THE SHIELD, THE PHALLUS, AND THE ROSETTE: CY TWOMBLY'S *FIFTY DAYS AT ILIAM*

by

KAITLYN MORRISON

(Under the Direction of Isabelle Wallace)

ABSTRACT

Cy Twombly's permanent installation of ten paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art has been well-studied for its use of Homer's *Iliad* as a canonical source, as well as the interplay of word and image. Attentive to the repetition of circular forms, especially Twombly's rendition of the ekphrastic shield of Achilles, this thesis charts the shield's evolution into the flower-like "shades" of the warriors on the large-scale painting, *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector*, on the Eastern wall, and their phallic embodiment on the battlefields and links this evolution, as well as the cycle's relationship to the art world's contemporaneous transition from Abstract Expressionism to the aesthetics of Pop Art and Postmodernism more generally.

INDEX WORDS: Cy Twombly, *Fifty Days of Iliam,* Abstract Expressionism, Homer, *The Iliad,* Philadelphia Museum of Art

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## I. Introduction

Famous for abstract paintings that draw on classical themes, Cy Twombly is an American artist closely associated with the first generation of artists after Abstract Expressionism. Among his most famous paintings are those that comprise *Fifty Days at Iliam,* which are best understood as an abstracted, highly selective depiction of the events of war centrally recorded in *The Iliad*, as well as its ripple effects on the canonical characters as described further in ancient texts such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and the *Epic Cycle*. Following a careful description of these abstract paintings, this thesis will attend to the relationship between *The Iliad* and Twombly's adaption of its plot structure, with particular attention to the gendered interpretation of the heroic body as it is mythologically transmuted from the battlefield to the Underworld across the barrier of time. As a painter trained at Black Mountain College in the 1950s, Twombly subsequently witnessed the "death" of Modernist aesthetics as his painting developed alongside the emergence of Pop art, which is generally understood to have been the first "Postmodernist" art movement.[1] Broadly, these popular art movements differ in both formal aesthetics, context, and conception. Whereas Abstract Expressionism was understood to reflect the physical labor, psychology, and emotional state of the artist, most of whom were straight men, Pop art focused on pop culture, and was representational, referential, and cool with no pretense of making the absent present. Often making reference to advertisements and other paintings, Pop paintings incorporated text and raised questions of authenticity and authorship. Associated with queer artists like Andy

[1]Abstract Expressionism was most aptly defined in Clement Greenberg's 1955 essay, "American Type Painting." He reviews the work of abstract painters in the 1940s, contextualizing that they are still influenced by Cubism to a noticeable degree, but highlights the year of 1950 as an important turning point for the development of the Abstract American painter. He draws on Abstract Expressionist modernist painting as a movement that has become self-critical, which he finds crucial to the development of taste, aesthetic, and good art. Flatness, obliteration of pictorial illusion based on the reliance of light and dark color contrast that even Mondrian had fallen victim to, the pure velocity of paint to express the pure channel of color, and an "all-overness" of color and paint on canvas are the traits he identifies as highly Western and Abstract Expressionist. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3: 208-229.

Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, it came into existence on the heels of a transitional generation located between the polarities of macho Abstract Expressionism and, in the words of one critic, the "flaccid art" of Pop.[2]

Twombly, a painter aligned with this transitional generation, was able to maintain a blend of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art influences in his work.[3] This thesis argues that Twombly's engagement with contrasting forms allows the artist to map the progression from Modernism to Postmodernism on to the body of the metaphorical Iliadic warrior. By intertwining painting with classical gender implications garnered from Homeric poetry, Twombly's canvases articulate that despite the Modernist attempt to reveal the manful presence of the artist on the canvas, paintings instead embody absence.[4] This line of thought is depicted through the reiterated symbols of the shield, as Twombly morphs this preeminent ekphrastic symbol into masculine phalluses and rosettes—the quadrangle, effervescent shapes that signify the death of the warrior. The gallery's layout, wherein canvases of comparable size stand across from one

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[2]Peter Selz, "The Flaccid Art," *The Partisian Review* 3, no. 3 (1963).

[3]Some of his instructors at Black Mountain College were celebrated Abstract Expressionist and Modernist artists such as Franz Kline and John Cage, while he attended the school with contemporaries that notably forged "Postmodernist" idioms in their work, such as Robert Rauschenberg.

[44]I refer to further theory about the presence and absence of the artist and affixed meanings therein, explicated by Roland Barthes in 1967 and Jacques Derrida in 1968. Barthes, first, argued in his essay "The Death of the Author" that the original meaning behind any text or piece of art becomes fissured by cultural context and critical interpretation based on the broad context of applied meanings. Modernist painting, once heightened by formalists as self-mythologizing, self-representative, and purely medium-based pieces of art, was, for the decade prior to Barthes, understood to have solved "the problem of painting" in that Baroque academic work depended on illusory forms and figures to indicate depth and reality (this is inherently a Platonic problem, in that the drawing of the chair can never really be the chair). By self-actualizing on canvas through a reading that applies Nietzschean revelatory methods, the archetypal Abstract Expressionist artist was thought to be leaving himself, his sensorial reality, and his emotional state, on canvas—and the methods implied on canvas were often metaphorically phallic, in that they harnessed gesture and bodily motion through paintbrush and physical labor as the artist typically moved above the canvas strewn flat on the floor. To critique the artist's authority over the canvas once the art is circulating within a viewership context is to "severe" the presence of the artist from the canvas, a moment of disjunction that Rosalind Krauss refers to as Derridean *differànce.* See pages 19-20 and note 54. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen* no. 5- 6 (1967); Jacques Derrida, "La Differànce," *Société Française de Philosophie,* Bulletin 62, no. 3 (1968): 73.

another on opposing walls and function as reflections of one another, accentuates this dichotomy of forms.

## II. Formal Analysis

Permanently installed in 1989 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Cy Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam* (1978) (figs. 1-2) is an impressive cycle of 10 large-scale paintings based on the *Iliad* and executed in the painter's scratchy signature style, which he began to develop in the late 1950s alongside other post-expressionist artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. All paintings in Twombly's cycle are exhibited together in a single room save one—*The Shield of Achilles*—which hangs on the northern wall outside the gallery. Isolated from the remaining paintings in the cycle, it consists of a blend of black, dark red, orange, and blue lines that meet in a vortex, slightly off centered to the left of center on the otherwise off-white canvas (fig. 3). The bright colors of the shield trail in droplets to the bottom of the canvas, contributing to the notion that the shield is in fact moving, perhaps having been flung from an unseen hand. The visual impression of movement is furthered in the multi-colored lines as they circulate and gravitate toward the orange and red center of the circle. At the top left of the canvas are words rendered in in graphite and oil crayon; descriptively, they read: ΔCHILLES SHIELD.

Inside the gallery, one finds on the other side of this same, door-pierced wall two complementary works that serve as the cycle's first and last paintings: *Heroes of the Achaeans* and *Heroes of the Ilians* (figs. 5, 4), respectively.[5] Moving clockwise through the gallery, the first painting in the cycle, *Heroes of the Achaeans* is essentially a list of names. They command

[5]A 1979 diagrammatic display from *Fifty Day*'s first showing in New York at the Heiner Friedrich gallery shows that Twombly's preferred ordering of the paintings begins with *Achaeans* it will be treated first.

much of the canvas in deep red oil crayon, with four large Greek Deltas in place of the A's in Achaeans and Achilles. Likewise, *Ilians*, to which I will return at the end of this description, is, in large part, comprised of names. Above the light blue "ILIΔNS" at the top of the canvas, one finds the smeared names of the immortal gods who provide aid to the Trojans throughout the war: Apollo, Aphrodite, Artemis, and Ares. Their names are delicately written in slight cursive, a shade of blue, with off-white paint smeared over the letters to such a degree that the names appear almost invisible; the graphite names of the warriors are scrawled beneath a thick black "rosette" outline, in this case, an empty quatrefoil shape that Twombly recycles in various motifs throughout the cycle. In comparison, in *Achaeans*, the immortals who support the Greeks in the war are easily identifiable, left unmarked in graphite pencil above the word "ΔCHΔEΔNS" in two lists of three—Thetis, Hera, Athena, Poseidon (spelled by Twombly as "Posedon"), Hermes, Hephaestus. Every A is replaced, in *Iliam* fashion, with a Greek Delta. Scrawled in the same evocative red oil crayon, Achilles's name is written at slightly smaller scale than the titular Achaeans. Between these two red names others can be found: Calchas and Agamemnon, both of which are rendered nearly illegible with a smear of white paint over the graphite pencil. This change of color choice may demonstrate the death of both characters, yet Patroclus, whose death is a central event in the *Iliad*, is not smeared out with the same slash of white paint.[6] Instead, Twombly dangles the name Patroclus off to the "E" in Achilles in cramped, small handwriting.

[6]In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra murders him in a vengeful rage with the help of her lover, exacting revenge for sacrifice of his daughter for his success in the Trojan War; Agamemnon's death is thus an after-effect of the war, not a central episode. Calchas's death is less clear as it is only recorded in fragmented or lost texts, such as the *Nosti* and the *Melampodia*. It is evident that, after sailing to Colophon directly after the Trojan War, he was either murdered or committed suicide after losing to another seer in a test of prophetic ability. Twombly's interest in highlighting their presences in shades of off-white paste, smearing the representation of their existence out while also setting them apart from the other Achaean heroes, intensifies his various interests in fragmentation and non-representation as a form of representation in and of itself – to that end, the smearing of their names works to serve as textual indications of their presence within their war and the coming of their deaths as *after-effects* of the war. Twombly works with empty space to offer not only the idea of death, but also fragmented texts as a sort of death, a gap in space.

The remaining Greek heroes, respectively, Menelaus, Diomedes, and Telamonian Ajax, are scribbled in light gray graphite under Achilles and Patroclus.

The white smear to the right of the Patroclus's name serves to visually emphasize the adjacent off-white smear on the first larger canvas (measuring 118 x 94 ¼ inches) on the northern wall, *Vengeance of Achilles* (fig. 6). The smear on this canvas is located beneath the red inscription of the title above the circular object, whose composition and line work are similar to *The Shield of Achilles* due to the concentric, overlapping lines repeated in oil red crayon. Departing from *Shield,* the presence of a black, rocketing shape accumulates at the top of the circle toward the right-hand side of the canvas, allowing for the movement of the lines to come to a pointed terminus rather than *The Shield*'s suggestion of lines that fold over on to themselves unceasingly. Thus, Twombly creates the effect of a rocketing, phallic object that is firing itself off canvas in the direction of the cycle's next painting. The titular red words denoting the significance of the rocket scrawled above it, too, become less present as they fling themselves off the right edge of the canvas. After one views this work, it becomes evident that Twombly's *Fifty Days* portrays the progression of Achilles across each individual canvas, seemingly picking up the series of events from the text *in medias res* after Achilles acquires the shield in Book 19 and initiates his vengeful pursuit of Hector after the Trojan hero kills Patroclus.

The centerpiece of the northern wall, the still larger *Achaeans in Battle* (fig. 7), is a comparatively busy canvas, topped by the outline of a phallus and the word "Axioi" or Achaeans. Generally assumed to depict the Greeks at war after Achilles rejoins the fight to pursue vengeance for Patroclus in Book 20, the left-side of the canvas is less densely inscribed, with two angles against the canvas' left-side that have been demarcated by the names Thetis and Athena, scaled along their respective angled line. These angles demarcated with the names of

immortals appear as halves of 90-degree triangle, a motif that reoccurs compositionally throughout the canvas perhaps to accentuate the gods looking down at the battlefield from Mount Olympus. A blue, orange, and black circular vortex obscures the middle letters of Achilles's centrally located name, most likely symbolizing the carrying of the shield in battle after it was gifted to him by Thetis in Book 19. Moving from the shield towards the right side of the canvas, Twombly covers the center-right portion of the canvas with smeared blacks, reds, blues, and grays that overlap the names of Achaeans. Beneath the name Ajax in this dense area of the canvas, a thin outline of a phallus hovers atop a graphite circle with a bisection of horizontal and vertical lines overlapped. Both above Ajax and, further right, the warriors Diomedes and Patroclus are marked with colored phalluses of different sizes. One may thus garner that the convergence of action is occurring in this densely populated area of rocketing phalluses, wherein one finds the smeared names of the dead that drip in shades of orange, blue, and black, towards the bottom of the canvas. This expansive artwork, characterized by seemingly disparate imagery, relies on the colors of the *Shield* as well as the reoccurring circular shield-shape to establish cohesion within the narrative. Indeed, circles play a dominant role in unifying the overall composition of the piece. At the bottom-left corner of the canvas, there is an arrangement of black and red concentric lines, shaping a smaller circle beneath the name Agamemnon, which is significantly smaller than the inscribed name of Achilles positioned above it. Additionally, Twombly incorporates the previously mentioned "shield" shape positioned at the center of Achilles's name, beneath Ajax, and notably at the canvas's center-bottom. Most intriguingly, he portrays in the bottom-center of the canvas a painter's palette with the word "ARTIST" hastily written above it, and a scrawl to the right of this denotation that may be the blurred, nearly

indecipherable signature of Twombly.[7] Because this is the largest and perhaps the most symbolically dense work in the *Iliam* series, much of the prevalent symbols in this work will be developed alongside *The Shield of Achilles*. This thesis will consider the following shapes in more depth after this introduction to the cycle's content: the phallus, the shield, and the rosette.

The last painting on the North wall, *The Fire that Consumes All before It* (fig. 8), is the cycle's most brilliant and saturated. Its title, which is scrawled beneath the painting's lone image, references the wrath of Achilles and the Achaeans at large, as described by Alexander Pope in his translation of *The Iliad,* Twombly's preferred translation.[8] A painting dominated by this rosette motif that resembles the morphic heptagonal, octagonal, or nonagonal shapes that repeat throughout the cycle, *Fire* can thus be differentiated from the concentric overlap found in the phallic form as well as in the circular form of the shield. Here, the octangular object blends several different variations of red with white paint smearing off its flank, again indicating movement off-canvas as the right-tip is cut off at the symbol's center. Accordingly, the "rosette"

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[7]I suggest that this is a signature based on Twombly's interest in Greek literature and the corresponding visual culture of such. That the palette is compositionally in direct conversation with *Ilians in Battle,* on which Twombly includes geographical notations that numerically scale the objects in the centermost confluence of the "battle" on canvas, interposes a reference to the mark of craftsmanship of the artist as something that is eternal, evocative of Modernism in material and philosophical thought—yet Derridean deconstruction theory muddies the "signature" as an authentic "trace" of the artist as Derrida suggests that each word or symbol, with a focus on the signature, is not self-contained but is a product of its relationship with other signs. The signature, to Derrida, is the presence of absence, or the idea that intended, authorial meaning is always deferred and never present. The "ARTIST" signature is charged with irony by placement next to a hollow palette and ineptly scribbled line that may be Twombly's own indecipherable signature, and compositionally charged by notations that set off the marks of "moving" figures that are indeed stagnant by nature. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-330.

[8]Sources for this are Twombly himself, Joachim Latacz, Anne Carson, Christine Kondolean, etc.; Latacz, a Homeric scholar, provides a selection of translation to compare Pope's to more commonly preferred versions in his essay "Cy Twombly with Achilles at Troy" in *Cy Twombly: Image, Text, and Paratext* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlang, 2018), 137-189: "In Book 2, line 780, Homer describes the advance of the Achaeans host against Troy as 'οἳ δ' ἁρ' ἴσαν ὡς εἴ τε πυρί χθών πασα νέμοιτο...' Pope gives this in his *Preface* to the translation…already on the second page as 'They pour along like a Fire that sweeps the whole Earth before it'" – thus Twombly cites directly from Pope's words. Notably, Pope had also produced a lexicon of illustrations in his 18th-century paperback, which include demonstrations of Achilles's shield and numismatics-inspired profiles of gods. 19th-century reprints include plates on the title page that depict the personified goddess night and the throne of Jupiter. Alexander Pope, "Pope's Preface to the Iliad of Homer," in *The Iliad,* trans. by Alexander Pope (London: W. Bowyer, 1715-20), xxxi–lxxii.

form returns in the cycle's next, comparatively more static canvas, *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector*, which alone occupies the gallery's East wall (fig. 9). It consists of three named rosette forms: the leftmost for Achilles that appears red despite being comprised of various shades, bisected in the center with an X that divides it into four manifolds; the center for Patroclus, painted a swirl of gray and red, bearing eight sides. Finally, Hector's rosette is in an off-white hue, with a visible black outline delineating its shape. The black outline is partially smeared in certain areas, possibly indicating that Hector's shade, if it is to serve as a signifier or evocation of presence, is less dense compared to that of Achilles and Patroclus, perhaps due to his death by Achilles's hands in vengeance for Patroclus.

Another list-painting evocative of the *Heroes* canvases found on both sides of the western gallery entrance, *House of Priam* (fig. 10) is the first painting on the southern wall, effectively transitioning Twombly's Iliadic narrative from visual to verbal once more. At the top of the canvas, Twombly scrawls the title of the painting and lists Arisbe and her son by Priam, Aesacus, first. Twombly then lists a number of characters who have minor roles in the *Iliad,* such as the wife of Priam, Hecuba and Priam's comrade Hyratcus.[9] In miniature, beneath Hecuba, Twombly refers to the 50 children Priam was reported to have, demarcating the 19 sons and 12 daughters had by Hecuba.[10] The major character Hector, below this seeming aside, is written in simple graphite pencil like most of the others on the list, yet Cassandra's name below Hector, and nearly toppling over Paris's as well, is a conspicuous exception. The princess of Troy's name, Twombly doubles in size, overlining multiple times in both blue oil crayon and graphite,

[9]Both characters play nominal roles in *The Iliad,* with Hecuba being named among those who grieve at Hector's funeral, and Hyratcus being named once in Book 2 when Homer sets the scene beyond the Trojan walls.
[10]His source for this is Catherine Avery's 1962 text, *The New Century Classical Handbook.* He keeps the order of the names written in this text, quoting from it exactly. Cameron Avery, *The New Century Classical Handbook* (Norwalk: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962).

and places in the center of the canvas. The visual impact of retracing the letters in her name over and over lends the canvas a sense of auditory repetition. Cassandra's sonic capitalization by Twombly is peculiar, as she is a minor character in the *Iliad,* much more so than the wife of Hector, Andromache, whose lament after his death is a central motif in Homeric studies, and yet not featured on this list, presumably because she is related to Priam by marriage.[11] Cassandra, on the other hand, is passively described by Homer as the most beautiful of Priam's daughters, the wife of an unnamed Trojan solider, and noted amongst the mourners bewailing Hector's death in the *Iliad*.[12] *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus records the conclusion of her story, after she has been taken as a wife for Agamemnon and murdered by Clytemnestra in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter; along with other ancient sources, Aeschylus explicates that Apollo had blessed her with the gift of prophecy, and then cursed her after she failed to do his bidding so that her prophecies would never be believed. Notably, she predicted both the fall of Troy and the death of Agamemnon and both prophecies went unheeded. Accordingly, *House of Priam* depicts this notion of a tonal vibration without a terminus in the shaky, doubling of the letters that reverberate in several overlapping shades.

The last two paintings on the southern wall are *Ilians in Battle* and *Shades of Eternal Night* (figs. 11-12). In the former, which is directly across from and compositionally related to *Achaeans in Battle*, we see several pennant flags that span across the center of the canvas from left to right, embossed with names either slanting on an angle or straight across the bottom of the triangular shape beginning with Paris, Artemis, Apollo, Ares, and Aphrodite. Paris is perhaps

[11]Further, Andromache's family was slain by Achilles in an earlier battle before she was taken as wife to Hector. Since a central focus of Twombly is the wrath of Achilles, it's curious that he pays her no attention.
[12]In *Ajax* by Sophocles, Cassandra is dragged away from a statue of Athena and raped by Ajax in Athena's temple during the Trojan War. This is considered an act of defilement and Ajax loses favor with the gods. Finally, losing the series of contests for the armor of Achilles, drives him to madness and suicide.

given the "Olympian" angle due to Aphrodite's interference with the battle in Book 3, when she lifts him from Menelaus's grasp and returns him to his chambers atop the city of Troy. Not only are the immortals entangled with the triangular pennants to denote their arc above the battlefield, but their names are written several times across the entire canvas, either overlapping in both the Greek and Romanized versions of their names or in two lists of three at the top-right of the canvas, written beneath two circular rosettes. Their constant iterations on canvas refer to their various interferences throughout the text of *The Iliad.* Five circular objects towards the bottom of the canvas are rendered in varying shades of blue, orange, and black, or simple graphite pencil with hints of color overlapping, yet seemingly severed from the names of the heroes, while the corresponding painting, *Achaeans in Battle,* appears to harness this circular imagery in relation to named heroes. Each phallus and pennant point toward the right-hand side of the canvas, as with the painting's northern counterpart, indicating that the confluence of battle is articulated off-canvas, within the gallery space itself.

The cycle's penultimate painting, *Shades of Eternal Night*, which faces *The Vengeance of Achilles* on the gallery's North wall, features another rosette in gray and blue, cloud-like in form, suspended just above the center of the canvas, hanging over the title scrawled in graphite and overlined with blue (fig. 12). In 1978, the year of the cycle's execution, Twombly also produced eight drawings with a similar iconography and shared title: *Shades of Night* (figs. 13-15).[13] The series consists of cloud-like spheres in different hues of purple, black, and red, with scrawls recording either a singular date or an indecipherable recording such as "Jan 8th 7th 8th – Aug 1st." In a broad sense, Twombly's central concern in the *Shades* series is to represent the passage of time, linking cloud-like imagery to the ephemerality of time as a concept. As a result, both space

[13]All eight paintings were exhibited in 2016 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. At the time of this writing, the PMA owns three drawings, and the others are in private collections.

and time symbolically collapse, with the former rendered into a symbolic diffusion of cloud-like imagery, and the time above handwritten in several different numeric representations merged. In contrast, *Shades of Eternal Night* is not anchored by a numerical date; instead, it takes the form of a fleeting rosette that conveys a sense of physical space beyond the constraints of time—an everlasting backdrop that may be read as an evocation of the personified goddess Night, frequently invoked in Homeric poetry.

*Shades of Eternal Night* produces an effective transition to the last painting in the gallery, the aforementioned *Heroes of the Ilians* (fig. 4), as a bisected, empty rosette outlined in black oil crayon dominates over two-thirds of the painting. In the center of the canvas are the names of the Trojan heroes, listed from the center to the bottom, depicted through graphite crosshatching, and above the rosette, Twombly lists the names of the immortals that supported the Trojans in delicate cursive. The reuse of the rosette imagery, which will be contextualized in this thesis as a transformation of the shield, encapsulates Twombly's exploration of the epic as a continuous cycle of vengeance, grief, and violence that deals directly with the body of the heroic warrior. Broadly, the forms of the shield, the rosette, and the phallus are mirrors of each other—they emerge as evolving, concentric forms in a constant state of flux and metamorphosis, representing of the body of the warrior in a narratively collapsed time-period, mapped by Twombly to be somewhere between battle and death. The most critical part of the cycle, as this thesis will develop, is the inclusion of the painter's palette, and thus the artist, in the center of *Achaeans in Battle.* With this, Twombly includes a self-referential element, defining the painter's palette—his own presumably—as both protective armor and an illusory stand-in for the body in much the same way the phalluses and shields embody the trajectory of the hero on canvas—a body that is also in flux, under direct attack. Through this form, Twombly acknowledges the painter's body,

which experiences the passage of time and its effects within a rapidly changing period. In 1979, one year following the completion of this cycle, Clement Greenberg announced an "emergency" in the art world, underscoring the switch from Abstract Expressionism to Pop art that had been taking place since 1957.[14] This "crisis," for Greenberg, was emphasized in the emergence of popular art production, and he argued that Modernist art had effectively confronted the threat of art's degradation during its heyday and that the now-favored aesthetic of "Postmodernist art" would fail to do the same.[15] He further contended that Postmodern aesthetics were rooted in superficial processes disengaged from a self-reflexive engagement with the medium, and thereby lacked the drive to address the "problem" of representing reality both truthfully and beautifully, as Modernist artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning had attempted through their critical isolation of the medium as subject and emphasis on the vitality and emotionality of the artist. This essay analyzes the cultural problems Twombly was encountering in painting, as an artist who came of age between these two major movements, evidenced by his use of gestural, Expressionist marks with Postmodernist textual elements. In *Achaeans in Battle,* Twombly, by placing himself in the center of the battle, draws an effective analogy between the events of the epic and his paradoxical role as one of the last Abstract Expressionist painters during the cultural and aesthetic debate over its effectiveness as a movement. To portray this cultural embattlement, Twombly plays on gestural marks that reference the body to suggest that the vital forms of the marks make inherent reference to bodily violence. He shows that emotional, expressive forms ultimately become redundant, hollow and empty, and finally, that painting fails to harness true reality because of the limits of the medium itself.

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[14]Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," in *Arts 54,* no.6 (February 1980), 5, 6.
[15]Ibid., 7.

## III. Exhibition History

Before its installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1989, *Fifty Days at Iliam* was exhibited once in the same year as its completion date of 1978 at the Heiner Friedreich Gallery in New York. There, the cycle was not installed across the four walls of a gallery as Twombly intended, thus establishing an order for the paintings for subsequent curators. Instead, the works were shown in a straight line.[16] In 1989, then curator of twentieth-century art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Mark Rosenthal, wrote to Twombly about his interest in acquiring a series of paintings in order to dedicate a gallery to his work in the style of the museum's Marcel Duchamp collection.[17] In 1989, the purchase of the *Fifty Days* series was finalized at a cost of two million dollars, and it was followed by an accompanying opening.[18] Carlos Basualdo writes of a "mixed" public reception, although the Philadelphia Inquirer's 1989 review by art critic Edward J. Sozanski praised the space for its perfect "suitability" to the scale of the cycle and emphasized the importance of the gallery's circular curation.[19] This review, and essays written during the initial exhibition, suggest that most critics positioned *The Shield of Achilles* as the focal image,

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[16]Edward J. Sozanski, "Twombly's 'Fifty Days', an Epic at Art Museum," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* November 30th, 1989.
[17]Carlos Basualdo, "Achilles in Philadelphia: *Fifty Days at Iliam* in the Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art," in *Cy Twombly: Fifty Days at Iliam,* ed. by Carlos Basualdo (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 25.
[18]Ibid., 26.
[19]Edward J. Sozanski, "Twombly's 'Fifty Days', an Epic at Art Museum," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* November 30th, 1989. Rather obliquely, Carlos Basualdo's source for this is a conversation with Ann Temkin, the acting curator after the departure of Mark Rosenthal. Temkin's recollection refers to members on the board voicing concern over dedicating an entire gallery to a singular artist, and that "letters from members" stated vaguely the same thing. Within the Philadelphia Museum's archives on Twombly and *Fifty Days,* which include several files of public reaction, no major criticisms are voiced. It is apt, in the void of actual documentation, to assume that much of the negative reaction is of the same sentiment of a scathing review from one of Twombly's earlier shows in Germany; the newspaper *Die Welt* writes of his "indecent works on canvas…he was unknown to us previously: he will be immediately forgotten." Much of the discontent hinges on the aesthetic of "indecent graffiti on low-life walls" – shocking absurdities that feel out of place within a higher arts institution, as art historian Manfred de la Motte put it in 1961: "And now people get angry, because among all the smears and sullies they find any amount of pornography…they are not even painted clearly."

with the circular structure of the paintings deemed the most evocative element of the visual narrative. However, interpretations for this cycle varies, and it is thus essential to provide an overview that encompasses interpretations of Twombly's work from its early days to present-day discussions.

## IV. Literature Review

The writing on Twombly may be divided into three major factions: art-historical analysis of the artist's relationship to the style of Abstract Expressionism; theoretical reflection on his combination of text and image, often discussed within a semantical, linguistical, or psychoanalytic lens; and in-depth studies of the myths, literary inscriptions, and archaic poetry referenced by Twombly. In the first camp, art historians and curators Robert Pincus-Witten and Suzanne Delehanty contextualize Twombly's work and explore the complications of his relationship with Abstract Expressionism. Pincus-Witten, in 1968, highlights Twombly's balanced use of and departure from Abstract Expressionism, emphasizing the influence of his immersion in the "Baroque" Italian environment to which Twombly relocated permanently in 1957.[20] Twombly's shift towards legibility, myth, and tactile surfaces is contextualized by Pincus-Witten as a conscious departure from Abstract Expressionism in that he turned from pure abstraction to scribbled objects and textual references, transforming dimensions of emotion that were significant to high Modernist artists such as Pollock and de Kooning into indecipherable scrawl to mimic the form of these artists. Pincus-Witten argues that this serves as a masterful solution to the challenge of representing the "real" with the illusionary tool of painting during the

[20]Robert Pincus-Witten, "Learning to Write – 1968," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 59.

rise of Pop art.[21] In 1975, Delehanty underscores Twombly's focus on movement, space, and time, portraying him as a masterful thinker who navigates the contradiction between process and finished work, aligning him with artistic rationality reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci.[22]

In 1976, Roland Barthes wrote the essay "Non Multa Sed Multum" for a French catalogue of Twombly's works on paper. He establishes Twombly's work as a form of "gestural" writing that deals, most centrally, with the body, and the process of art production. He establishes that "a line—any line inscribed on a sheet of paper—is a denial of the importance of the body, the body and its flesh, the body and its humors," and argues that Twombly often serves to "derange" the body through connecting the line to cultural or textual references beyond the scope of what the canvas offers.[23] In his essay "The Wisdom of Art" from 1979, Barthes revisits Cy Twombly's work. He begins by examining three common techniques Twombly employs: "scratching," "smudging," and "smearing."[24] Barthes connects these methods of effacement to Twombly's gestural style of painting, likening it to the act of "*jeté*," or throwing something, and connecting the *jeté* to the dispersal of "thrown" figures scattered on the canvas, which in turn creates for a sense of empty space. For Barthes, these methods of effacement, gesture, and emptiness, embody a Symbolist effect of sensual forms that Barthes describes as "Mediterranean" and defines as "an enormous complex of memories and sensations...a whole life of forms, colors and light…that Twombly consists in having imposed…while starting from materials (scratches, smudges, smears, little color, nonacademic forms) which have no analogy

[21]Ibid., 59.
[22]Suzanne Delehanty, "The Alchemy of Mind and Hand – 1975," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 65-8, 70.
[23]Roland Barthes, "Non Multa Sed Multum—1976," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 89-99.
[24]Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art—1979," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 102-115.

with the great Mediterranean radiance." Nevertheless, Barthes argues that Twombly preserves the culture and even the aesthetic of the Mediterranean in his paintings.[25]

Adopting a more theoretical approach, Marjorie Welish, a poet and art critic, asserts in her 1978 "A Discourse on Twombly" that Twombly's significance in art history lies in his fusion of text and image and the psychosomatic nature of his writing.[26] While placing Twombly within the Abstract Expressionist legacy, she also highlights his departure from it, emphasizing Surrealist influences in his earlier work and advocating for an art-historical interpretation over a purely literary one.[27] She further defends this line of argumentation in 1999 in an essay entitled "The Art of Being Sparse, Porous, Scattered: Roland Barthes on Cy Twombly" in which she centralizes the "critical face-off" in the 1950s and 1960s Twombly experienced as an Abstract Expressionist-trained painter that embraced, to the eye of critics like Greenberg, a Surrealist lexicon and thereby dismissed the tradition of Modernist painting that sought to embody "the revelatory-self on canvas."[28] Further reading into Welish's 1999 text indicates that her frustrations might be superimposed on to her frustration with much writing on Twombly, as she works to characterize him as a formalist focused on the acquisition of writing both as a visual and linguistical tool rather than as an Expressionist. She uses *Fifty Days at Iliam* to finalize this argumentation. Instead of understanding the *Shield*, for example, as a separate entity based on its

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[25]107-8. Welish addressed her concerns with this "Symbolist" camp of thought on Twombly in a 1999 critique on Barthes's writing on Twombly. Noting that Barthes was once a structuralist, she heightens his Symbolist defense of Twombly as a rhetorical defense against his own shift from Structuralism to Symbolism: "Aphoristic impressions, willfully literary but not historical, stand for Barthes's declared representation of Twombly's history…Twombly's thematic inscription of epic into a lyrical mode compels attention to this implication of history only to lend myth the experiential feeling of history." In this context, Welish asserts that Twombly illustrates physical impulses in a condensed form to both rationalize and deconstruct the "scrawl" as formal objects, independent of an external presence of another canon or text, contrasting to Barthes's Symbolic "effects". Instead, Welish emphasizes that referential symbols to a literary canon is secondary to Twombly's aims. What most evokes this read, in her view, is *Fifty Days at Iliam.* Majorie Welish, *Signifying Art: Essays on Art after 1960,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 55.
[26]Ibid., 35-8, 41.
[27]Ibid., 55, 71-2.
[28]Ibid., 54.

isolation in the gallery's anteroom, she tracks its structural "metamorphosis" from the anteroom to the insular gallery through line and color.[29] As Welish argues, the shield "uncoils" in aggressive movements, first as the emboldened red lines that overlap the name of Achilles on *Heroes of the Achaeans,* and then shapeshifts into phallic shapes and bulging masses. The shape then contorts into the rosettes that float as specters from the afterlife in *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector,* and reaches its conclusion on *Heroes of the Ilians,*"an ossified contour of the quatrefoil that the shield has become."[30] Since her larger argument refers to the formal system of relations within Twombly's narrative as being independent from the narrative of *The Iliad* and concurrent to "his own poetics," it is critical to evaluate the validity of her argument against other examinations of *The Shield of Achilles* before putting forward my ultimate conclusion: that Twombly placed the *Shield of Achilles* outside of the gallery to echo the narrator of *The Iliad's* ekphrastic description of the Shield not as a finished product, but as an object consistently being fashioned in time and space. This is distinct from Welish's argument in that it does require an external literary narrative, but I intend to show that Twombly was indeed addressing the concerns of painting within his time while maintaining the bodily structure of *The Iliad*.[31]

Departing from Welish, contemporary research on Twombly emphasizes his connections to literature, as is evident in art historian Thierry Greub's 2022 six-volume catalogue that works to detail literary references across Twombly's entire career. This meticulous exploration by art historians underscores the significance of Twombly's interplay of drawings and textual elements

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[29]Ibid., 43. This structural argument works to undermine Barthes's own Symbolist reading of Twombly.
[30]Ibid., 43.
[31]By bodily, I refer to the larger argument made by Christine Albright that *The Iliad* is a "larger masculine epic body" with a smaller, uterine-body in Book 18 that she argues is the *ekphrastic* intention and structure. Christine Albright, *Pandora's Poetics: Ekphrasis in the Ancient Epic*. (PhD diss. University of Georgia, 2009), 60.

within his oeuvre, and amongst Greub, such discourse touches on gesture, calligraphy, Surrealist automatic writing, and intertextuality as dynamic commentaries on historical, art historical, or cultural themes. This centralization on literature effectively undermines the historical importance of Twombly's work, according to Welish.

Recent writing on *The Shield of Achilles* emphasizes its textual roots and advances an interpretation of the physical nature of *Fifty Day*'s cyclical, phallic imagery. In her essay "The Time of Achilles" featured in the 2020 exhibition catalogue *Cy Twombly: Making Past Present*, classicist Brooke Holmes focuses on Twombly's *Shield* as an abstracted representation of the first ekphrasis. Like Welish, she explains how its placement outside of the gallery serves to instigate Achilles's arc throughout the entire cycle, signified by the Delta within Achilles's name, interpreting it as a "rocketing phallus" based on the description Twombly used in a 2000 interview with David Sylvester to justify all replacements of the letter "A" throughout the series and the misspelling of "Ilium."[32] In their respective analyses, Holmes and art historian Christine Kondoleon, in her essay "Color and Line, Gods and Poetry," interpret the abundance of phalluses in *Fifty Days* as a means of portraying bodily violence.[33] This imagery is certainly most prevalent in the large battle pieces that face one another in the center of the gallery, *Achaeans* and *Ilians at Battle.* The named heroes in the centermost "battle" of the canvas (the conflux of dense coloration, circular shapes, and smears at the far-right edges of the twin canvases) are

[32]Brooke Holmes, "The Time of Achilles," in *Cy Twombly: Making Past Present* (Boston: MFA Publications/Museum of Fine Arts, 2020), 219. Basualdo questions whether or not this was decided before or after installation, as a 1978 letter sent to Twombly from then-curator Mark Rosenthal prompts Twombly to consider the final spelling of the word between "Ilium, Iliom, and Iliam."

[33]Ibid., 223. Vaguely, Holmes refers to this as Twombly's attempt to critique the "error of sexual politics" and does not return to the subject of sexual politics within Twombly's oeuvre directly, opting instead to focus on her main argument, which is Achilles's trajectory as a rocket/phallus throughout the cycle. The phrase is curious, as the use of phallic imagery to represent bodily violence is not unique to Twombly, not does it appear that Holmes is referring to the work of Rosalind Krauss, who discusses phallic imagery in relationship to Twombly's larger concern with presence and absence.

projected forward by testicular and phallic imagery, establishing a masculine trajectory that ultimately, within the larger narrative, condenses and expands into a "quatrefoil" rosette that represents the shade of what was once there to memorialize the death and, according to Welish, ultimately feminize the warrior through metamorphosis into a flowering object.[34] On her account, not only is the rosette ultimately feminizing, but, as Christine Albright has argued, the shield, in Homeric studies, is argued to have the same gendered reading as a feminine object that conceals the lower-body of the warrior in its hollow.[35]

As Twombly adapts these forms into abstract signifiers for the body, art historian Rosalind Krauss's analysis presented in her 1999 chapter on Twombly's art within the book *The Optical Unconscious* becomes relevant. Therein, Krauss draws a parallel between Twombly's artistic technique and the intervention of graffiti. She suggests that his graffiti-inspired technique ultimately disassociates the artist from his creation, contrasting with the previous notion, rooted in high Modernism, that Expressionist painting unified the artist's entire emotional and physical self within the artwork.[36] Krauss links Twombly's artistic practice to her revisionist reading of Jackson Pollock's project of creating traces and marks, specifically the drip style of painting. However, Krauss argues that Twombly's objective differs from the modernist pursuit of "self-revelation." Instead, she claims his work refers to the intervention, or "temporal disjunction,"

[34]Welish defines this shift in imagery as such: "Action painting, having accrued libido and animus, subsides into gesture; gesture subsides into contour. Remember the myth of Flora memorializing the destiny of warriors, who, when they die, undergo a transformation and metamorphose into flowers. Having painting this symbol early on (in vivid chroma), Twombly in mid-life will have continued to grant the motif of the heart (or flowering heart or passionate flower) in the schema of the rosette so that it may be interpreted as a funerary remembrance."Majorie Welish, *Signifying Art: Essays on Art after 1960,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57.
[35]Christine Albright, *Pandora's Poetics: Ekphrasis in the Ancient Epic*. (PhD diss. University of Georgia, 2009), 190.
[36]Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 256-66.

occurring when the mark is made on canvas.[37] This experience is ultimately violent, Krauss contends, as the image represents a "condition of the structure of the marker's having been cut away from himself; it is as though he had gone up to a mirror to witness his own appearing and had smashed the mirror instead. Had thereby voided his own presence, leaving only his mark."[38] Embodied presence is unstable based on the nature of the medium. This revelation signifies a deliberate departure from the Modernist emphasis on the completed canvas as a reflective surface, introducing a dynamic process where the mark-making becomes a traumatic and violent experience, intertwined with the artist's bodily engagement in the act of creation, which is ultimately severed by the artist's non-presence after the fact. Such mark-making intentionally compromises the "unity of the sign," or the cohesive, integrated nature of the mark, disrupting the conventional coherence or stability of the symbols being used.[39] Therefore, by the time he relocated to Rome, Twombly, writes Krauss, "had felt the need to acknowledge that it was in fact the body that was at stake. The savagery of the mark does not let up but its crude violence is now the site of an obsessional formulation of bodily parts… the erotics of which is that its body will never be reconstituted, whole" based on the invasion of the mark, or the line, as an external or outside presence that divides and defers non-presence, while the present mark paradoxically remains dependent on the provisional existence of the non-present.[40] Thus Twombly's mark effects a bodily violence that mirrors "the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and its own bondage."[41] Although his marks intentionally are cramped and scrawled in frustrated stasis, they indicate a thwarted sense of movement against the borders of

[37]Ibid., 260. "Self-revelation," in Krauss's text, is in quotes, as she refers to Harold Rosenberg's 1952 article in ARTnews on action painting.
[38]Ibid., 260
[39]Ibid., 260.
[40]Ibid., 266.
[41]Ibid., 266.

the image, often minimalized by the empty plain of "void" canvas that flattens all figural reality without the notion of the "pure" wholeness of the original Modernist's mark.[42] Krauss's exploration of the paradoxes embedded in mark-making, navigating the interplay between presence and non-presence and portraying it as a form of violence between the body of the marker and the marked thing, significantly shapes my interpretation of Twombly's approach to *The Iliad.* The cycle's central concern is the representation of a cohesive narrative or embodiment within the process of making images. The form of the *Shield* outside the gallery, once constative of cosmological ordering and a protective covering for the body, becomes the empty rosette in *Heroes of the Ilians,* and once again the original presence of the body is reordered as the viewer departs from the insular gallery and views the anteroom once more.

## V. The Shield

The shape of the circle has been discussed in this thesis as crucial not only to the formal elements of *Fifty Days,* but also for the arrangement of the paintings into a sequenced cycle that one consumes in a circular fashion. In this regard, it is interesting to note that classicist Joachim Latacz, in his essay for Therry Grieub's 2022 publication *Cy Twombly: Image, Text, and Paratext*, describes "cycle" as the most befitting word for the ten paintings series based on the etymology of the Greek word κύκλος and its Latinization, *cyclus*. As he notes, "*kyklos*/*cyclus* primarily concerns (thematic and temporal) continuation and the continuity of related matter that arises out of that continuation, with the scope of encompassing *all* of this related material."[43] In

[42]Ibid., 260.
[43]Joachim Lactacz, "Cy Twombly with Achilles at Troy," in *Cy Twombly: Image, Text, and Paratext* (Morphomata vol. 13), ed. by Thierry Greub (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2018), 266.

his reading of *Fifty Days*, Latacz, like many before him, centers the *Shield* as the most evocative image within this series. As I have already begun to suggest, the image of the shield evolves into the forms of the phallus and the rosette throughout the series to evoke the metamorphosis of the warrior's body as it undergoes violence. Further, the changes to the shield in the battlefield narratives may serve as an analogy for the cultural conflicts Twombly underwent as a 20th-century painter positioned between the dissolution of Modernist painting methods and the rise of Pop art.[44]

**Homeric Studies**

Achilles's shield, which is described at length in book 18, is much discussed within Homeric studies. Before Achilles rejoins the battle to exact revenge, his mother Thetis, an immortal who knows that his decision to rejoin the battle at this moment will bring about his death, comes to the house of Hephaestus to request he replace the armor and the shield that Achilles had lent Patroclus, which Hector had stripped from the corpse of Patroclus. Moved by Thetis's emotion, Hephaestus dedicates himself to crafting new armor for Achilles's, expressing a wish: "that I might so surely be able to hide him far from dolorous death, when dread fate comes on him."[45] He envisions the armor's beauty captivating the admiration of many in the future. For nearly two-hundred lines, the narrator of *The Iliad* describes the shield's fashioning,

[44]This is his concern with Abstract Expressionism as a whole: that meaning changes and symbols can become muddied over time. Adaption of *The Iliad,* a systematic poem that revolves around the visual dynamics of movement, that is circular in nature, is muddied in Twombly's hand. Its symbols are evolving, and even within the evolution there are intersplices of off-white space that reference the nature of the canvas on which evolutions of movement, i.e. imagery, are technically produced and therefore mere replications, symbols that evoke nothing, "the stupidity of strokes" in the words of Barthes. Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art—1979," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 115.
[45]Homer, trans. by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), Book 18.475-615.

which results in five main narrative scenes adorning the iron in low-relief. Famously known as the first ekphrasis, the shield of Achilles has interested modern scholars based on its complete lack of further focus in the remaining text. Accordingly, classicist Stephen Scully writes that "the ekphrasis is 'there for us, not for the characters in the epic.'" As Hephaestus himself acknowledges: "in the future many a one among the multitude of men shall marvel, whoever looks on it."[46] The consensus is thus that the shield's ekphrastic description is intended to show the reader a time of peace adverse the present war, a compensation, in other words, for the absence of a desirable reality during the narrative's violent present. This strategy results in an intertextual commentary on the events of *The Iliad* within the *The* Iliad—one that contrasts with the motivations of the shield-bearer, Achilles, who has no desire for peace in any moment in the course of the epic. This discursive device, like Twombly's painting of the shield, emphasizes the circulatory effect of *The Iliad*'s entire plot, as a recent dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania argues.

In this dissertation, William Beck argues that the plot of *The Iliad* is purposely circular in nature, which is evoked in its metaphoric imagery and the arc of Achilles in particular. He makes his case by examining several points where *The Iliad* appears incongruent to scholars, writing instead that such seemingly odd insertions (such as the Achaean wall) are visually and symbolically evocative of the plot structure. Since Achilles in particular never reaches fulfillment within the plot although he exacts revenge for Patroclus, *The Iliad* most prominently circles back to where it started; after the murder of Hector and the mutilation of his corpse by Achilles, Apollo must intervene and return Hector's corpse to Ilios, which evokes the imagery of

[46]Ibid., Book 18.; Stephen Scully, "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003): 30, https://doi.org/10.2307/3658523.

a father ransoming his child from the Achaeans, as did Chryseis with Chryses.[47] Most importantly for my purposes: Achilles bears a shield proffering a vision of peace within the cosmic ordering, while he mutilates the corpse of Hector, dragging him in circles around the walls of Ilios. Such circulatory plot apparatuses, such as the imagery of life and death on the shield, the chase of Hector to the dragging of his corpse, and the chariot race after Patroclus's death, invoke the very structure of the poem for Beck, and Twombly follows the same circular structure in both gallery display and his choice of motifs.

**Twombly in the Center of the Battle**

In the same way that Homeric scholars agree that the shield is there for the reader, Richard Fletcher makes the argument that Twombly's cycle is structured so as to immerse the viewer within the work. He bases this line of thinking on the 18th-century Pope translation of *The Iliad* that was used by Twombly for reference. The immediacy and speed of the language possessed Twombly's imagination, and Fletcher argues that this is largely because Pope translates the original Greek in ways that place the reader within the action.[48] A similar strategy underwrites Twombly's cycle. The viewer is activated as a centermost figure in the battle by first viewing *The Shield of Achilles,* the metaphorical body of Achilles. Then, upon entrance into the insular gallery, the first canvas one sees, directly across from the gallery door, is the *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector* toward which one is beckoned. Having progressed forward toward *Shades*, one is effectively standing in the center of the gallery between *Achaeans* and

[47]William Beck, *The Narrative of The Iliad: Time, Space, and Story* (PhD diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2019), 180.
[48]Richard Fletcher, "*Cy Twombly: Fifty Days at Iliam*, ed. by Carlos Basualdo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 61-8.

*Ilians in Battle*. These paintings depict the intersection of aggressive, masculine imagery within the abstract forms, and Twombly's markings serve as both reference to this aggressive movement, as well as a nod to the artificiality of the depicted actions. By positioning the viewer's body as the focal point, initially through the confrontation of Achilles's metaphorical body in upon viewing *The Shield of Achilles* in the anteroom, and then staging the viewer amidst the metaphorical and cultural battle upon entering the insular gallery, Twombly highlights that mark-making is inherently tied to the body of first artist, then viewer. In the sense that Hephaestus hopes to craft the shield to "hide" Achilles from a death that is locked into his fate, Twombly's vision of *The Shield* is visually concerned with the ineffective tools of art-making and craftsmanship as a method to conceal a body that is under direct attack as a *result* of the mark-making. This is furthered by scholarly arguments on ekphrasis; classified as a "uterine, feminine" element inside the masculine poetical arrangement of *The Iliad*, as it depends on compositional speech to seduce the audience and connotes a scene of sexual exchange (especially seen during Thetis's metaphorical seduction of Hephaestus while the craftsman emits masculine processuality as he engages with *techne)* the ekphrasis replaces this bodily exchange with violence when Achilles's grasps the shield while defiling the body of Hector.[49] In the same visual sense, Twombly's adaption of *The Shield* has been shown to be both moving and stagnant, evocative of Achilles's arc across the battlefield in formal elements such as the flung paint and the whirling notion of the linework in the concentric circle, but Twombly shows the frustrated stagnation of Achilles's lack of plot fulfillment in both the text and lines that appear both frenetic

[49]Christine Albright, *Pandora's Poetics: Ekphrasis in the Ancient Epic*. (PhD diss. University of Georgia, 2009), 97.

and stagnant to show that the *Shield*, and the body it represents behind it, is an illusory object incapable of actual movement due to the nature of the medium.

Further, shields create a feminine hollow to conceal the body of the warrior. The ekphrastic text in Book 18 describes scenes of sexual and bodily exchange in peace-times, including spiral dances and whirlpools, which Twombly suggests in the blend of concentric lines that spiral continually toward the smeared center.[50] In Book 19, Achilles's armor gleams across the battlefield, and his eyes are described as being alight with fire, driving terror into the Achaeans and Trojans who view him.[51] What was made to conceal his body draws attention to it, and Twombly evokes this irony through the compiling of scribbled linework that both denotes the figure of Achilles and effaces him, "mirroring the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and its own bondage," and such a frustrated movement is shown in the splatters of paint off the object that suggest the whirling of the shield in the cosmic order.[52]

This is carried through into the battlefield depictions. The imagery of Twombly's painter's palette in the center of *Achaeans in Battle*, and the named "ARTIST" above it, mirrors the formal structure of the shields depicted under the named warriors, placed to the left and right of the palette, such as Agamemnon's black and red shield and Ajax's graphite, bisected quadrangular shield (figs. 13-14). Twombly thus implicates painters and the medium of the painting in the center of the battle, referencing the very same cultural battle between Modernist and Postmodernist painting Greenberg would highlight in his 1979 lecture just a year later. The

[50]Ibid., 151.
[51]Ibid., 127.
[52]Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 270; Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art—1979," in *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio (Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002), 115.

trajectory of the shield as it moves across canvas to canvas is bodily; it references the body of Achilles and the fates of the warriors who are intertwined to him and is highly gendered—the shields of Achilles and Patroclus become the phallic-rocket on the right-hand of battlefield canvas and, after the *Like a fire that Consumes all Before it,* shift into the shapes of the quatrefoil rosettes that Welish refers to as the "feminized bodies of warriors" after death. While Welish is correct in identifying Twombly's "rosette" adaption as a visual that stems from classical myth, this process of metamorphosis is not idyllically feminine as such flowers are not highly gendered in Greek culture. When Ajax, for example, commits suicide because he lost the contest for Achilles's armor and shield to Odysseus, what springs where his corpse fell is the delphinium. This commemorative cycle is thus heavily imbued with the nature of heroic, masculine figures. Indeed, Twombly's representation of the rosette verges from the bloodied ichor in *Like a Fire that Consumes all Before it* to the empty quatrefoil in *Heroes of the Ilians* in order to project the abstracted body's presence as a deconstructive form of absence, rather than a feminization of the warrior's body after death. Thus Twombly's adaption of Modernist painting as a specific of bodily violence, via Krauss, that occurs during the mark-making process—each "trace," according to Derrida, is actually the presence of absence.[53] A temporal disjunction thus occurs, which heightens the "derangement" of the body's ability to represent itself holistically on canvas.[54] This negotiation between presence and absence becomes central to Twombly's theme in *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector.*

[53]Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 269-70.
[54]Roland Barthes, Non Multa Sed Multum—1976," In *Writings on Cy Twombly,* ed. by Nicola del Roscio, Munich: Schrimer/Mosel, 2002, 99.

## VI. The Phallus and the Rosette

In *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector,* Twombly establishes the rosette shape's connection to death or afterlife, as a shade, in Twombly's drawings, is a spectral sign that maps an alternate, material existence outside of time and space. The rosette, in Twombly's eight *Shades of Night* drawings, is constructed as an airy effusion that, as argued, contrasts the mechanics of time with the abstraction of space. When Twombly repeats this graphite sign and harnesses it with a named being, it suggests a spectral, effervescent existence that has been altered by time and space, as the named being cannot be represented by a shield or phallus since they have lost the specific gendered embodiment once apt on earlier canvases. On the far-left side of the canvas, Achilles's "shade" is bright red, as was his shield, phallus, and fiery rage on the preceding canvases—this also draws an analogy to the presence of Modernist vital forms in Expressionist art. Patroclus's shade, in the center, is muddied with Achilles's red coloring and Hector's half-smudged and smeared rosette, suggesting, once more, a double-reading; that Patroclus's fates are intertwined with the two warriors in the referential text, as much of the conflict occurs over Patroclus's body and death, and that Twombly himself stands positioned between Modernist vitality and Postmodernist deconstruction. Hector's half-smeared rosette, at far right, grants a visual effect evocative of Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*, by which Rauschenberg challenged the older artist's stature and authority.[55] But Twombly, instead of

[55]By "deconstruction," I refer to further theory explicated by Roland Barthes in 1967 and Jacques Derrida in 1968, applied by Rosalind Krauss to Twombly via *différance*, the Derridean idea that meaning is deferred, and deferred endlessly. It combines the French words for "difference" and "deferral," emphasizing that meaning is not stable or fixed but is instead always deferred and never fully present. Thereby, any applied meaning based on the presence of the artist and his sensorial, emotional reality once believed to extant on Modernist canvas is critiqued by Derridean *différance*. Krauss applies *différance* to the temporal disjunction between the moment of mark-making and the trace of the mark, suggesting that Twombly's representation of bodily violence is furthered by this disjunction between the presence of the mark and the absence of the artist as soon as the trace is present. Jacques Derrida, "La Différance," *Société Française de Philosophie,* Bulletin 62, no. 3 (1968): 73.

erasing, smudges and smears the lines of this rosette with an overlay of white paint to retain the integrity of the mark. This "cloudy" effect further washes out the coloring of the paint and canvas beneath, effectively rinsing the rosette of its articulation of presence and signifying the absence of not only Hector and Hector's body on canvas, but also of Achilles's and Patroclus's. Thus, the bright burning red of Achilles's rosette is emptied out, in contrast, by Hector's absence. This articulation can be applied to the entire narrative of Twombly's cycle; as it progresses, the once heavily gestural, Modernist forms of painting, such as the suggestion of movement in the formal elements of *Shield of Achilles* and the masculine phallic signifier of Achilles's strength in *Vengeance of Achilles,* are emptied out by Postmodernist deconstruction.

**Conclusion**

In summary, Twombly is producing a counter-narrative about his own cultural "battle" while abstracting the themes of masculinity and death in *The Iliad.* His battle, of course, is that painting, despite the heroics of the Abstract Expressionists, still cannot represent the "truth" of reality without effecting illusory forms of presence and drawing parallels to exploitative, gendered violence. A few items of recognition emerge amongst the alteration of the first, uterine shield-shape to the "last" outline of the rosette that occupies two-thirds of the *Heroes of the Ilians*; first, the fullness and vividity of the ekphrastic shield-object is hollowed out and bisected into two parts, suggesting that the shield-object no longer stands for presence due to the death of the characters on canvas. Second, the shield, which was used to protect and contain the body in a feminine attempt to cover the phallus, cannot conceal as a rosette due to its ephemeral, death-like quality on the canvases. Therefore, the body has conceivably disappeared, and with it, the gendering of the phallic warrior, and the feminine ekphrastic structure as a self-contained body

within the epic structure. Further, although the continuous looping of concentric lines in Twombly's *Shield* reference the "cosmic whole" the narrator of *The Iliad* establishes in the imagery of his ekphrasis, based on both the formal arrangement of *The Shield* and the classical canon of the *Epic Cycle*, neither can reach a terminus.

The classical framework of *The Iliad* and the conception of the masculine and feminine components of the body therein are interwoven in Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam* in inseparable, dynamic ways. Such an interest in preserving a classical perspective does not sever Twombly from his post-Expressionist aims, which are to continue painting and drawing without dissolution from broader, literary contexts and to preserve the power of illusory forms on canvas without intimating that the artist's presence is still inherent on the canvas; on the contrary, Twombly's representation of the heroic body mirrors his larger concerns with the embodied presence on canvas. The forms he employs mutate and converge under the tensile pressure of an evolving environment, and time and space collapse based on the limits of the Expressionist medium he pastiches together.

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Figures

Figure 1: Cy Twombly, *Fifty Days at Iliam*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, sizes vary, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

Figure 2: Cy Twombly, *Fifty Days at Iliam*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, sizes vary, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.


Figure 3: Cy Twombly, *The Shield of Achilles*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 75 ½ x 62 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

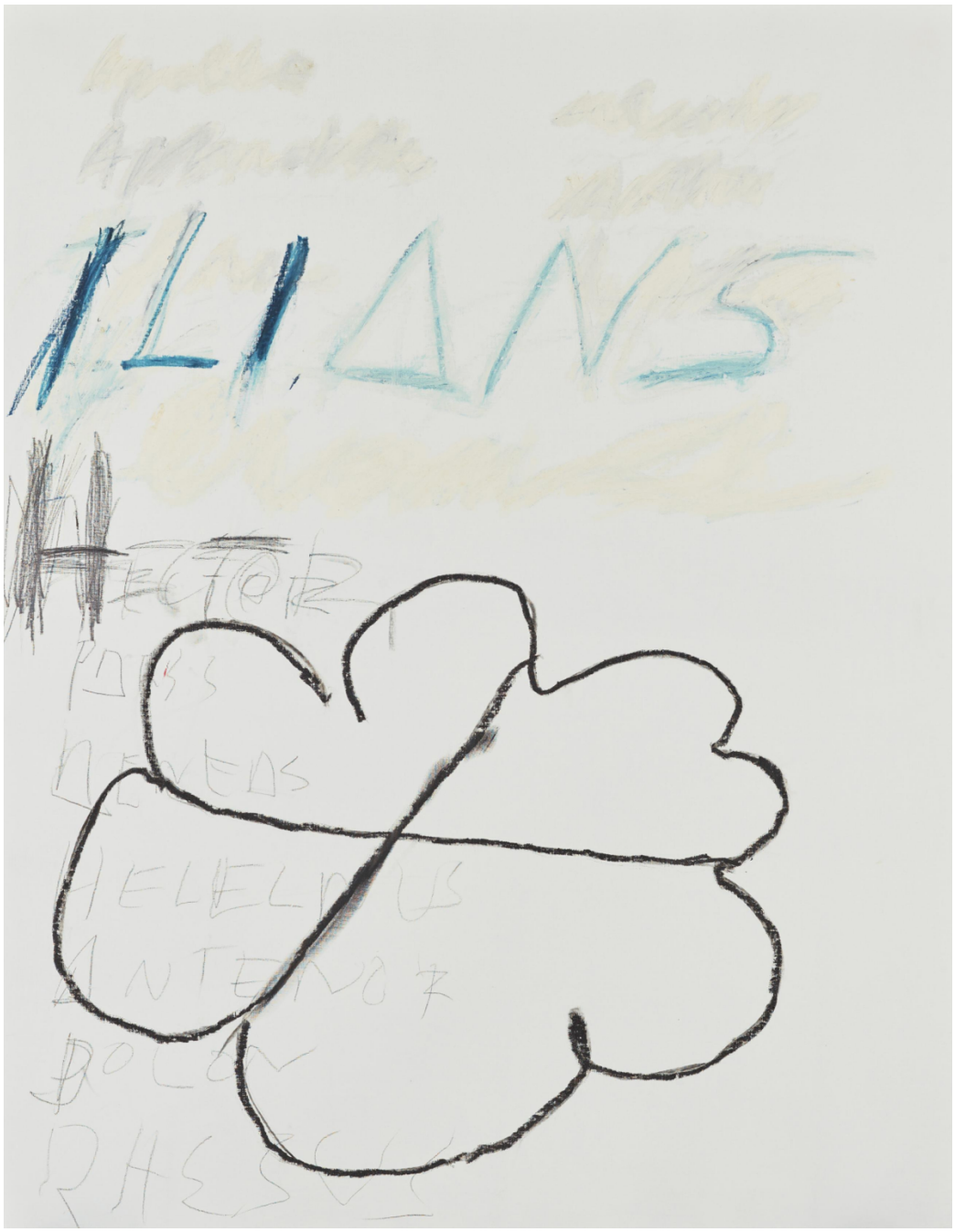

Figure 4: Cy Twombly, *Heroes of the Ilians*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 75 ½ x 59 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

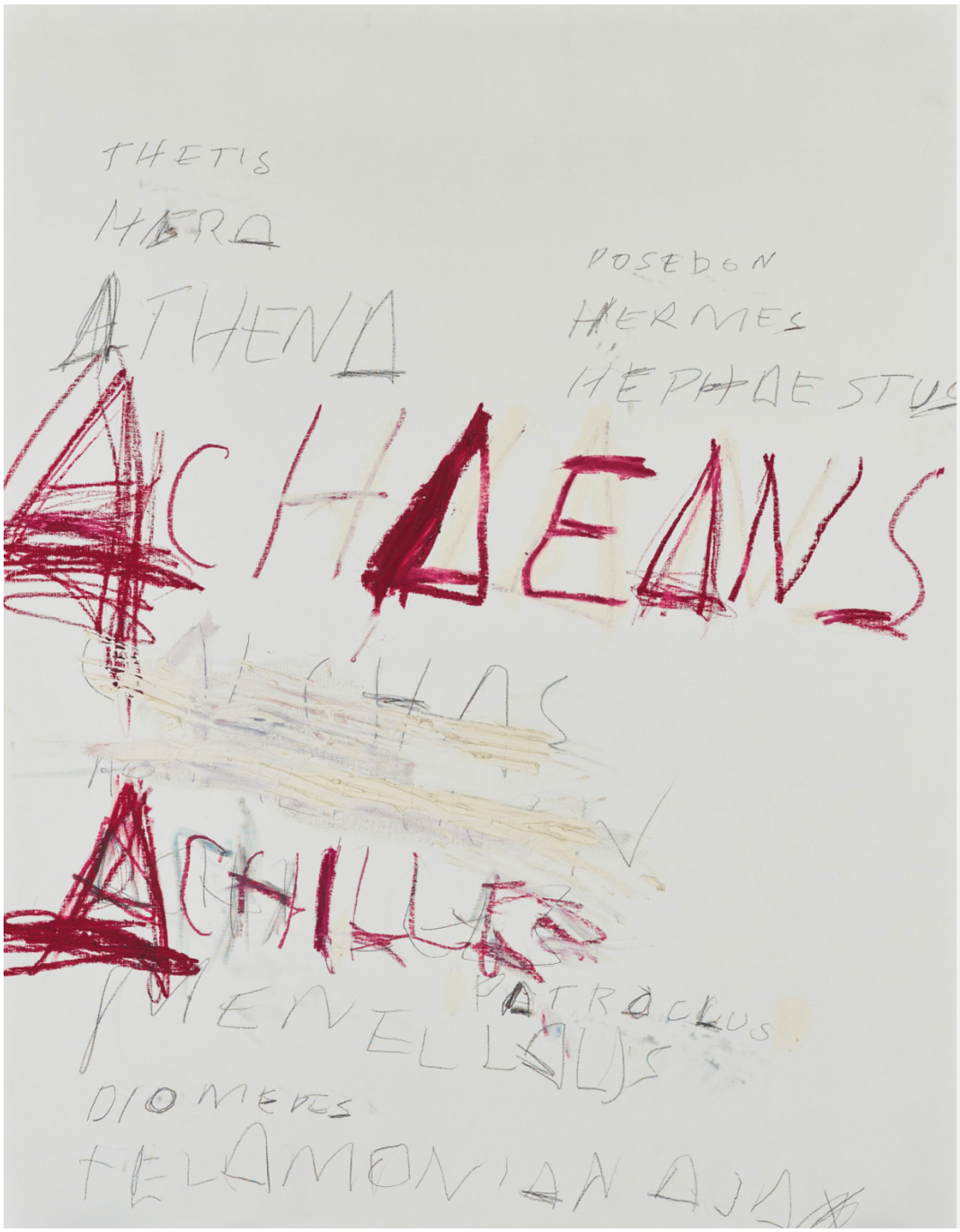


Figure 5: Cy Twombly, *Heroes of the Achaeans*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 75 ½ x 59 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.


Figure 6: Cy Twombly, *Vengeance of Achilles*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 94 ¼ in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.


Figure 7: Cy Twombly, *Achaeans in Battle*, 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 149 ½ in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

Figure 8: Cy Twombly, *The Fire that Consumes All before It,* 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 75 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

Figure 9: Cy Twombly, *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector,* 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 193 ¾ in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

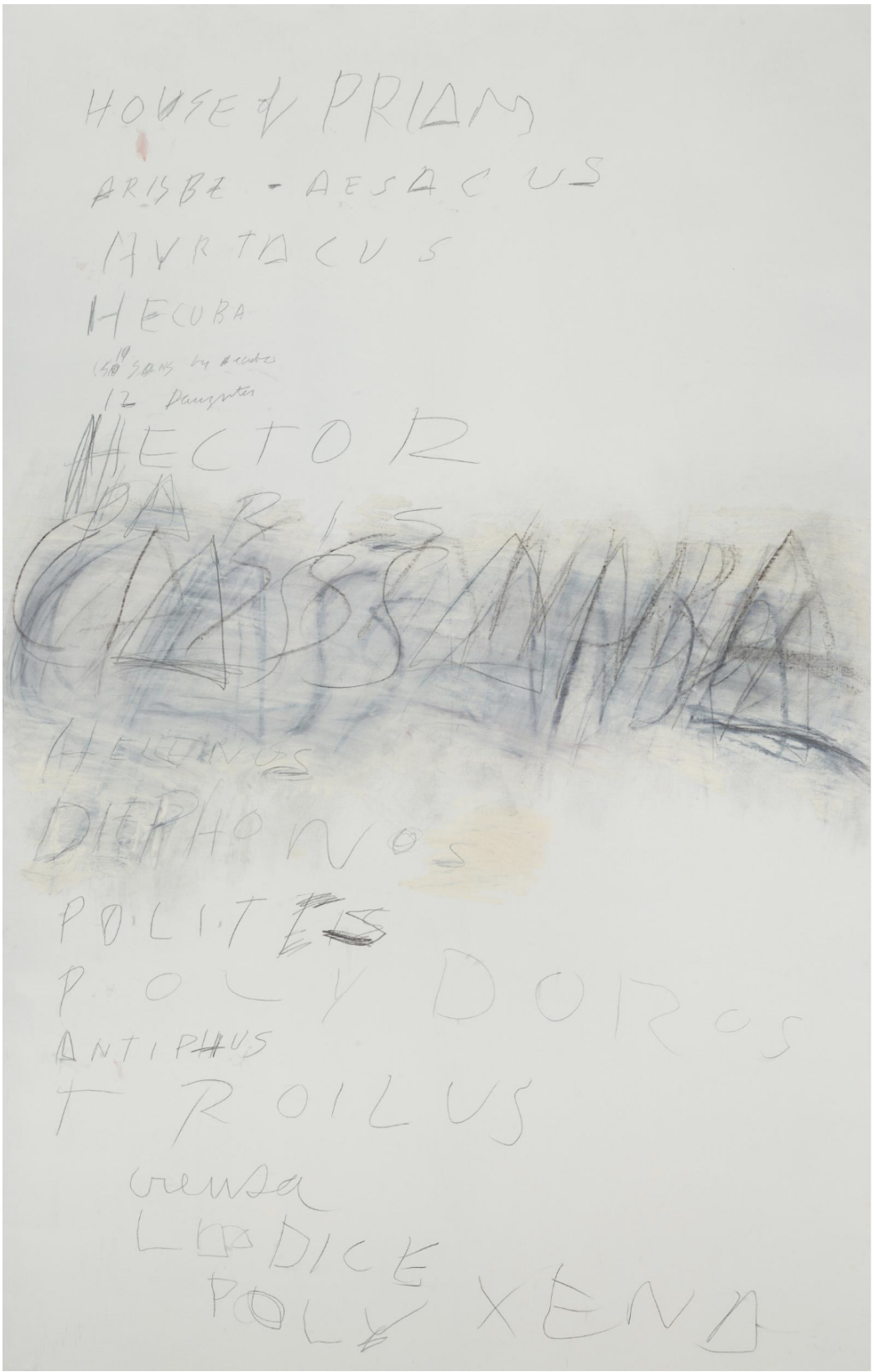


Figure 10: Cy Twombly, *House of Priam,* 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 75 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

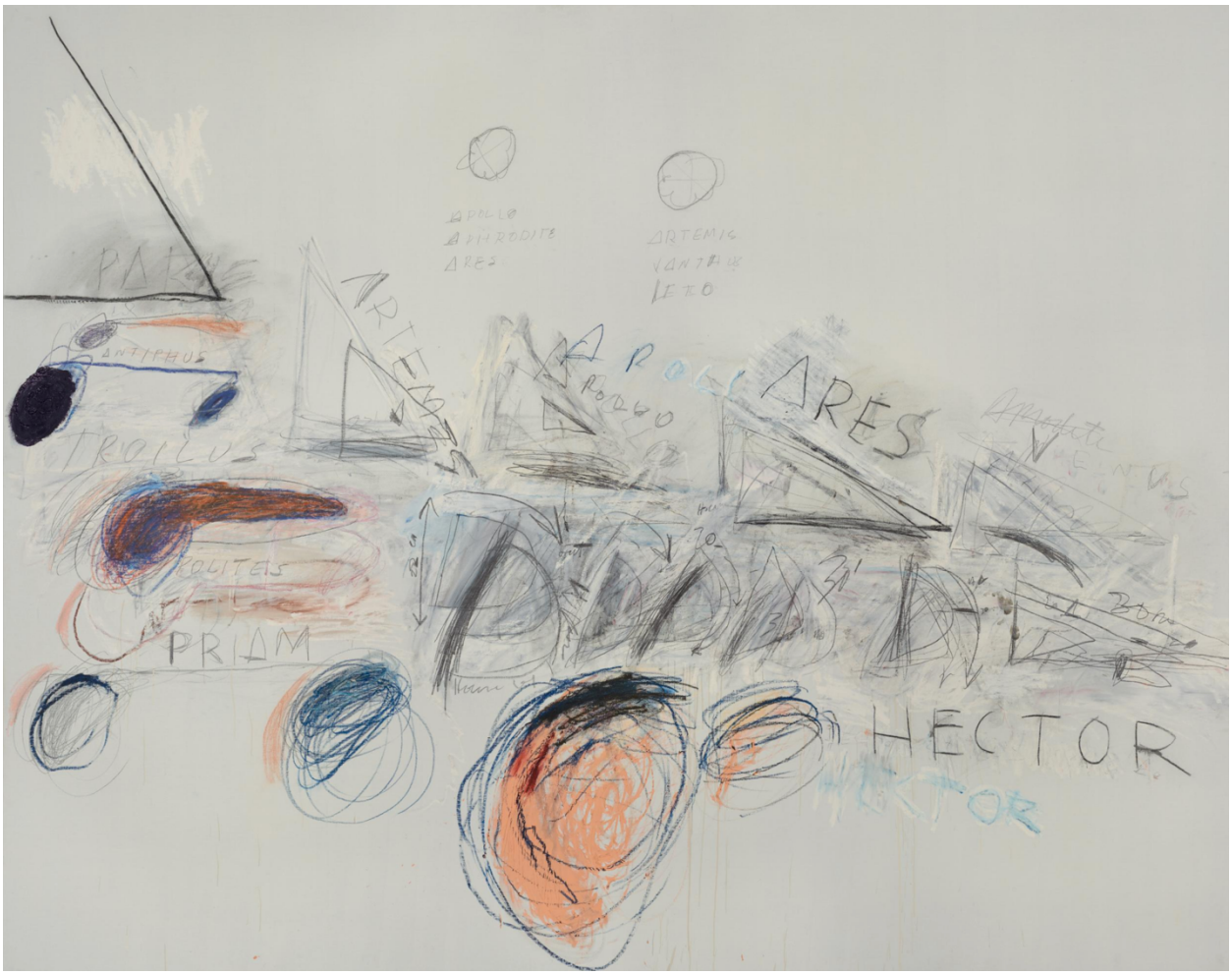


Figure 11: Cy Twombly, *Ilians in Battle,* 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 149 ½ in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.


Figure 12: Cy Twombly, *Shades of Eternal Night,* 1978, oil, oil crayon, graphite on canvas, 118 x 94 ¼ in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

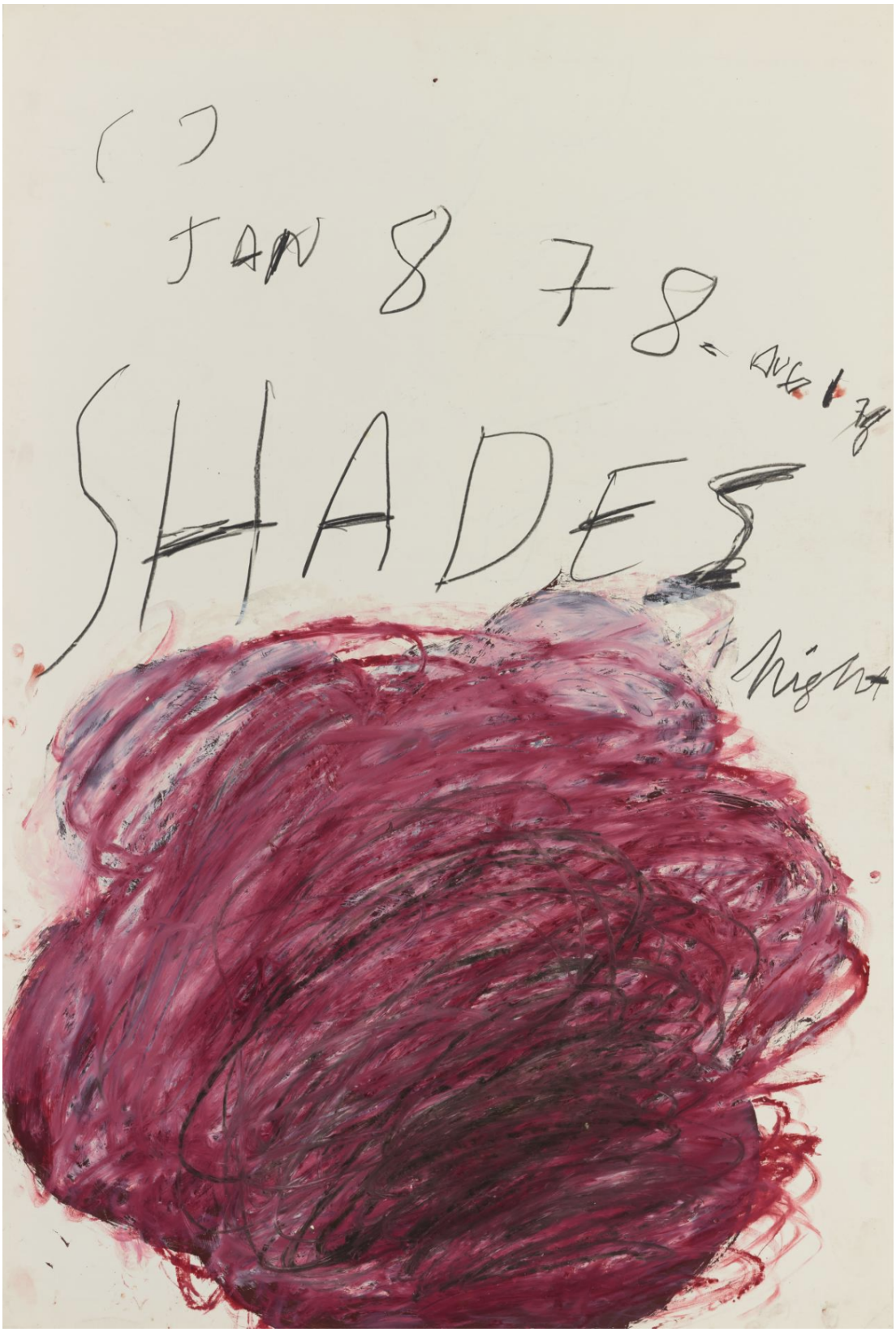


Figure 13: Cy Twombly, *Shades of Night (January 8 - August 1),* 1978, oil, oil stick, graphite on paper, 40 x 27 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

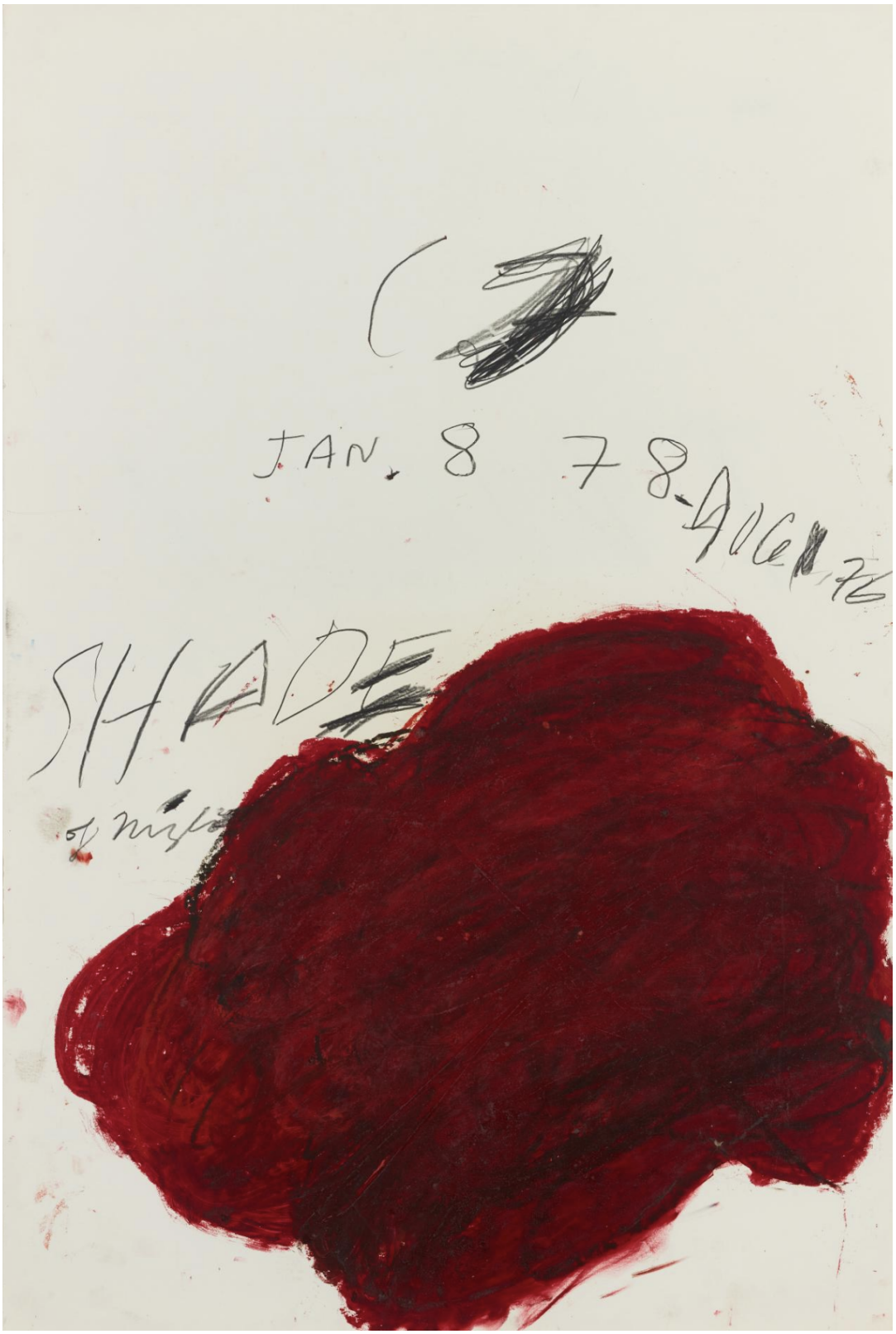


Figure 14: Cy Twombly, *Shades of Night (January 8 - August 1),* 1978, oil, oil stick, graphite on paper, 40 x 27 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

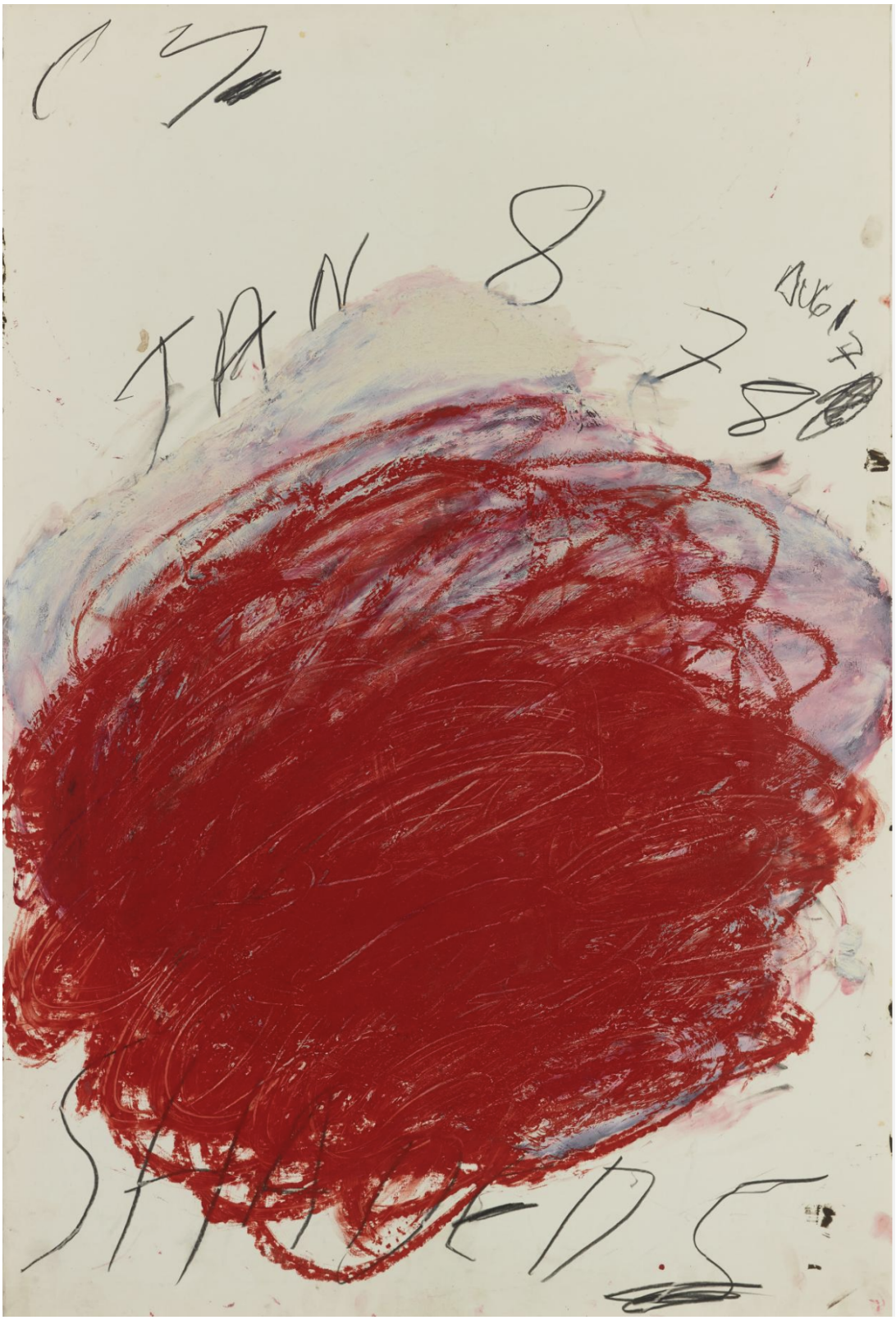


Figure 15: Cy Twombly, *Shades of Night (January 8 - August 1),* 1978, oil, oil stick, graphite on paper, 40 x 27 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.