. Having spent all his career interweaving painting and poetry, here Twombly explores each sheet line's endless possibilities. He thus recalls earlier series of drawings, although now his lines unveil colored paths that take form throughout the book, oscillating between writing and drawing. Sometimes his hand imitates the gesture of writing words; however, he is not forming any letters, but only creating endlessly looping lines, just as he did in some works from the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Letters of resignation* (1967). Writing becomes drawing, suggesting a movement of the hand which hesitates between actually writing words or forming lines and shapes.

Despite putting in question the reading experience, the function and the overall experience of the book are still available to the viewer. *Untitled (In beauty it is finished)*, as the rest of Twombly's books, is an artwork which cannot be seen all at once. One has to take it in their hand, explore it, leaf through it and thus appreciate the juxtaposed and sequenced text and image given to read and see, and explore not only the page visually but also its physicality. There is a certain intimacy for the book as a medium: it is a personal object that one holds, observes – brings and looks closely, reads and spends time with. This experience of the book requires a whole different way of looking than any other work of his art. To put it otherwise, when the visual experience of viewing an artwork meets the book's materiality, the viewer engages in a time-consuming activity (Drucker 2004). Not to mention that when Twombly creates a book, he borrows words he himself found in other books. He thus recreates the experience he once had and aims to initiate this intimate relationship between his own artwork and his reader. Therefore, the experience of the book is tactile (has to be in one's hands), spatial (the surface plane of the sheet and the sheets all-together), as well as temporal (since the book as an object has a beginning and an ending and need time not only to fold out, read and view, but also to engage to its understanding and appreciation). This three-faced reading viewing experience sequenced into the definite space of text and images (Drucker 2004, 14) gives these assembled drawings the function of a traditional book.

Nevertheless, no one *needs to* read it from beginning to end. In fact, its other function as an original artwork implies that the only way for the public to appreciate it is in an exhibition space. This excludes the possibility of being held in hands, and cancels the full experience of the book. Instead, it is limited to the visual appreciation of the (only) one exhibited page. Although by using available technical means today, a spectator could potentially scroll virtually on a screen of a scanned copy of the book, this could not replace the actual experience described above. The latter becomes an experience theoretically available to the

‘lucky few’ who could afford to acquire the artwork. This inaccessibility limits its potential, compelling museum spectators to regard it as nothing more than a work on paper.

All in all, Twombly’s handmade books could sum up the artist’s entire pictorial practice. In connection with his paintings or even his own library books, these *livres d’artiste* gather a lifetime’s preoccupation and reflection on the text and image relationship, on color, abstraction (the line) and figuration (flower motifs), drawing and writing, painting and poetry.

Books in Practice

I have tried to delve into three different aspects of Twombly’s use of books. The book is proved to be one of the most important elements of his poetics, either used as an object, support or material. It is the painter’s main source of inspiration and intellectual support for the artistic creation, as well as a handmade object that presents an experimental form of art for Twombly.

Moreover, as already seen, his relationship with them shows different approaches to the book as a form of knowledge that is tangible as well as immaterial. The latter is suggested by its function as stimuli for the painter: books’ content and ideas are the starting point guiding the artist’s imagination and leading to later creation – a process which represents a key insight into Twombly’s work. As far as the tangible aspect of knowledge is concerned, Twombly uses the books as a tangible object to collect and elaborate (physically on its pages). Especially for the rare editions or secondhand books in his library, the idea of collecting a book pre-owned by somebody else reenforces the notion of tangible knowledge which is transferred from hand to hand, reused and reread, surviving throughout the years from one person to another. Twombly comes to add his own marks and even transform it to a material of his art. As it has also been shown, thanks to his own handmade books, the artist also creates an equivalent tangible object which is an ideal example that illustrates the metamorphosis of the immaterial knowledge already mentioned to tangible. Books in his practice not only illustrate the artistic genesis, as is usually the case for most artists, but also illustrate a full circle of the artistic process, from inspiration to elaboration, treatment and finally, creation of the artwork.

ABSTRACT

Contrary to the thought that knowledge could hinder the artist's imagination, this paper aims to demonstrate, through the example of Cy Twombly, that books can be not only a source of creation, inspiration, and knowledge but also an active element in the late twentieth-century painter's artistic practice. The study of the books found in the artist's collection reveals how the painter uses them as a medium that, through his treatment and active reading, transforms into an artwork. These same books serve as a source of inspiration for the creation of his paintings. At the same time, Twombly creates his own books out of handmade paper. This lesser-known practice offers Twombly a boundless field of experimentation, a new form of art in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste*. The analysis of these three different aspects of Twombly's use of books in his creative process allows us to study the book itself as an object of collection, as a source of inspiration, and as both a material and intellectual form of knowledge.

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NOTES

- 1 On this aspect of Twombly's studio see (Spathoni 2024).
- 2 See introduction of the present volume.
- 3 On the subject see also the research project in France: <http://lesbibliothequesdartistes.org/>
- 4 Mary Jacobus gave the first valuable insight into Twombly's library presenting not only a detailed list of the books owned by the artist but also reproductions of certain pages of his copies (Jacobus 2016). Twombly's last published catalogue raisonné also started transcribing (although not systematically) some of the artists copied lines and thus allow the identification of various sources. More recently, Thierry Greub presented an exhaustive study on Twombly's quotes and therefore offered a more detailed list of the artist's book collection (Greub 2022). My remarks are mainly based on these sources.
- 5 Although this practice is relatively rare in Twombly's work, one can nonetheless find excerpts from poems copied in their original language — for example, in Latin, as in *Animula Vagula* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 24–25); in German or French, as in *Untitled (Les Fleurs du Mal)* (1990, Cat. Rais. Drawings 8, No. 20); and most frequently, in Greek — as seen in the drawing series *Meli* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 51–56) and in *Untitled* (1980, Cat. Rais. Drawings 7, Nos. 47–49). In the latter, the inscription «ΔΙΙ ΑΘΕνΑιΟι ΜΕΔΟν ΔΑΒΟνΤΕΣ», written on the helmet of a Persian soldier, indirectly references the Battle of Marathon.
- 6 As mentioned above, since the books started in the 1980s, Twombly not only came back to the medium twenty years later to complete them, but also continued exploring the medium by creating more books at that point.
- 7 The same haiku is also found in a later painting (by the artist who copied its full version on the surface of *Untitled*, 2007 (cat.rais. No 58); see (Del Roscio 2016).