

# PAINTING AND ITS SIDE EFFECTS

by John Kelsey

*Dizziness, euphoria, depersonalization, itching, impaired concentration, night sweats, nausea...* I remember the poster Christopher Wool made for a show at Luhring Augustine in 1997 (p. 21). Presenting an absurdly long list of a medicine's side effects, the announcement made you think about art and drugs as one space: a zone of indistinction, or possibly indifference, involving the urban body in its most mutational moments of self-exteriority. Chloë Sevigny gave me that poster because she had two, and it's been on the fridge ever since (I drop this name because I think Wool's art has something of her disarmingly open and blank it-ness or out-ness... and somehow, back then, these two got joined for me). The listed side effects could be names for states of both the body and painting. Out of body/painting states. And being words, the names themselves are already dislocations, already outside of what they mean. Being an image, the poster returns a sort of blanked-out speechlessness to the words: something to stare at. Wool's recent paintings can be described as self-distancing bodies playing out at their limits—making and multiplying themselves there. And in 1997, his poster was already doing this with its inventory of dislocating, de-centering sensations or signs...

Following Wool, it's tempting to define abstraction as a means of transportation in situ, or whatever allows us to perform the inescapability of a reiteration that somehow causes us (and the work) to return differently, strangely, each time—or even multiply, like a list of side effects. We function by putting ourselves out and getting something(s) other back, constantly. This definition of abstraction is not necessarily New York-specific, but here it addresses an experience that's as violent as it is practical and perhaps even necessary (in art as in daily life), or in any case brings us closer to an understanding of the creative dislocation we so intimately share with a metropolis we know we can neither inhabit nor escape... Here, where we hold nothing more in common than our own mediation within the act of doing (painting or whatever), abstraction is how we happen and how we work.

A sprayed line of enamel wanders the canvas, looping in and out of itself on the surface. On another canvas, this same looping line recurs as a screen print. Photographed and then reiterated elsewhere, a painterly gesture is suddenly outside or beside itself. So where is the painting happening? In the situation that Wool sets up here, we could say that painting is always already relocated or dislocated, and systematically amputated from the supposedly living, breathing moment and place of the work. Dislocation is how the paintings get out and get done, or worked out into the world. And in a world of non-stop work, these worked-out surfaces also seem to arrive as signs of a possible end of work, a having done with the job of painting. Still, this jobless possibility can only work itself out. And there's something forensic and corpse-like about the reproduced, multiplied gesture: it's not only painting beside itself but somehow post-itself, done for, like something turned up at a crime scene (Wool's photographs of New York streets at night, of his former studio after it caught on fire, and of his own paintings, all have the cold-eyed, noir look of forensic documents, as if the camera always gets there too late, after the act, after the paint job ... and now we hear the word "job" in its criminal or street sense).

Recent tests of New York water show increasing levels of Adderall in our drinking supply. The whole city is hooked on this new performance-enhancing work drug. And look at what we produce: hand-tailored flannel shirts that obsessively tweak and refine traditional prototypes, high-end granola to be consumed amid rustic, woodsy decors, the High Line, swarms of MFA grads, and more Adderall prescriptions to keep us focused on all this information. Meanwhile, painting keeps returning as *information* about painting, whether in the galleries or online. But Wool's paintings have always done this. Each of his canvases presents Wool information, mediating his own moves within the channel of the painting, in this way addressing the destiny of gestures in a city where abstraction has become another word for *survival*. In these paintings, gesture returns in a strange way, after itself and as if from the side—as a means of intervening within the processes that already separate the painter from his own activity. Here, in other words, we see that gestures are already involved in their own transmission. It's not an easy thing to describe, this process whereby the body of painting suddenly moves outside itself, discovering the possibility of another, cooler, abstract body where before there was only absence. The post-gestural gesture elaborates itself in the depths of

a workout where repetition and dislocation reign, and where an abstract body is now doing reps.

As a kid on Cape Cod I used to twirl horseshoe crabs around by the spikes they have for tails, then set them down and watch them wander in disoriented spirals. Their tails would leave marks in the sand a lot like Wool's sprayed lines. But when Wool photographs his line to make a silkscreen that repeats it however many times, in whatever colors, and in higher or lower resolutions, he introduces another level of disorientation. The wandering is now divorced from itself, from its own situation of wandering, in order to wander in a cool (mediatic) way now, not just in space but in time and also between works. It becomes repeated or multiplied wandering, haunting or stalking a series of canvases. In this way, something related to Abstract Expressionism is carried over (like a number) into something like post-gestural abstraction, losing a big part of itself on the way. The expressive gesture gets the information on itself and then puts it back to work, working it out again, but more programmatically now. And repetition derails whatever was AbEx about the painting into the realm of graffiti, where tags are reiterated over and over again, contaminating urban space with a viral multiplication of the same mark, which is also a vandalistic mode of branding. With graffiti, wandering and repeating lose their distinction in city space: roaming/tagging invents another, rhythmic and resistant mode of spatial agency (in the 1980s, it was called "wildstyle").

Probably having absorbed Hans Hofmann's famous credo about the elimination of the unnecessary from painting so that the necessary may speak, Wool translates this back in a world where only work seems necessary and real. What speaks in Wool's painting is the experience of repetition and dislocation (alienation?), which he consistently converts into transformative possibilities. And if work is what speaks here, it's already like a recorded voice playing back against the noise of the contemporary workspace, even looping. The painter improvises with painterly information, automating his own gestures in order to replay them in different ways. We could also say that what speaks in these paintings is the absurd necessity of working in a decidedly unnecessary medium (painting), after Hofmann, and after Wool, too... because the one doing the work has become a sort of painting machine that has in some way put the painter himself on hold, drawing him into its loops and repetitions. That both the painter and the painting need to work does not mean that this need is itself

necessary, however. Need is another word for a habit that can be semi-blind to itself ... located in the most automatic part of ourselves.

The painting machine idea comes from Warhol, clearly, as does the use of the screen print on canvas. In Wool's practice, however, a repressed AbEx painter returns as a sort of avenging ghost, working overtime now but also basically jobless (historically outmoded) in this Factory. In Wool's hands, the screen print discovers another, gestural possibility. And as much as he exploits print's power of repetition, he is not at all interested in making copies: Repetition of marks or gestures becomes a means of pulling always new, always different and unrepeatable images from the middle of the work. When a spray line or any other painterly gesture recurs as a print, it is always a transformed spray line, the same information producing a totally different image. On some canvases, an accumulation of eight to ten prints, one on top of the other, involves this same information in a play of simultaneous erasure and build-up. In-between these printed layers, areas of the composition are sometimes whited out again with enamel. Elsewhere, superimposed screens produce moiré effects. Accidents happen, compositional disasters. The surface thickens. And as information builds and accumulates, it is simultaneously lost, buried, and decomposed. It's virtually impossible to locate the beginning or the end of these built/unbuilt, worked/unworked images, as painterly information is cycled through a process that causes gestures to drift and return outside of themselves, recombining elsewhere with others.

The actual beginning or first step of a large-format painting might be a small drawing that Wool photographed and then blew up on a screen, and the end might be a final layer of enamel attacking the information that came before it, with a sprayed brown line half-buried somewhere in-between. But when we see the image he's produced, we are getting all of these moments at once, in one look, seeing as if from the middle of the work. Within this one—overloaded, semi-obliterated, complex, severely challenged—look, a multiplicity of gesture-images is activated and worked out. And when just one of the four quadrants that make up a screen-image is deployed separately, fragmenting and disorienting the source image, a gesture is split apart and reconnected to other part-gestures. There are also paintings that resemble split-screens, half brown and half black, where a formless splotch returns as a neatly divided, re-organized image. The use of a digital camera in this process affects the sharpness and grain of the source image which, in combination with the low resolution of the



new screen that translates it in ink, can produce relentless dot patterns that are aggressively hard to look at up close. Staring a painting in the face, we realize it doesn't yet know how to be looked at, or that it hasn't yet found its eyes.

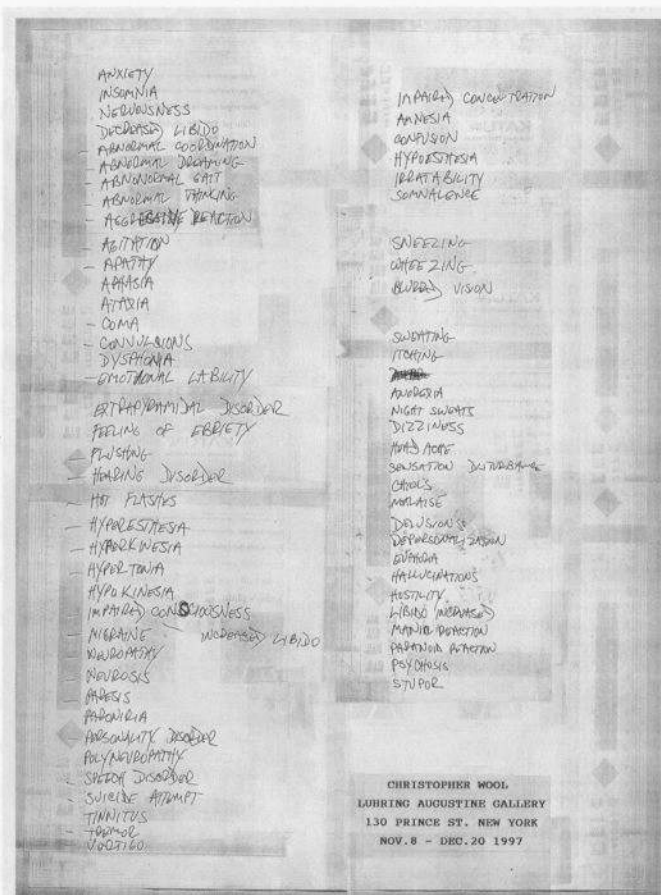
The color in some of the recent work is laid down fast, the enamel paint always isolated from the printed layer. When there are several colors, they remain separated so that they can collide like cars on a highway. If these colors express, it's by colliding and piling up. They hit the surface and each other, never mixing or blending. Brown feels kind of moody and shitty, but in a hard, nailed-down way. Red and yellow alarm and then sour the surface, first one and then the other, like a jump cut in a film. Some of these effects were achieved by using large sheets of cardboard to press poured and dripped paint against an earlier series of screen-prints on paper, with the artist standing on top of the cardboard tool and putting his weight into it. It could be that for Wool, the only way to work out the specific density, opacity, and body of these colors is by stomping them in. But eventually this information, too, is cycled back through a process involving a camera, a screen, and whatever other means of mediating, dislocating, and resituating the gesture.

In Paris more than in any previous exhibition, Wool has chosen to install many works together with those that provided their source imagery. We can actually stand back and see the gestural drift between paintings and across the space of the room, witnessing how his process generates such specifically different images from the same information. We see elements of one painting buried in another, or combining on a second canvas with elements that may have originated in a third. Gestures go viral, escaping one painting and contaminating another. A work recurs outside of itself, sometimes in a partial or fragmented way, always coming back remotely as another image—thicker, faster, sharper, or in brown. Frequently, having been divided into quadrants in the screening process, it returns showing the gaps between its drifting, misaligned sections. In the speed of transmission, integrity is not always preserved. The image lands by coming apart at the seams, but it lands dead on, this time directly in the crosshairs that its own quartering has produced.

Returning now to Wool's poster from 1997, we suddenly get the joke about the concatenation of symptoms, about being too damaged to work, and the ambiguity he opens up here between an artist's overloaded metabolism and an anxious hypochondriac jumping out of his skin at the slightest sign. Wool's joke on being out of control is presented in a most

controlled manner, as a methodically written-out and orderly list of terms. Control loses its distinction from loss of control in this neurotic, possibly endless, obsessive-compulsive enumeration of problems. There's more than a little bit of Catskills humor in the paintings, too, and this never fails to betray their cool on some level. Sometimes it's hiding in the titles, sometimes hiding right out there in the open, in plain sight on the surface of the canvas. Repetition, or a dislocating seriality, seems to be the main weapon in this stand-up routine whereby the abstract painter can't stop producing signs of his own absence on the job.

As Wool causes his paintings to stammer and repeat outside of themselves, he produces a more prolific and, at the same time, more abstract and stranger artist. In other words, he performs a sort of aesthetic agency for a painter that is not exactly himself but always one or more steps to the side: the painter as side effect. Side effects do not come before or after, from above or below. They proliferate in the meanwhile and in the margins. And these effects are not separate from the efficient, productive, good hard work of the medicine, they are concurrent and co-present, also part of its work, but as if jeering the job's efficiency from the sidelines. Within this restless, drifting workspace, gestures no longer express the artist in an immediate way, they repeat and rework him. And if work is the hardest drug in New York, painting is a serious habit.



Exhibition poster / Affiche d'exposition Christopher Wool, Lühring Augustine, New York 1997 (see text p. 15 / voir texte p. 101)