

*Un/veiled. Inside the creative process (after Cy Twombly)*

**Dean Rader & Carlos Peris in conversation**

**Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio, Rome**

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**EDE (Eleonora Di Erasmo)** - Good evening and welcome to Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio for the third appointment of the second edition of *Un/veiled*. Today our guests are Dean Rader and Carlos Peris, they are both authors of two books dedicated to the work of Cy Twombly.

Dean Rader collected a series of poems he wrote in dialogue with the artist's most famous artworks after several years of research, on the other side Carlos Peris investigated the photographic research of Cy Twombly, lesser-known but greatly revalued in recent years through several exhibitions and publications.

I would like to start with a short introduction to briefly present the topics that will be discussed during the conversation about the publications and with the reading of a part of a poem by Wallace Stevens, which Twombly used in some drawings from the 90's, entitled *The Poems of Our Climate*.

I will read just the first part of the poem and then I will explain you the reason for this short reading:

*Clear water in a brilliant bowl,  
Pink and white carnations. The light  
In the room more like a snowy air,  
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow  
At the end of winter when afternoon return.  
Pink and white carnations – one desires  
So much more than that. The day itself  
Is simplified: a bowl of white,  
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,  
With nothing more than the carnations there.*

This is the first part of the poem which begins with a description of a vase of flowers.

Indeed, Wallace Stevens usually begins his poems by describing images that are apparently real but that later move into a dimension totally surreal, because what the poet talks about it is not the real image but it is the idea...the idea that we have of that vase of flowers.

Somehow when Cy Twombly inscribes a part of this poem in his works tries to find the invisible in the visible, exactly what Wallace Stevens tries to do through his poems.

Perhaps the artist wanted to track down through this part of Stevens' poem his own photographs, the photos he took of flowers and of the vases of flowers using close-ups, blurs, overexposures that somehow allowed him to concentrate his gaze, going beyond and catching in the visible what is actually invisible. This refers not only to the creative process, but it is in some way also part of the title of the project *Un/veiled*. Indeed, what both authors try to explain in their publications is that the text and the image, the photographic work, the painting, the drawing intertwine in Twombly's work and therefore the photographic work and the poetry have the same value for the artist and find connections between them, the same dimension, the same environment at the very moment the artist creates a work.

Dean Rader is a Professor at the University of San Francisco and he wrote many books, at least he was author and co-author of 12 books, including *Before Borderless: Dialogues with the Art of Cy Twombly*, while Carlos Peris is a multidisciplinary artist. He manages an exhibition space, SACECA, in Sagunto, near Valencia and he teaches painting at the Universitat Politècnica San Carlos in



letter within letter:

line from writer to reader:

sender / receiver:

what is life but a correspondence,

a notation,

written / read by & about the self:

Dear X, Dear Y . . .

Life, like the sentence,

ends, but what if the letter is infinite?

Dear Twombly,

master of the eternal e, unending o--

what letter would you write to /

for our country? What sign / what scrawl

speaks through its own silence into the ear

of our brightest hearing?

Calligraphic and metonymic

all at once. Yes, it is true we may not hear,

but we still might read

and yes, it is true that we may

not read, but we still might see.

Darkness blinds but only until it is marked by light.

Blindness darkens

but only until it is lit by mark.

What awaits us, Cy, in the mailboxes of the dead?

Here, the glyphs and graphemes

of our daily lives

seem at best unreadable,

at worst struck through.

It is time to draw the insurgent word /

time to write

the letter of our uprising on the envelope that is this land.

To the tyranny of edict,

I send the erasing angel:

to the president of autocracy,

I post the cancellation.

As a poet who is obsessed with many of the same poets that Twombly seems to love, Wallace Stevens, for example. It is serendipitous that Eleonora mentioned Wallace Stevens. There's a poem in this book that also mentions Stevens. I think that he and Twombly are great aesthetic twins but the poet that I am drawn to the most, I think that overlaps with Twombly, is the great Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke and specifically the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Twombly loved the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and in 1979 he did a series of pieces on Orpheus that often have quotes from Rilke in the pieces themselves. And in some of my poems I take some of those quotes and work them into my own, my own poem. One of the things I love about Twombly is how he's always engaging other artists. So in these pieces he is thinking about Rilke who's thinking about Orpheus which means Rilke is kind of also thinking about Ovid and maybe Twombly is thinking about Ovid. So in this poem I am thinking about Rilke and thinking about the past and it's called *In Advance of All Parting*.

Another canvas,

another blank page—

more of the same: absence within absence,  
uncertainty and indeterminacy,

those twins language lifts out of.

What came first-drawing or writing?

Every sign is a symbol of its vanishing,

every mark the beginning of its erasure.

Among the waning,

I want to be the singing glass that shivers as it rings,

be both the tracing and the trace —

I want to be the mark that marks our names.

**CP (Carlos Peris)** - Thank you.

**DR** - Well, sure. Now the fun begins.

**CP** - Thank you Dean. Thank you Eleonora. Thank you Nicola. Thank you everyone for coming. Grazie mille. So, it was beautiful, thank you.

**DR** - Thank you.

**CP** - I would like to start the conversation by asking you what you mentioned in the book. How these poems came as part of one specific exhibition that took place in New York, a drawing exhibition at Gagosian Gallery [*Cy Twombly. In Beauty it is Finished*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2018].

**DR** - Which you also saw

**CP** - Which I also saw

**DR** - Which is amazing to think about...

**CP** - Yeah, yeah, it's a coincidence that kept me thrilled when I first saw the book. We were at the premiere, the presentation of *Cy Dear* at the MoMA and it happened, we came to visit the exhibition. And there is just something there that keeps me thinking about since I received your book and it's how these images, these paintings, these drawings from Twombly in a way transmute and transform themselves into poems? I think also to the images you create with your poems.

**DR** - That's a really great and complicated question.

Well, I'm always thinking about how Twombly is making me feel something. I don't always ask how he does something because that's really happens in some other realm that I don't have access to but I am interested in why when I see a work by Twombly, I feel the way I do and I feel like there's something formal in that. But in this book, I am trying to replicate that emotion.

I would like to do in my poems what Twombly does on canvas. And I would like to help readers of poetry who maybe respond more to poetry than they do to visual art. A lot of my poetry friends, they just don't get visual art, and they really don't always get abstract art. And so one of the things that I'm really trying to do in this book is to capture the vision, the energy, the movement, the cadence, the raw emotion, the big thinking that I see and I feel in Twombly into the poems. So as you noticed, some of the poems on the page, don't always look like poems. They maybe try to replicate what Twombly does on the canvas, on the page.

There's one poem in particular which is on this monitor that is talking to one of the chalkboard paintings and that painting I always imagined can be read either horizontally or vertically. So I wrote a poem that tries to, with great fun, describe that painting, but you can read it two ways.

You can read it all the way across or you can read it vertically. So I'm always trying to respect the energy and design of Twombly's work in the poem. I really want people to feel Twombly's energy in the poems. And I want readers and viewers to feel like there's some sort of collaboration, some merging of his greater abilities with my, my groping.

So. And I wanted to ask you as an artist, your work is really spectacular. So as an artist who is also in this world of making art, you are encountering Twombly. And I think you and I, we've both talked about this. We have found an inspiration in Twombly for our own work. What was it like to be really moved by Twombly as an artist to then go and look at these photographs in a way that no one has done before and then to write about them?

**CP** - Yes. I mean, as an artist, at the beginning I was painting more than I'm doing now, so I think it has been, natural, quite a natural process to start maybe on that path, that is painting, when I discovered [Twombly], I was painting almost every day. I discovered it in the Tate Liverpool at the show of Turner, Monet, Twombly [*Turner Monet Twombly. Later Paintings*. Tate Liverpool, 2011] I was so shocked to see it live, just running across the Tate and entering the room where the exhibition was going on.

**DR** - I know that emotion.

**CP** - Yeah, and I didn't pay the ticket of the exhibition, I was just sneaking.

**DR** - I also know that act.

**CP** - So, yeah, that emotion, that feeling of encounter of this new way of thinking, paint or painting itself, was shocking for me. And the way he could manage all this material inside of a surface for me was amazing. This simplicity but also all the burden that comes with each gesture was totally revealing for me. But with the years I became more focused on installation and this kind of work. So photography always been collateral media for me but in the later few years it's been more present in a way. So it came quite natural to decide to focus on his photography and also, as Eleonora pointed out, it's something that is not been pretty much talked about. And I consider that we should, and I say we because we and finally we are all working on it, we should talk more about this part of his production because for me maybe photography was a companion for Twombly in his whole career since the first photographs from '51 until his last art production, including also photographs at the

Cemetery of Saint-Barthélemy. So it is shocking how important it [photography] was during his career and how minimum attention it got, it received also by the artist, well, not attention by him, but in a way he kept them [photographs] for himself until '93, the year of the first exhibition of his photographs. So, that is also an interesting point of view from the artist that later on was, in a way, correlated.

**DR** - Yeah. Well I hope your book will change how people think about his photographs because you make this brilliant observation earlier in the book where you say that his drawings, his paintings, his sculptures and his photographs were all part of the same process and I think that is really interesting. And if people start to think of his photographs as woven in the same fabric, are two sides of the same coin as his painting, then I think that those will get elevated. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about why you think that the photographs were part of this larger sort of macro or organic process, and not just, as you said, a tertiary or ancillary project?

**CP** - Yes. I think as poetry. Indeed, it was a crucial part of Twombly's work. Maybe it's not as present in every single piece, but as photography is not present in every single exhibition or single catalogue. So I think, in the end, for an artist and more specifically for Cy Twombly focused on that specific part of his life, interior life, even his life was part of his art. You know, in the end, there is much talk about art/life and life/art. I think that even with his sculptures there's no line to draw a start because his sculptures were painted. Maybe that's an obvious part or this is something that could sound a bit not so serious, but they were painted. That means something. That means a lot, in fact. And his drawings were painted, too. But, on the other side, his paintings were drawn. Poetry was included there. And photography was happening while he was painting. And there are lots of photographs that are just part of a point on the path of painting. So, those pictures reveal a lot of the process but also a lot of his momentum while he was making [a work] and I think about poetry. And you know pretty well because I think in your book you're also working with what's happening in the painting with your perception of it. And you reflected on it not only about putting that specific work part on the left side or on the right side, but you reflected also on your feelings about it. But there's something also on the composition. You said this kind of reading the painting, this kind of reading history, this kind of approaching Twombly, I think it is very interesting. And yeah, maybe we can talk about a bit more of that part.

**DR** - Yes. Thank you. It's a good question. I'm obsessed with these issues. For me, I discovered him when I was a graduate student, actually through an essay by Roland Barthes and I immediately became transfixed by him. And I even made a cross-country road trip from New York, where I was in grad school, to Houston, when the Twombly Gallery opened at the Menil in 1995 or 1996. And he's sort of been in my brain living there for a long time. And this book; it's asking a lot of questions about life, mortality, the role of art, what it means to devote a life to an aesthetic project. But its two basic obsessions are what is the difference between writing and drawing? What does it mean when Twombly writes out a Rilke poem on a canvas? Is he writing there? Is or is he drawing? And then the other similar questions are what's the relationship between looking and reading?

We tend to think of ourselves as *looking* at art, but we *read* poetry. And one of the questions that I ask in the afterword is, what if in this book Twombly is the poet and my poems are the visual art? Like, what would that do to the project of Twombly? What if I'm the one drawing and he's the one writing? What does that do to our respective aesthetic projects? So one thing I try to do in the book is to try to capture on the page a kind of visual grammar or a visual cadence of the painting or the drawings. And sometimes I will try to take—if it's a piece that is about poetry includes lines of poetry in it—then I'll try to encode those lines into the poem. Here's one example: a drawing that Twombly drew that is very more than a kind of purple stain and then lines from a Sappho fragment. And then I wound up trying to think about how could I make something that would incorporate Twombly,

Sappho, and me. So I came up with this idea. I wrote this poem, and the last word of every line spells out, it replicates, the Sappho fragment. So there's three kind of traces in the poem Twombly, Sappho, and mine.

And I love that kind of three-part conversation, that multi-vocal work, because I think that's sort of an homage to much of his work which is almost always in conversation with some predecessor, someone who came before him, who sort of laid an esthetic agroundwork for a linguistic or poetic groundwork.

**CP** - That's nice, because you said about them, well, while reading, we are watching, while writing, we are also scribbling or painting in a way, and when we are talking about Twombly, it's impossible to get rid of poetry. I mean, from my point of view and making a thesis and working on a PhD about Twombly, I had to be academic all the time. So it was quite a big job to try not to be poetic, because is not what you're supposed to do in a PhD. So it's so curious to see how all these words or actions have their two sided things. Yeah, two ways of seeing them or doing them. So that's interesting because it happened to Twombly too, as you said, but is happening to us.

**DR** -Yes.

**CP** - At the same time you are drawing on, I don't want to say that, but I'm making poetry, in a way.

**DR** - Sure. Yeah. Well, I was thinking about that with your photographs as well that you're working on it. So I feel like there, there are painters and poets that I engage with my brain and so I'm thinking my way through. Wallace Stevens, for example. I mean, you, me, Twombly.

Eleonora just learned this, but I wrote my master's thesis on Rilke and Stevens, my PhD thesis on Wallace Stevens. I've lived with those guys for a really long time up here [points to head], but I also live with them here [points to heart]. And Twombly is that one of those rare artists who I feel equally engaged by intellectually and emotionally, like I feel those poems and I feel his paintings. I feel his paintings so deeply. And I think that for many of us, at least in the West, and maybe, you know, in Europe and America, we tend to come to visual art maybe with a little more of our heart. We tend to come to poetry, maybe a little more with our head as something to be decoded. And I think that Twombly takes the best of those engagements. And I love how he makes me feel through thinking or his paintings teach me how to think through feeling or feel through thinking. I don't know exactly which one, but I feel bigger after being with them.

How do you see your own work with the photographs contributing to this sense of Twombly's bigness or the sense of his accomplishments or his ambitions? Did he want those photographs to be to do private work or public work or both?

**CP** - I think at the beginning they were just made for himself and he didn't think to make them public. That's I think more obvious now, seeing the dates when they were published, made and copied also. So, as I said, the first photographs dated from '51. He waits until '93 to show them to the public. But most of the production of Twombly comes when the Polaroid was launched. So this Polaroid the SX 70 it was the first model for a Land camera. I think it opened up a world of possibilities for Twombly because at the beginning thinking about making a photograph consisted of taking the photo, then developing the film, and then having this sort of other object on paper. So it takes time, takes process, it takes knowledge, it takes technique, qualities that maybe Twombly didn't search for.

And, well, maybe he was not interested in that technical part of doing photographs. So Polaroid finally gave him what he wanted or what he needed or even more what he desired in a way. Because finally, photography, I think, for Twombly comes more from a desire to have an image or to take that image and make it. So yeah, those photographs were taken in '51, but in the 70s Polaroid camera came out. So in Twombly's production the majority of them are made with Polaroid. It takes 20 years till he

decided to print them with the Fresson family in France. But later on, I think it was in 2005 he decided to make another production, more, from my point of view, more untestable prints that were more linked with Twombly's work in general. Think about that, for 20 years the photos were kept in his studios and you can see on that screen over there. There are lots of photos that were taken of his studio where he had all these Polaroids close to what he was painting on that time. So for him it was like a aid of memory. And I don't want to call them sketchbook, but they were sort of a mechanism to encapsulate some *momentum* or state of mind while creating, while thinking, while reading. So in a way, I think, yeah, they were primarily made for himself, but later he thought that they had that potential. So he gave them that opportunity to raise. And I think also the small artwork always speaks of the bigger one and happens quite a lot of time. And the other way around, the big ones talk about the small ones and it's happening all the time.

So, yeah, they were just made for him.

And I think also that's a bit related with poetry sometimes, with writing, you write something for you and later comes out. I had the feeling, I can imagine all your notebooks plenty of...

**DR** - Well, we had talked about that maybe some of the Polaroids are kind of visual note taking. You know, he's sort of like keeping track of these because some of the Polaroids would be of the pieces, some of them would be of the work space or the pieces or in the background or some... I thought that was just such an interesting project for him to do. And how many thousands, like 5000?

**CP** - Polaroids, yeah.

**DR** - That's astonishing. That's more than I have.

Maybe there are questions from the audience that we could respond to...

**CP** - ...or corrections...

**NDR (Nicola Del Roscio)** - Can you please talk about that? The photographs of Cy Twombly are not of a photo reporter, they are a pictorial interpretation, rather than a portrait, you know. It was an interpretation of painting, certain rhythm, certain punctuations, certain noises, certain whispers of the mouth, even breathing...

**DR** - I feel like he [Carlos] would be the better expert to talk about that. I think what would I see in the photographs and Carlos book does a great job of doing this, literally and metaphorically giving us a different lens through which to look at the paintings. So if you think about photographing, so like in my book, the photograph of the painting tries to make you feel like you're in front of the painting whereas Twombly's Polaroids of his work don't try to do that. Right? They capture them, sort of as a still life. Right? And so I think that he is interested in placing those paintings and placing his studio. And then also, you know, his photographs of the sea or the landscape around Gaeta. He's interested in, in providing another lens through which to look at the world and his work. That's what I would say.

**CP** - Yes, that's totally true. And I think also, not only to record this, this just the set up or the still life. I just said that it's happening, obviously, because it is a technique based on image, so it's happening. But as you said, Nicola, I think it's also a record, but it's not a record as a reporter, it's a record of a moment, it's a record of a sense, it's a record of a memory. In fact, it's a capsule that is captivating all that but obviously in a painterly way because finally we have an image, we have an object that is the Polaroid and later on this reinterpretation of the print that I think refers to the ways how we see the photos, how we see his paintings, how we see them related one to the other, to each other.

**DR** - And I would even say something perhaps similar about the artwork in which lines of poetry appear. I mean, one question would be why? Why isn't the visual plane enough? Why? Why isn't that enough? Why, when there's really good printed, very legible translations of Rilke or Lorca out there, why go in your big, beautiful painting and write out lines that are really hard to read anyway? Why do that? What is gained by that? And so I have often wondered if Twombly is responding to the poetry in this really emotional way and he is like "One genre isn't enough." He needs both of those always in interplay, sort of like maybe he does in the photographs. Things just on their own, are just one thing, but if you have things talking to each other, then I don't know. Somehow it's richer.

**CP** - Yeah, it gets bigger. And more important in a way. As we said, they are helping each other to grow, to rise and about poetry and the relation with Twombly I can remember some poetry that maybe is corrected by Twombly...

**DR** - Yeah, he changes it...

**CP** - ... he changes it and also in the paintings some of them are not complete. He decided to just leave some of the verse and not the rest of it. And that's brilliant for my point of view.

**DR** - I love that. Yeah.  
You don't need a whole poem.

**CP** - Any other question...

**CG (Cristian Grasu)** - So, in 2021 there was an exhibition at Gagosian, right up here, of photographs of Cy Twombly and the title of the exhibition was *Souvenirs of Time* [Cy Twombly. *Souvenirs of Time*, Gagosian Gallery, Rome, 2021]. This is a question for Carlos, obviously, because of photograph, but then feel free to answer as well if you want obviously. Do you think Twombly intended his photographs as souvenirs of time that he would look back at them, you know, in some moments? Or do you think he just intended them just as something that he liked in that specific moment?

**CP** - Yeah, I mean, that was a really clever title for the exhibition and I think, well, you can see also on that screen, there are some photographs from the archive that show Twombly with all the Polaroids arranged on a table. So he used to play games like memory games with them and staking them and reorganizing them, like for more focused to less focused on, from more specific content to a more abstract one. And all this kind of games played with this kind of card game or tarot card or something like that, so this kind of trying to recall or to go back, it's a kind of souvenir. Of course. Yeah. These photographs, what they did was to take these specific moments, so he could come back to them and think again about them and feel them again. And I think that happens all the time with his paintings. As you said before, you feel when Twombly is making that scribble, making that gesture of that paint or over the materials having there. So that motion, I think with photographs he was trying to reconnect with that moment, with that state of mind, with that specific moment. Yeah. For sure.

**DR** - I feel like I'm not as smart about the photographs as Carlos, but what I would say is—we were actually talking about this at lunch today—Eleonora was telling us that Twombly became particularly interested in Stevens in the 90s and did, you know, maybe roughly 6 or 8 pieces that are sort of responding to this one poem, and I think that is a kind of record of a time about how he's feeling about Stevens or thinking about Stevens. And so one of the things I've always wondered is if when he writes out lines of poets in his pieces, is that almost like public diary? Is it a way to tell the world and to himself: *This is how I was thinking about Sappho and 1963* [drawings] or *this is how I was feeling about Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus in 1979. This! Oh yes, I loved this one! Wallace Stevens poem in*

*1991*. And so I do wonder if those are kind of souvenirs that captures an emotional resonance, a kind of fugitive fleeting experience that ties us to the infinite. I believe all of that.

**NDR** - ...he put it like in “incastro” and he corrected famous poems, you know, and with these corrections they look, they sounded much better than the original work was.

**DR** - All poems can use a little bit of editing, even by non-poets, maybe especially by non-poets.

Thank you.