Christopher Wool in his studio, New York, ca. 1982. Photo by Zoe Leonard

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TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS

ONE OF THE FIRST public descriptions of Christopher Wool's art could just as easily provide the last word. Written as the press release for his 1986 show at Cable Gallery in New York, when Wool was on the brink of creating the body of work that marked the breakthrough to his mature career, it augurs his development with strange prescience:

> Wool's work contains continual internal/external debate within itself. At one moment his work will display self-denial, at the next moment solipsism. Shifting psychological states, false fronts, shadows of themselves, justify their own existence.… Wool's work locks itself in only to deftly escape through sleight of hand. The necessity to survive the moment at all costs, using its repertoire of false fronts and psychological stances is the work's lifeblood.[1]

The oracle in question was Wool's contemporary Jeff Koons, and while coded by the coolly assured terms of its author's own practice, the one-page text succinctly captures some of the conceptual and psychic complexities of a career that has consistently eluded easy codification. The conflicted identity diagnosed by Koons—whereby the work looks both out to the world and inward in an obsessive self-replication, is both attracted to the expressive potential of gesture and relentlessly mediates this same impulse—can be applied to Wool's entire artistic output, from his initial adherence to ready-made forms and constraining compositional systems to his recent explorations of abstraction via erasure, collage, and digital transformation. "There is no secure sense of what Wool's paintings mean," mused another early commentator, John Caldwell, on the occasion of the artist's first solo museum presentation, in 1989. "They are uniform, deliberate, absolute, and masterful, but entirely resistant to one's natural search for meaning, which they seem to deny."[2] As Wool's oeuvre has evolved, it has become clear that this evasive quality stems from a fundamental rejection of certainty or resolution that serves as the conceptual core of the work as well as its formal underpinnings. A restless search for meaning is already visualized *within* the paintings, photographs, and works on paper that constitute the artist's nuanced engagement with the question of how to make a picture.

ALTHOUGH IN RECENT YEARS Wool has spent much of his time amid the open landscape of West Texas, from the outset his work has been associated with an abrasive urban sensibility. His identity was forged in two locales teeming with avant-garde currents: the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s and downtown New York in the 1970s. The child of erudite and liberal parents (his father, Ira, was a professor of molecular biology at the University of Chicago and his mother, Glorye, a psychiatrist), Wool had a heightened awareness of the sociopolitical ferment that enveloped Chicago as he entered his teens, which reached a notorious crescendo in the clashes between police and protesters during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Against this backdrop of counter-cultural dissent, Wool grasped that art too could be a subversive force, through a number of youthful encounters that he isolates for their peculiar power and influence.

The first of these was a 1966 exhibition by the Chicago-based collaborative the Hairy Who, which took place at the Hyde Park Art Center.[3] The eleven-year-old Wool (who had taken art classes at the center) was riveted by the outré subject matter and raucous humor of the work, which was exhibited on walls decked with a garish floral pattern (fig. 1) and accompanied by a catalogue in the form of a hand-drawn comic. The following year, he experienced a very different immersive installation, Dan Flavin's *alternating pink and*

Fig. 1 Installation view of *Hairy Who*, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, February 25–April 19, 1966. (For collection credits, see p. 270.)

Fig. 2 Dan Flavin, *alternating pink and "gold"*, 1967. Pink and yellow fluorescent light, fifty-four lamps, 8-foot fixtures, variable dimensions overall. Installation view: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, December 9, 1967–January 14, 1968

"gold" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (fig. 2). The artist's first solo show at a museum, the work consisted of fifty-four fluorescent lamps arrayed vertically around the space, their cloying luminescence reflected in hazy wobbles in the polished floor of the gallery. Flavin himself described the effect as "rather difficult to take,"[4] and Wool was both awed and disturbed by the sight, to the point where he felt nauseated and had to rush out for air. A third watershed moment was a concert by the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble, soon to be more famously billed as the Art Ensemble of Chicago, that took place in winter 1967–68. The Afrocentric group emphasized free improvisation and an unconventional, highly theatrical performance style, and the show initiated in Wool a strong creative affinity with experimental jazz that continues to inflect his work.[5] While there is no straightforward genealogy to be traced from these three wildly divergent formative experiences to Wool's own creative project, they each possessed a disorienting, even combative quality that would become a benchmark for the artist as he developed his practice.

Wool's formal art education began in 1972 at Sarah Lawrence College in suburban New York City. Frustrated by the institution's insistence that students take only one studio class per semester, he negotiated permission to take painting and photography courses simultaneously, on the condition that his following year would consist only of academic work—a deal he promptly reneged on by dropping out after his second semester, restless and ready for a move to Manhattan. Nonetheless, this brief stint at Sarah Lawrence was long enough for Wool to be deeply impacted by his studies with the Abstract Expressionist painter Richard Pousette-Dart, an engaged and empathetic teacher whom he admired for his light-footed eschewal of artistic dogma and tellingly characterized as "a painter more interested in questions than answers."[6] A more hegemonic classicism pervaded Wool's yearlong stint at the New York Studio School, where he enrolled the following September.[7] Under the regime of its founder and dean, Mercedes Matter, the faculty espoused the centrality of drawing, with the use of an eraser to model charcoal as a signature strategy. This approach is recalled by artist Joyce Pensato, Wool's studio mate at the school and a lifelong friend: "The philosophy was based on Hans Hofmann—push and pull and all that. You were supposed to draw like Giacometti and paint like de Kooning, then break with it and do your own thing. Jack Tworkov was our main guy that year, and Philip Guston came in to teach a few times. Everyone was doing these moth-eaten still lifes, and Christopher and I had no connection to that, so we had to search for our own subjects, then and for the next forty years. And I think we both started with the street."[8]

The street in question was one of the most mythologized of the twentieth century: the countercultural bastion of 1970s downtown New York. Intoxicated by the scene's frayed sensibility and carnivalesque tactics, Wool immersed himself in a creative milieu that was jettisoning the pieties of the preceding Conceptualist generation in favor of an interdisciplinary free-for-all in which every musician was making a film and every artist had a band. Based in a loft converted from a former men's shelter on Chatham Square at the southernmost reaches of the Bowery, Wool drifted toward the crowd that orbited the Mudd Club, Max's Kansas City, and CBGB, and while more rapt observer rather than central player, he eventually formed close friendships with downtown figures such as James Nares, Glenn O'Brien, and Richard Hell. The flayed antiaesthetic and three-chord, DIY abandon of punk and No Wave music found parallel expression in the unvarnished iconoclasm of No Wave film, also known as the New Cinema after the short-lived but highly influential screening room that was active on St. Mark's Place in the East Village for a period in 1979. Founded by Nares, Eric Mitchell, and Becky Johnston, the venue served to premiere Super 8 films by a small group of contemporaries such as Charlie Ahearn, Vivienne Dick, John Lurie, and Amos Poe, who saw themselves in direct opposition to the prevailing experimental film scene. Wool was a regular at the New Cinema and became so enthused by the possibilities of the medium that he considered taking it up as his own, spending a summer enrolled in New York University's film program, where he was taught by the legendary professor (and mentor to Martin Scorsese) Haig P. Manoogian. Ultimately Wool found the collaborative necessities of filmmaking incompatible with his inclination for a solitary, iterative process, but underground film of the late '70s would remain for him a creative compass.[9]

AFTER A NUMBER of years given over to volatile experimentation, Wool established a steady painting practice in 1981. By this time, downtown's creative topography had started to shift dramatically. As Ronald Reagan entered the White House and popular culture took on a more reactionary and relentlessly consumerist tenor, the art economy boomed, heralding a "return to painting" after its prolonged exile from the vanguard. Gestural, largely figurative canvases were back in the spotlight, and outsize personalities such as Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat enjoyed a rapid ascent to the status of household names. The market's enthusiasm for this resurgence, however, was matched by equally vigorous critical disdain. Theorists of a postmodernist bent were largely focused on the activities of a group of artists that became known as the Pictures generation (after the catalytic exhibition organized by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in 1977), who worked primarily with photographic imagery and appropriative strategies to probe the mechanisms of desire enmeshed in mainstream visual culture.[10] The dismissal of painting implicit in the lionization of the Pictures agenda was made overt in Crimp's 1981 essay "The End of Painting," which relegated the medium to a cul-de-sac of rococo irrelevance.[11] However, in one of the most resonant critical bouts of the period, Crimp's question "To what end painting in the 1980s?"[12] was met with an agile response from the artist and writer Thomas Lawson, who asserted painting's continued potential for critical agency. Interestingly, Lawson located the impasse within a matrix of doubt and belief, arguing that the declarative nature of photography-based work "can do little to stimulate the growth of a really troubling doubt." Painting, meanwhile, was "the medium that requires the greatest amount of faith. For it is this question of faith that is central."[13]

This particular scuffle was of course only the latest chapter in a larger cycle of death and resurrection that painting had been caught in since the invention of the daguerreotype, and the emotive terms used by Lawson were the natural extension of a critical tradition in which the medium had been anthropomorphized as an alternately beleaguered, extinct, and triumphantly resurgent body. Against this high-keyed backdrop, Wool's interest in not only painting but abstract painting was distinctly out of step with the prevailing critical weather, when the one point of hearty agreement between Crimp and Lawson was a dismissal of painterly abstraction as "the last manneristic twitches of modernism."[14] Excruciatingly aware of the taboo status of gestural mark-making as an index of self-expression, Wool was nonetheless compelled to explore whatever space was left within abstraction for a critical practice. For the first half of the 1980s, he tested a range of formal strategies, gaining at the same time a better understanding of the vicissitudes of the studio in his role as assistant to sculptor Joel Shapiro. His first solo show, at Cable Gallery in 1984, presented seven canvases and two works on paper depicting raw, densely painted forms that at times warily broached figuration (fig. 3). Over the next few years, Wool suppressed overt imagery completely and moved

Fig. 3 *The Bigger the Lie the Longer the Nose*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 167.6 cm

toward an all-over uniformity rendered in a palette of blacks and silvery grays (such as *Type B*, 1986, fig. 4). The carefully wrought surfaces of these works, which often incorporate the effects of chemical reactions in the dripped paint, are simultaneously seductive and forbidding. Wool's first review in *Artforum* described them as "a cross between a Jackson Pollock and a Formica countertop,"[15] and it was at this point that a persistent critical formulation of Wool's work as a detente between AbEx energy and the deadpan cool of Pop, figured in particular by the polarity between Pollock and Warhol, began to gain purchase.[16]

Wool made a defining advance in his work between 1986 and '87 based on an alternative set of influences, merging a Post-Minimalist emphasis on process with the strategies of replication and cultural piracy that girded the work of peers such as Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine. In the first of a number of such developments over the course of the years, the seeds of this breakthrough came from the urban vernacular. It was a common trick of New York landlords to use a roller incised with patterns to paint the hallways of tenement buildings, in a nod to décor that was more economical than wallpaper. Wool observed a workman applying this tawdry embellishment to the halls outside his loft and recalls being fascinated by the considerable challenge of lining up the patterns successfully. The rollers could be bought cheaply in hardware and art-supply stores in a variety of designs that included blossoms, leaves, and vines, as well as

Fig. 4 ***Type B*, 1986. Enamel on aluminum, 182.9 x 121.9 cm**

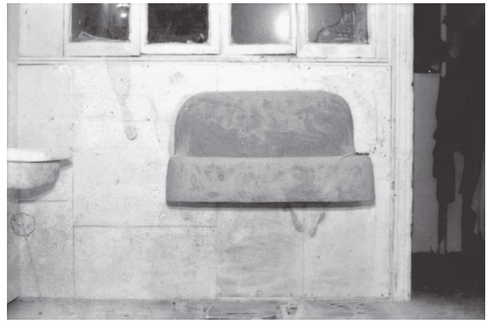

Fig. 5 Robert Gober, *The Silent Sink*, work in progress, 1984. Installation view: Gober studio, East 7th Street, New York, 1984

abstract geometries ranging from the minimal to the baroque. In these prosaic tools, Wool identified a preexisting formal repertoire that teetered between the conditions of figuration and abstraction. Executed in gleaming black enamel on aluminum panels that had been primed with uninflected white paint, Wool's pattern paintings evoke a peculiar disjunction between the prettifying intention of the rollers and the ascetic formal language in which he deployed them, described by the artist as "an interesting friction generated by putting forms that were supposed to be decorative in such severe terms."[17]

Perhaps most epiphanic for Wool was the way this new technique neatly sidestepped the historical baggage surrounding the expressive impulse in painting, making the act of production correlate precisely with the visual content of the work while also lifting that content directly from the image bank of the everyday environment. The inextricable relationship between mechanical action and final form inherent to the rollers, which allowed gesture and its problematics to be (literally) held at arm's length, collapsed the opposition set up in Wool's much-cited statement that his early abstractions had represented a shift from the question of "what to paint" to one of "how to paint it."[18] With these new works, the two questions had been rendered synonymous. The circumscription of found forms and parsimonious formal parameters paradoxically endowed Wool with new creative latitude, eliminating what he termed "a modernist kind of decision-making"[19] and a potentially bogus surrender to clichés of spontaneous creation.

The bland iconography and commercial mode of labor of Wool's pattern paintings are, however, held in tension with the idiosyncrasies that accompany their status as unique, handmade objects. Wool dates his recognition of the strange charisma of the handmade readymade to the experience of visiting

Fig. 6 ***Untitled*, 1990. Enamel on rice paper, 99 x 62.2 cm**

Robert Gober's studio in the early 1980s. There he saw the artist's first sink sculptures (fig. 5)—objects that mimicked mass-produced anonymity but that Gober had painstakingly sculpted—and was stunned by the vulnerability and elusive psychological potency imparted to these mundane forms. Wool's roller paintings permit a similar trace of the hand's caprices. They are threaded through with woozy glitches wherein the patterned icon is elongated or skipped altogether, in a strangely disarming systemic breakdown that is amplified by the choice of unforgiving industrial materials. Scanning the surface of the works, the eye lights on these mishaps, and they accrue a special emotional charge. A vein of slipped paint amid a vacuous sea of clovers or fleurs-de-lis appears as a bodily lesion—a surprising moment of deeply human mortification within a depersonalized framework. This precarious truce between control and its relinquishment was to prove foundational for Wool's subsequent work.

After uncovering the creative potential of the rollers, Wool quickly extended his process to encompass rubber stamps, which provided a somewhat more supple compositional tool. The first stamped works employed the form of a repeated curlicue that melded together into the impression of a baroque gate, but the seriality of interlocking patterns was gradually loosened in favor of less-regimented elements such as individual sprigs of flowers scattered at intervals across the picture plane. During a yearlong residency at the American Academy in Rome in 1989–90, Wool made a series of works on paper that experimented with more overtly figurative imagery: a heraldic bird (fig. 6) and a somewhat sinister rendering of a gender-ambiguous human figure running. While he attempted to use these icons as mere visual units, configuring them in geometric arrangements, they retained, in the artist's eyes, a distinctly narrative flavor. He found a more recondite motif in a sinuous vine design derived from one of his favorite rollers, enlarged to the point that the imagery broke from the strictures of pattern to achieve a sense of organic growth. Wool fabricated the stamps in large, rectilinear units that left traces of paint at their edges—an index of procedural fallout that resulted in an incidental gridding of the surface and, like the roller stutters, prefigured the embrace of the visual noise emitted by methods of mechanical reproduction in later bodies of work. It was also at this point that the artist began to experiment with the strategy of layering, in both his rollered and stamped works, as a means to create pictorial discord. In one of the more complex paintings in this series, *Riot* (1989/92, plate 19), the vine forms are stamped in consecutive layers that are slightly misaligned, as if the image is being chased by its own shadow.[20]

IN TANDEM with his pattern paintings, Wool developed a body of work that trod the same conceptual territory with a more strident visual presence. Echoing the paradigm established with the pattern works, his "word paintings" took a system of preexisting forms as a structural given, then set about exploiting the aesthetic subtleties available within these parameters. Wool had already spent the better part of a decade archiving turns of phrase that arrested his attention when he encountered a visual eureka that has been so often recounted in the literature around his work it has attained the apocryphal ring of an origin myth: the moment that he stumbled across a fresh-off-the-lot white delivery truck that had been branded with SEX LUV in crisp, crudely rendered spray paint. Gripped by the graphic power of this ad hoc composition, Wool set about creating an artwork that would channel the impact of the experience. An early, untitled effort from 1987 shows the words SEX and LUV rendered with blocky stencils, floating in the upper-right quadrant of the white-painted paper (plate 8). Searching for a more reductive formal armature, he created a further work in which he penciled in a faintly visible grid and repeated the paired words to fill the vertically oriented surface.

At the historical juncture at which Wool turned to the pictorial possibilities of language, the relationship between visual and verbal representation had been a fertile point of avant-garde inquiry for more than a century, from the textual

Fig. 7 Olivier Mosset and Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy), untitled, ca. 1980–81. Installation view: New York, ca. 1982. Photograph from *Bomb*, no. 4 (Fall 1982)

experiments of Stéphane Mallarmé, F. T. Marinetti, and Guillaume Apollinaire to the cut-ups of William Burroughs. Language as medium, designated by Lawrence Weiner as "the most nonobjective thing we have ever developed in this world,"[21] had served as a cornerstone of Conceptualism, with its efforts to relocate art in the intangible realm of the idea. And for Wool's peers such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, text had been deployed to explode the mass media's cunning instantiation of social norms and consumerist fantasies. Wool, however, was less concerned with language as a means to transcend image, or with the problematic conjunction of text and image, than with text *as* image. He had long been fascinated by the way words function when removed from the quiet authority of the page and exposed to the cacophony of the city, whether through the blaring incantations of billboards and commercial signage or the illicit interventions of graffiti artists. But with their velvety white grounds and stylized letters rendered in dense, sign painter's enamel that pooled and dripped within the stencils, the word paintings have a resolute material presence that transcends the graphic. With hindsight, Wool dates his impulse to intervene in the painted field with text not only to the memory of the graffitied truck but to an encounter with a collaboration between the Swiss conceptual painter Olivier Mosset and musician/artist Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy). The work's pristine monochrome surface has been interrupted with the scrawled arrangement KNEECAP/ART PIMPS/NO IMAGE (fig. 7), marrying one of painting's most severely reductive traditions with street art's dissident provocations.[22]

Setting up a dizzying interplay between the regimes of the visual and the textual, Wool engages the associative power and overt mode of address of his subject matter while also allowing the words to operate as shapes on a surface, beyond any communicative function. He preserves the specific outlines and order of the letters (the "ready-made" aspect of the approach) but freely disrupts conventional spacing, strips out punctuation, fractures words, and excises letters when formally expedient. The smooth cognition of reading is replaced by a more deliberate effort to assemble meaning, forcing the viewer to revert to the childhood struggle to make sense of language. Indeed, one series of word paintings plays on Wool's own early experiences with the famous primer *Fun with Dick and Jane*, using the lines "See Spot run. Run dog run." as its genesis. For Wool, the word paintings function most effectively when their content is matched to their affect—when a work, in his view, "does what it says." The first of the word compositions to be executed as a painting, rather than as a work on paper, depicts the formulation TRO/JNH/ORS (*Untitled*, 1988, fig. 8). Wool saw the work itself as mimicking the meaning of the text, in that the eviscerated structure evokes an act of camouflage. (It also happens to recall Lawson's idea of painting as a subversive lure, deploying its seductive wiles and commercial muscle as a means to covertly infiltrate the mainstream: "using an unsuspecting vehicle as camouflage, the radical artist can manipulate the viewer's faith to dislodge his or her certainty."[23]) Driven by a similar internal logic, a 1989 painting titled *Trouble* starkly arranges the letters TRBL into quadrants (plate 15). With this jarring layout and the reduction of seven letters to four, Wool reflects the obstruction and agitation implied by the illustrated word in a kind of visual onomatopoeia.

"TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS," the title of a 1950 collection of short stories by Raymond Chandler, could provide Wool an apt calling card. Chandler's razor-sharp prose has long held a special resonance for the artist; in 1984 he read aloud a passage from the author's seminal study of the detective genre, "The Simple Art of Murder," as a performance at the opening of a one-day, two-person exhibition with Joyce Pensato at Four Walls gallery in Hoboken, New Jersey. The excerpt included the following lines: "It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting and even amusing patterns out of it. It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little, and that his death should be the coin of what we call civilization. All this still is not quite enough."[24] Chandler's vision of a seamy metropolis peopled by criminals, corrupt journalists, and dirty cops is channeled in the dog-eat-dog world distilled in the word paintings, which voice a study of social breakdown that mirrors the cognitive jolts and formal disintegration of their compositions. Wool created a kind of cast book of these pathologies, each condensed into nine letters stacked into three rows, in a series of works on paper that were originally made for a 1989 artist's book titled *Black Book* (plate 14).[25] While a number of the words could be interpreted as neutral—*assistant*, for example, or *comedian*—they are overwhelmingly pejorative, and epithets such as *assassin*, *adversary*, and *terrorist* radiate hostility.[26] Suggestive of a shadowy regime in which hypocrisy and betrayal are the only viable options for survival, the *Black Book Drawings* have been read both as accusations directed at the viewer and as a more general indictment of a rotten society. Another possibility is that they represent a self-lacerating catalogue of the various roles an artist might take on, expressing Wool's vexed relationship to the notion of the masterful figure in the studio. This refrain of dark-humored abjection and vulnerability repeatedly surfaces in the work of this period. It echoes through the deflated Borscht Belt shtick of the 1988 paintings *My Act* (plate 13) and *My Name*, collaborative works by Wool and Richard Prince that offer wry commentary on artistic exchange and appropriation, and it evolves into a more lyrical bruise of self-admonishment in the painting *Blue Fool* (1990, plate 16), which Wool acknowledges to be in part a melancholy self-portrait.

The singular aura of anxiety in Wool's word paintings at times shades into naked dread. Nowhere is this nightmarish cast more tangible than in *Apocalypse Now*, the 1988 work that spells out the despairing command SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS (plate 12). Wool purloined the phrase from a scene in Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic transposition of *Heart of Darkness* to the Vietnam War. The line derives from the moment when Willard, the Special Operations officer who has been tasked with assassinating the rogue Colonel Kurtz, reads an intercepted letter by a Captain Colby. Colby had been previously sent on the same mission but is now missing in action, the last trace of him being this missive to his wife back home. A brief insert from the scene reveals the letter itself, scrawled in an erratic hand: SELL THE HOUSE/SELL THE CAR/SELL THE KIDS/FIND SOMEONE ELSE/FORGET IT!/I'M NEVER COMING ~~HOME~~ BACK/FORGET IT!!![27] The painting formed one element of a joint installation by Wool and Gober at 303 Gallery in 1989 (pages 74–75) that also included a trio of the latter's urinal works, a full-length mirror imported from Wool's loft, and a collaborative photograph by the two artists showing a dress decorated with one of Wool's roller patterns, hanging on a tree in a wooded landscape (*Untitled*, 1988, plate 11).[28] The photograph, freighted with a sense of foreboding, suggests an enigmatic scenario that might unlock the various strands of hysteria, loss, and repressed trauma that permeated the exhibition. This fraught atmosphere was made explicit in a text by Gary Indiana published in an accompanying booklet, a first-person narrative in which the speaker is convinced he is under surveillance and imminent threat.[29]

Fig. 8 *Untitled*, 1988. Enamel on aluminum, 182.9 x 121.9 cm

If *Apocalypse Now* speaks of a free-floating paranoia that anticipates mounting horrors, a contemporaneous painting (*Untitled*, 1988, plate 9) summons the aftermath of a specific episode of notorious violence. Depicting the words HELTER HELTER, Wool's implacable black lettering makes macabre reference to "Helter Skelter," Charles Manson's code name for his imagined racial apocalypse, which was scrawled in blood at one of the scenes of the murders he incited. This horrifying denouement to a summer of alienation and impending disaster was indelibly described in Joan Didion's "The White Album." "The Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969," she wrote in the essay's conclusion. "The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled."[30] Wool viewed his transmutation of the phrase into a geometrically framed repetition to be an act of reimposing order on the violent abandon of the source, though the change could also be seen conversely as a stymieing prolongation of the tension that Didion describes as having been punctured.

The ominous figuring of endings in these works culminates in *Untitled* (1990–91, plate 18).[31] The painting depicts a series of paratactic statements that render a world where even

the illusion of comfort has been lost: "The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around. No more coats and no more home." The longest and most complex arrangement of text by Wool, the language is genuinely difficult to decipher, forcing the viewer to remain standing before it in a state of gradual comprehension that attains a time-based, near-performative sense of engagement. While Wool's appropriated expressions are mostly culled from pop culture, this painting has a more rarefied source. He first came across the lines in Greil Marcus's countercultural history *Lipstick Traces*, which cites the Situationist writer Raoul Vaneigem's use of the passage to describe the condition of nihilism in his seminal 1967 book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.[32] Vaneigem was in turn paraphrasing the Russian philosopher Vasily Rozanov, who coined the formulation to allegorize the upheaval of the Russian Revolution:

> With a clang, a creak, and a scream the iron curtain drops on Russian history. "The performance is over."
> The people get up from their seats.
> "Time to put on your fur coats and go home."
> They look around.
> But the fur coats and the houses have all vanished.[33]

In a curious echo of Wool's coopted title *Apocalypse Now*, Rozanov's lines originate in a 1918 essay titled "The Apocalypse of Our Time."

Within the thematics of Wool's work, the painting's narrative swirls together the implosion of Vietnam with the anarchic repudiations of punk—Captain Colby's letter,

Fig. 9 **Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Christopher Wool, *"Untitled"*, 1993. Print on paper, endless copies, 8 inches at ideal height x 37 x 55 1/2 inches (original paper size)**

with its deleted *home*, meets the Sex Pistols' "No Future." Further exploiting the statement's assiduous blankness of tone, the work's subsequent iterations exposed new facets of meaning. In 1991 Wool erected a version of the painting nearly twenty-four feet high on the rear facade of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh as part of the Carnegie International, where it was interpreted by some as an epitaph for the evacuated cultural landscape and "charade of prosperity" left in the wake of Reagan-Bush.[34] As an extension of the project, he created a billboard installation in downtown Pittsburgh that read THE SHOW IS OVER on both sides (pages 98–99). Positioned in a desolate gap between a highway overpass and a dilapidated parking lot, the work gave the porous relation between Wool's work and the street a fresh charge, enacting the artist's long-held interest in the way words embed themselves in the urban fabric. Two years later, Felix Gonzalez-Torres asked Wool for permission to use an image of the painting in a 1993 "stack" work created to benefit the New York nonprofit group Printed Matter (fig. 9). Framed by Gonzalez-Torres's practice, the vision of an abrupt curtain fall is inevitably transmuted into an elegiac parable for the cataclysm of the AIDS crisis, with the gradual (if temporary) diminishing of the sculptural stack of papers physically echoing the loss evoked in the text.

Wool's attraction to the bleak poetics of the urban margins was explored in a new medium in the culminating project of a 1992 DAAD residency in Berlin, a photobook titled *Absent Without Leave* (pages 1–18).[35] Photography had been an interest of Wool's since his teenage years, but he began to pursue it more methodically during an extensive period of largely solitary travels initiated in 1989 during his residency in Rome. The phrase "absent without leave" denotes a dereliction of duty, evoking the same fractured world order and militarized milieu that Wool had conjured in *Apocalypse Now*. Although the book's 160 black-and-white images offer brief, jolting glimpses of human intimacy—a mother pushing a baby carriage; a woman bending to dress—the scenes are rarely populated, other than by the occasional vagrant cat or dog. And while certain images of statues in a park or boats on a lake might conceivably be at home in any tourist slideshow, the overwhelming impression gleaned when turning the pages is one of alienation. Buildings and highways rush past the window of a moving car. Grimy hotel rooms run together with overflowing gutters and darkened passageways. In line with this spirit of raw contingency, the pictures themselves deliberately eschew any type of technical refinement. Wool had the prints cheaply developed at commercial labs, then added a further layer of mediation by photocopying the images,

Fig. 10 ***Cats in Bag Bags in River*** **(two details), 1990. Color photocopies, 11 parts, 36.2 x 27.9 cm each, edition of 25**

reducing the depicted forms to harsh binaries of black and white that often threaten to dissolve into abstract geometries, as if the known world is receding into the void.[36]

WOOL HAD ALREADY experimented with the disruptions of photomechanical processing in the 1991 artist's book *Cats in Bag Bags in River* (also issued as a portfolio of prints), published on the occasion of an exhibition at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The title—taken from a 1990 word painting that had in turn pilfered the phrase from the acerbic dialogue of the 1957 film *The Sweet Smell of Success*—stands in enigmatic relation to the book's contents: photographs of Wool's pattern and word paintings that have been run repeatedly through a color copier. Smothered in the distorting grain of the reproduction process and at times radically cropped, the original images are transferred into a new, hallucinatory register (fig. 10). Wool would crank up the machine's color controls, then feed each image through multiple times, enriching the pigments and breaking down the forms with every pass. Acid yellows, pinks, and turquoises bloom across the pages as a result, variegated into granular strips that echo the slippages of paint in the works themselves. The migration of related techniques to painting is seen in a group of works initiated in 1993 in which Wool applied his imagery via silkscreen, a process that allowed the controlled mediation of imagery while embracing the disordering operations of chance in the form of dissonant slipups and the sooty traces of the screen's frame. It also prompted a transition from the armature of all-over repetition or the grid to more subjective compositional choices, as the floral motifs that had been confined within the cycling pattern paintings emerged as fully individuated units. At times Wool extracted them directly from his cache of rollers and stamps, but more often he raided a couple of well-thumbed books of clip art for examples of generic flower imagery. Wool's use of flowers has been noted (and inevitably construed as Warholian) for its purposeful banality—the hobbyist's choice of cordial still-life material. But in the artist's view, the subject matter was irrelevant. It was simply a pool of readily available formal hooks that he could displace from their source and use as a unit of composition, divested of any narrative associations.

The resolutely even effect of the silkscreen process and the attendant possibility of layering multiple screenings allowed Wool to create dense strata of imagery without any formal element gaining special prominence. In certain works, the flower icons are used sparingly, as in the cartoonish deadpan of *Talkin' Loud Sayin' Nothing* (1994, plate 25), but more often they commingle in teeming palimpsests, with a vase or starburst blossom occasionally emerging intact from the fray on the outer edges of the picture. Accumulative and leveling at the same time, these passages of overlapped enamel tend to collapse into each other to the point that wholly new forms emerge, as if only by sabotaging his own images could Wool find the freedom to generate new ones. A similar mode of default image-making emerged in a number of paintings and works on paper from this period in which Wool unceremoniously paints over a morass of silkscreened images with a large brush, allowing the outline of the forms below to roughly dictate the contours of the overlaid pigment. He most commonly uses white or black paint, as if striking out his own

Fig. 11 ***I Can't Stand Myself When You Touch Me*, 1994. Enamel on aluminum, 274.3 x 182.9 cm**

iconography with Wite-Out or a redacting marker. But in certain cases, color, which had been held in abstemious check for so long, bursts forth—notably in the exuberant passages of canary yellow in *Untitled* (1995, plate 32) and bubble-gum pink in *I Can't Stand Myself When You Touch Me* (1994, fig. 11). Moving forward, bright hues would continue to occasionally punctuate the artist's typically puritan palette.[37]

The forays into chromatic effect and more traditional compositional structures in the flower paintings marked a probing of new possibilities in Wool's practice. Soon afterward, he opened up another by abruptly overturning his prohibition against free gesture in a series of paintings that make prominent use of a looping line applied with an industrial spray gun. Wool had already experimented with this tool, more commonly used on cars or furniture, in an outlying word composition from 1990 that vertically renders the word RIOT in casually sprayed letters (*Untitled*, plate 17). But this new, intentionally awkward form—part tag, part Twombly—marked the first time in his mature practice he had allowed his own hand to generate an invented and wholly nonrepresentational element, even if the inherently distanced application of the spray tempered the immediacy of human touch. In contemporaneous panels, Wool developed his formal repertoire in compositions that litter hand-rendered circles, diamonds, and crosses across a wobbly grid, sometimes further embellished with sporadic patches of overpainting. For an artist whose output had until this point adhered to a rigorous economy of means, the anxiously staccato gestures and chaotic sampling of different aesthetic registers that coalesce within a painting such as *Untitled* (1996, plate 34) represent an exuberant stylistic expansion, as the production of imagery springs free from the process-based motivations that served as the foundation of earlier work.

Throughout his career, Wool's production has been fed by simultaneous explorations of different mediums, each of which has equal status in his practice. Accordingly, the poetic deployment of formal dissolution in his screenprinted work found a parallel in the mid-'90s in his second major photography series, *East Broadway Breakdown* (pages 271–88). (The title hybridizes those of two classic albums by jazz saxophonists, Sonny Rollins's 1966 *East Broadway Run Down* and Arthur Blythe's 1979 *Lenox Avenue Breakdown*). The photographs were taken in 1994–95 but resolved into their public form only in 2002, when they were exhibited as inkjet prints and published as an artist's book.[38] The publication was created in the same style and format as *Absent Without Leave* and forms a loose diptych with the earlier work. Both series share a sense of drifting anomie, but in *East Broadway Breakdown* Wool focuses on a highly specific and familiar topography. The photographs, taken with a small consumer camera, document Wool's nightly walk or bike ride from his East Village studio to his Chinatown loft, which would frequently lead to unplanned wanderings through the area.[39] Distilling the seedy atmosphere of the area prior to its current, more sanitized incarnation, these down-at-heel nocturnes highlight the city's unadorned, off-hours existence, its topography emptied of citizens and stripped down to a skeleton of streetlamps, scaffolding, chain-link fences, and parked cars. While steadily refusing the spectacle of actual violence, the images vibrate with the same wounded alienation and malevolent threat that courses through so many of the word paintings—a dog chained to a fence topped with razor wire, its eyes blanked out with reflected light; a hydrant leaking murky liquid onto the street as a shadowy figure walks away; a vertiginous view down a concrete tenement stairwell. Except for the light emitted by streetlamps and windows, these vignettes are illuminated solely by the camera's harsh flash, which intrudes on dormant moments with an air of belligerent inquisition and at times blinds the forms into fugitive abstractions.

The cyclical nature of *East Broadway Breakdown*, with certain sites seen repeatedly from various angles on different nights, causes Wool's journeys to blend into a single, iterative experience of a landscape that is at once stagnant and in constant flux. Despite the note of spiritual destitution in these images, the artist clearly finds his surroundings absorbing, even energizing. In this outlook, Wool aligns with numerous figures, notably Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, who advocate immersion in the creative disorder of the modern city to imbue the quotidian with new form and meaning.[40] In some ways, Wool's photographs correlate to the Situationist notion of the *dérive*, an undirected excursion through the urban landscape that aimed to dislodge established patterns of behavior and shed light on meanings hidden beneath the spectacle of city's surface.[41] *East Broadway Breakdown* embodies this spirit of surrender to dislocation, an aleatory mode that is reflected in the presentation of the works as exhibited objects, when they are printed in small format and hung in a dense double row around a gallery space.

ALTHOUGH BY THE LATE 1990s Wool had largely left behind the word paintings, the period saw a few last flourishes of the series. Of two word paintings exhibited together in 1997, the first features the words CRASS CONCEITED VULGAR AND UNPLEASANT (*Untitled*, 1996, fig. 12). Lifted from the liner notes of an Iggy Pop album, the litany of petty vices recalls the more virulent antipantheon of the 1989 *Black Book Drawings*. For the second work, Wool also gleaned his material from a favorite musical source, in this case taking the phrase YOU MAKE ME from the cover of *Blank Generation*, the landmark 1977 record by Richard Hell and the Voidoids, which depicts a swaggering Hell pulling open his jacket to display the words written in marker on his bare chest (fig. 13). Hell had finished the phrase with an empty line, inviting the viewer to mentally fill in the blank, but Wool preferred to leave it plain and unpunctuated (*Untitled*, 1997, plate 42), thereby supporting a gamut of potential meanings. The same disarmingly direct address to the viewer is found in a 2000 work that presents the brisk tautology THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER YOU LOOK (*Untitled*, plate 48).[42] One might seek a possible art-historical antecedent for this insistent repetition in Frank Stella's famous declaration "What you see is what you see."[43] But Stella's credo of his desire for a pure factuality would seem an odd point of reference for Wool at a time when his work was toying with increasingly complex representational strategies, and in fact Wool's formulation had a quite different etymology. He had initially painted the panel with the words THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER IT LOOKS BACK, a phrase still faintly visible beneath the top layer of paint. This version of the phrase can be traced to an aphorism of the Austrian journalist and dramatist Karl Kraus, "The closer one looks at a word, the greater distance from which it looks back," which accords with Wool's long-established interest in the conditions of viewing language. The quote was subsequently cited by Walter Benjamin in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in a note appended to his rumination on the singular aura of the original art object as defined in antithetical relation to the mechanically reproduced image.[44] Benjamin posits that, unlike a photograph, a painting is able to mimic the reciprocity of a human relationship: "To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us."[45]

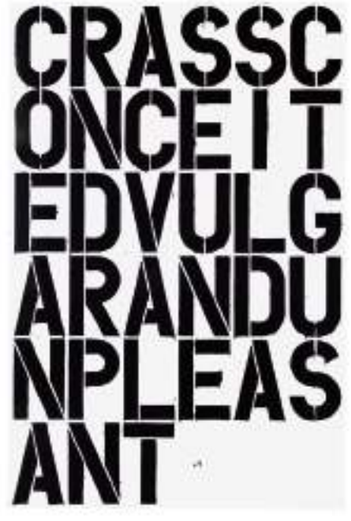

Fig. 12 ***Untitled*, 1996. Enamel on aluminum, 274.3 x 182.9 cm**

Fig. 13 Cover of Richard Hell and the Voidoids, *Blank Generation* (Sire, 1977)

Fig. 14 *Untitled*, 1998. Silkscreen ink on linen, 274.3 x 182.9 cm

Fig. 15 *Untitled*, 2000. Enamel on linen, 274.3 x 182.9 cm

This thread connecting Wool's composition to Benjamin's dichotomizing of the fetishized original and the depleted copy (and Wool's critical alteration of meaning) has special resonance in the light of the major conceptual shift that had recently occurred in the artist's work. In 1998, he began to use his own paintings as the starting point for new, autonomous works. He would take a finished picture, use it to create a silkscreen, and then reassign the image wholesale to a new canvas.[46] Simple as this transfer might seem, it effects a distinct metamorphosis. Whereas the source paintings are characterized by ghostly layers and subtly rendered details, in the second generation (fig. 14) all visual information is flattened into a crisply delineated silhouette of the original, creating a stark, monochrome polarity between ground and image. Around 2000, the use of digital imaging introduced a new level of complexity to Wool's serigraphic acts of mimesis. Solid uniformity was replaced with a "halftone" effect, in which imagery was fragmented into dots of various sizes that imperfectly approximated the modulations of photography.

This strategy of self-appropriation marked a new phase in Wool's practice in which original mark-making, tentatively permitted, coexists with works that deny the hand entirely. Thus *He Said She Said* (2001, plate 51) screens in black and white an untitled painting from the previous year that features a shaky scribble of orange sprayed against a painted ground, through which traces of a black screenprinted pattern are faintly visible (fig. 15). Wool created the second incarnation by dividing it into four screens placed with the edges slightly misaligned, dissecting the flow of the original into disjunctive quadrants. Subtle veils of paint are reduced to dirty occlusions within in a field of trembling particles, and its edge is transcribed in an awkward trompe l'oeil as if to underscore the stubborn objecthood of the source. Just as frequently, Wool's silkscreened doubles are worked on afresh in the studio, giving his mutative repetitions an air of vandalism. In *Last Year Halloween Fell on a Weekend* (2004, plate 62), for example, he adds a sprayed layer of electrifying scarlet to the vaporous gray forms of *Run Down Run* (2003, plate 60), while the interlacings of *Nation Time* (2000, plate 55) are overlaid in a second manifestation (*Untitled*, 2001, plate 56) with almost comically brusque strips of rolled-on white paint.

Although in many cases the transposition to the new canvas took place at a one-to-one scale, Wool also began significantly enlarging his motifs to create blowups that are both bluntly recursive and slyly deviant in their new guises. A body of work known as the "9th Street Rundown" drawings (2000, plates 43–46) proved one of the period's most plundered sources. Ranging from sponged masses to drippy pours and splashes, with the old rollered patterns making the occasional cameo appearance, the series functions like a typology of painterly gestures. Notably, the works interweave appropriated and original forms without differentiation; some were spontaneously made by the artist himself, but others were lifted directly from illustrations in a guide to abstract painting for the amateur.

At this point, Wool's turn to solipsistic replication begins to raise some subtle questions of definition. Are his second-generation abstractions really not abstract at all, but rather depictions of objects that already exist fully formed in the world, and therefore eminently representational in nature? Or do his remakings of either his own gestures or generic ones reduce abstraction to a set of emptied-out conventions? The genealogy of the latter position could be traced to the diagnostic of Hal Foster's 1986 essay "Signs Taken for Wonders," in which he suggests that some of the abstract work emerging in the 1980s, à la Peter Halley, Sherrie Levine, and Philip Taaffe, was in fact painting "produced as the *sign* of painting."[47] Wool's practice does take up related concerns in its undermining of certain modernist complacencies. But it ultimately affirms the idea that, despite a purely reflexive or borrowed origin, "a painting of a painting is still a painting,"[48] and there is no operative hierarchy of value or meaning between original and copy. The impoverishment of his primary pictures is consistently accompanied by an equally potent sense of illumination, granting the new image a vivid autonomy that transcends detached or ironic commentary (in Benjamin's terms, the work retains an aura of its own even as it dismantles the very notion of such a possibility). A revealing parallel for this effect can be found in Richard Prince's description of his attempt in his rephotography works to "additionalize" the reality of a given image into a "virtuoso real."[49] "By generating what appears to be a 'double' (or ghost)," Prince has written, "it might be possible to represent what the original photograph or picture imagined."[50] Wool's appropriation-based abstractions are less signs than *portraits* of paintings, and like the best examples of the genre, they delineate an interior as well as an exterior likeness, as if drilling down into the subconscious of the original. A work such as *Minor Mishap* (2001, plate 49), in which the painterly vocabulary of the "9th Street Rundown" series is translated into the different semantics of screenprinted halftone, exemplifies this phenomenon. Fractured into particles and sundered by the cruciform intrusion of the screens, the lurid orange phantom of the original pour of brown paint functions as an oneiric double that is at once familiar and alien, as if something experienced in daylight is being recalled in an altered and irrationally disturbing form.[51]

WOOL'S PARADOXICAL DRIVE to create through methods of recursion and negation has in recent years resulted in a new, open-ended vein of work that he calls his "gray paintings." The genesis of this series—ironically rendered in a vivid yellow—happened quite by accident. In 2000 Wool was working on a sprayed composition of yellow enamel that was proving unsuccessful. In a moment of frustration, he took a rag soaked in turpentine and wiped away the lines, using a series of rapid, arcing gestures that resulted in a central monochrome mass (*Untitled*, plate 50). Startled by the strangely compelling nature of this act of self-repudiation, he began to experiment with the same technique using his characteristic black enamel, seeking to pare down the pictorial elements to the essentials. As the series developed, the paintings began to alternate the act of erasing with the act of drawing (Wool considers his spray-gun application of enamel as closer in spirit to drawing than to painting). Each new set of lines is smothered in hazy veils of wiped gray, with further layers sprayed on top, to the point where distinguishing between the various imbrications becomes impossible.

The antiheroic notion of mark-unmaking correlates with a conviction lying at the heart of Wool's oeuvre—that linear progress toward artistic mastery is a modernist relic; that "the traditional idea of an objective masterpiece is no longer possible." Abandoning this goal, the artist operates in a realm of pervasive uncertainty: "Without objectivity you're left with doubt, and doubt insists on plurality."[52] This profound equivocacy, which has characterized his approach to making art from the beginning, does not limit his works to postmodernist circumspection but rather offers a wellspring of creativity and contributes a valence all its own. The gray paintings' effacements have an undeniably emotive tenor. When asked in an interview to explain his use of erasure in various forms, Wool responded with four words: *change, doubt, indecisiveness*, and, perhaps surprisingly on the face of it, *poetry*.[53] The literal loss enacted in the realization of these paintings endows them with the character of a lamentation, chiming with the potent strands of angst and melancholia that have always run close to the surface of his work, despite its game face of cool indifference.

Critically, however, the gray paintings make addition as important an operation as subtraction; the two impulses exist in a state of delicate tension that attains a productive symbiosis. Wool is fond of the title of Dore Ashton's 1976 study of the work of Philip Guston, *Yes, But…* as the ideal summation of the painterly condition.[54] Whereas in earlier phases of Wool's career, the hand-wrought gesture and its mediation existed in oscillations between separate works, in the gray paintings, the "yes" of the drawing is integrated with the

"but" of erasure within the bounds of a single canvas. This dialogue erects a rhetorical structure of constant concession and rebuttal that fully realizes the "internal/external debate within itself" identified by Jeff Koons in 1986. In this liminal state, where image emerges gradually through its cyclical desecration and resurrection, Wool's surging washes and lines invite a search for figurative reference while perpetually deferring this satisfaction. The artist acknowledges that the paintings occupy a newly expressive psychic space: "For me they are 'pictures' with all that that implies . . . and that often means that 'things' are pictured . . . but things can be psychological or sensed or dramatic as well as just a figure in a landscape."[55] In a 1997 interview, Wool had famously described his process as inherently reductive: "I define myself in my work by reducing the things I don't want—it seems impossible to know when to say 'yes,' but I know what I can say 'no' to. . . . It's easier to define things by what they're not than by what they are."[56] A decade later, his built-in caveats had enabled a pronounced, if hard-won, chorus of creative yeses. One could even posit a circularity between the gray paintings and Wool's earliest studies as an artist; that in these works he has returned to some of the central tenets of his training at the Studio School, with its emphasis on drawing and monochromatic modeled form, transfigured within a new metaphorics of doubt.

In parallel with the gestural immediacy permitted in the gray paintings, recent works show Wool continuing to find new ways to subject his imagery to strata of procedural

Fig. 16 ***Untitled*****, 2006. Silkscreen ink on paper, 243.8 x 140.3 cm**

Fig. 17 Installation view of Venice Biennale: ***ILLUMInations*****, Central Pavilion, 2011. All works:** ***Untitled*** **(2011)**

agitation, exploring the potentialities of digital technology for image making and abstraction in a world where modes of seeing are increasingly based on the radiant pixelated field of the computer screen. Fed into Photoshop to be dissected, combined, and recolored, Wool's pictorial elements travel ever more convoluted routes through reproductive filters, enabling new heights of rhizomatic collaging and self-sampling. The work gains a disorienting internal temporality whereby images incessantly return to be considered afresh within an ongoing pictorial investigation. To take one of myriad examples, a work such as *Untitled* (2009, plate 85) compresses within itself the spectral traces of multiple paintings past. The brutish black hooked line that originated in one of the most forceful gray paintings (*Untitled*, 2007, plate 72) reappears here in eviscerated form, married with elements from a number of other existing compositions, including a frenetic work on paper from 2009 (*Untitled*, plate 84). Wool also sometimes adds entirely new elements on the computer, drawing purposefully maladroit lines with a mouse that intertwine with his hand-sprayed ones on the scanned image below (fig. 16).

While the digital treatment of imagery is more commonly associated with the addition of a perfecting veneer, Wool's computer-based augmentations are as frank about their mechanics and petty breakdowns as any other of the artist's approaches over the years. "The tools have changed and the ways of exploring visual things have expanded," explains Wool. "But it's not a paradigm shift, it's the same old paradigm."[57] As with earlier silkscreened reincarnations, the artist's machinations in Photoshop enact a forensic discovery of the originating gesture as much as its dilution—an effect incisively demonstrated in a suite of eight untitled paintings created

Fig. 18 Chapter house, priory of La Charité-sur-Loire, France, 2012. Site-specific work, five stained-glass windows (detail)

for the 2011 Venice Biennale (fig. 17). In these works, Wool radically enlarged passages from an earlier group of works on paper that were themselves composites of photographed and original painterly gestures, subtly altering them digitally before reconstituting the images as 10-foot-tall screenprinted canvases. Wrung out by Wool's manipulations to a desiccated, brittle affect that contrasts sharply with the liquid kineticism of the gray paintings, the final iterations leave the viewer strangely unmoored from any sense of natural scale or materiality, as if looking at a slide specimen through the viewfinder of a microscope. Once again, the notion of the monolithic, auratic mark is countered by a discursive space where multiple possibilities jostle for validity. All of the paintings in the Venice installation share the same background configuration of painted marks and a central blot that appears in three variations, differentiated only by their hue and viscosity, and in one example vertically bisected into a jarring schism through the use of two different colored inks. Both exalted and denigrated by their exaggerated scale, these uncanny sibling images flicker between insisting on the incarnate potency of pigment applied to surface and declaring its fundamental instability, even unreality.[58]

True to form, in his most recent major project, Wool has made an abrupt turn away from the seemingly infinite possibilities of the digital to the most traditional of artistic contexts: a suite of stained glass for the arching stone windows of an ecclesiastical complex in central France. Commissioned to create the windows for the chapter house at the Clunisian priory of La Charité-sur-Loire, Wool conceived a design that trains the lead dividing the panes into looping lines that intersect with brief passages of bright yellow glass (fig. 18). The composition pivots on the same tension between line and modeled form that characterizes the gray paintings, with the shifting patterns of light moving through the clear glass correlating to Wool's washes of erasure and the lead approximating his spray-paint drawing. For a medium that usually depends on chromatic pyrotechnics, the windows are almost perversely austere, and Wool's awkward, tangled, severely black lines appear to have little aspiration to the numinous. Instead, these works live in the same conceptual and existential gray area that is conjured by all of Wool's pictures, a dialogic site in which every visual statement is rounded off with an ellipsis or a question mark rather than stopped by a period. And while the devotional context might be a surprising one for Wool, in some ways it is entirely apt. For despite the anxious and at times bleak tenor of his work, to continue to make pictures in the knowledge that resolution will always be out of reach could in fact be seen as a standpoint of stubborn optimism, even faith. When asked about his early decision to make paintings, Wool offers the simple response, "You don't have to believe in a medium, you just have to believe in art."[59] And art doesn't have to believe in anything.

NOTES

1. Press release for *Christopher Wool*, Cable Gallery, New York, Feb. 12–Mar. 8, 1986. The original features the typo "works" in the last sentence.
2. John Caldwell, *New Work: Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1989), unpaginated.
3. The Hairy Who was a group of artists trained at the Art Institute of Chicago that included Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Art Green, James Falconer, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum. Wool saw the collective's very first exhibition, *The Hairy Who*, organized by curator Don Baum in 1966; subsequent shows were staged at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1967 and 1968. The group's figurative style drew on the surreal and bizarre as well as on elements from the urban vernacular, such as advertisements, graffiti, comic books, and flea markets. The ensemble often used wordplay, misspellings, and puns in both their images and titles to subvert notions of detached severity commonplace among artists at the time.
4. Flavin's full quote reads: "I used pink and yellow light which, in general terms of this civilization, has a kind of vulgar sense. Pink and yellow together is rather difficult to take, found more in public lighting in a vulgar way." "Dan Flavin Interviewed by Phyllis Tuchman" (conducted March 9, 1972), in Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell, *Dan Flavin: The Complete Lights 1961–1996*, exh. cat. (New York: Dia Art Foundation in association with Yale University Press, New Haven, 2004), p. 194. In another exchange, with a Museum of Contemporary Art curator prior to the realization of *alternating pink and "gold"*, Flavin elaborates on the discombobulating character of the work: "I do not like the term 'environment' associated with my proposal. It seems to me to imply living conditions and perhaps, an invitation to comfortable residence. Such usage would deny a sense of direct and difficult visual artifice (in the sense that to confront vibrating fluorescent light for some time ought to be disturbing for most participants)." Flavin, unpublished letter to Jan van der Marck, June 17, 1967, quoted in Alexandra Whitney, "An Illuminated Paradox: Dan Flavin's *alternating pink and 'gold'*, 1967," in Flavin, Kristine Bell, Tiffany Bell, and Whitney, *Dan Flavin: Series and Progressions*, exh. cat. (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; New York: David Zwirner, 2010), p. 18.
5. A large proportion of Wool's titles have been appropriated from those of jazz records. For an illuminating consideration of the relationship of Wool's practice to musical structures, in particular the tension between improvisation and composition, see John Corbett, "Impropositions: Christopher Wool, Improvisation, Dub Painting," in *Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2012).
6. Christopher Wool, quoted in "A Conversation between Joanna Pousette-Dart and Christopher Wool," in *Richard Pousette-Dart: East River Studio*, exh. cat. (New York: Luhring Augustine, 2011), p. 70. With Joanna Pousette-Dart, Wool cocurated the exhibition *Richard Pousette-Dart: East River Studio*, Luhring Augustine, New York, Oct. 28–Dec. 23, 2011.
7. Wool was enrolled at Sarah Lawrence between September 1972 and May 1973 and at the Studio School from September 1973 to May 1974.
8. Joyce Pensato, conversation with the author, New York, Jan. 25, 2013.
9. In 1994 Wool coorganized *Hell Is You: The New Cinema 1979*, a film presentation at Printed Matter featuring Super 8 films by Eric Mitchell, Vivienne Dick, Michael McClard, Becky Johnston, John Lurie, and James Nares. (Wool also designed the poster for the program.) A few years later, he arranged for the remastering of a number of key No Wave works, including *Men in Orbit* (dir. John Lurie, 1979), *Kidnapped* (dir. Eric Mitchell, 1978), *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (dir. Vivienne Dick, 1978), *Rome '78* (dir. James Nares, 1978), and *Waiting for the Wind* (dir. Nares, 1982). Wool organized screenings of the remastered versions several times thereafter.
10. Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith were the artists included in the *Pictures* exhibition; Crimp's subsequent essay of the same title also discusses the work of Cindy Sherman. See Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 75–88.
11. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 69–86.
12. Ibid., p. 73.
13. Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit: Painting," *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (Oct. 1981), p. 45.
14. Ibid., p. 40.
15. Colin Westerbeck, "Reviews: Christopher Wool, Robbin Lockett Gallery," *Artforum* 25, no. 1 (Sept. 1986), p. 139.
16. John Caldwell, Ann Goldstein, Glenn O'Brien, Madeleine Grynsztejn, Jeffrey Deitch, Hans Dieter Huber, Richard Hell, and Julia Friedrich all make significant comparative reference to Pollock and Warhol in their critical assessments of Wool's work.
17. Christopher Wool, conversation with the author, New York, Jan. 14, 2013.
18. See Ann Goldstein, "What They're Not: The Paintings of Christopher Wool," in *Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), p. 258.
19. Ann Temkin, "Christopher Wool," in *Contemporary Voices: Works from the UBS Art Collection*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), p. 129.
20. The series culminated in a presentation at the 1992 edition of Documenta, curated by Jan Hoet, where a group of Wool's stamped vine paintings were shown against a wallpaper by Gober depicting a stylized rendering of a forest (p. 100). A contemporaneous review in *Frieze* described the collaboration as "the *fin de siècle* ideal of a total artwork, updated by a century." Stuart Morgan, "Documenta IX: Body Language," *Frieze* 6 (Sept.–Oct. 1992), p. 34.
21. Lawrence Weiner, "Art Without Space, 1969," in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 98.
22. For an interview in *Bomb* magazine between Mosset and Brathwaite in which the two describe this work, see Olivier Mosset and Fred Brathwaite, *Bomb*, no. 4 (Fall 1982), pp. 24–25. Another important point of reference for Wool's interest in text as image was the series of graffiti statements signed by SAMO©, a persona created by Jean-Michel Basquiat and others, that appeared in SoHo and on the Lower East Side during the summer of 1978.
23. Lawson, "Last Exit," p. 45.
24. Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder" (1950), in Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 17.
25. *Black Book* (New York: Thea Westreich Associates; Cologne: Galerie Gisela Capitain, 1989), edition of 350. Two of the twenty-two words used in the drawings are in fact eight letters rather than nine.
26. Wool extended his use of the traits enumerated in the *Black Book Drawings* to a series of large paintings. In a development that indicates the disturbing power of these works, beginning on September 12, 2001, the Baltimore Museum of Art received protests regarding Wool's painting of the word TERRORIST that was installed in a permanent-collection gallery. In response, the institution took down the work for two days, then rehung it with a new wall text acknowledging the changed cultural context of the painting in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, providing pencils and paper for visitors to share their reactions. A collection of local press clippings about the story were mailed to Wool by his friend the Baltimore-based filmmaker John Waters.
27. The scene occurs at 1:31:56 in *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). The text on the letter appears as shown here, in all capital letters.
28. The photograph was taken on the Pennsylvania property of the artist Elizabeth Murray, for whom Gober (and Wool, at times) had previously worked.
29. Gary Indiana, untitled, in *Robert Gober and Christopher Wool: A Project*, exh. cat. (New York: 303 Gallery, 1988), unpaginated. Reprinted in *Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (1998), p. 254.
30. Joan Didion, "The White Album" (1979), in Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 47. Didion's quote refers to "the murders on Cielo Drive," in which five individuals were killed at the home of film director Roman Polanski (including his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate). Though messages were scrawled in the victims' blood there, the words HELTER SKELTER were so written at the site of a different set of Manson murders, that of the LaBianca family killings, the following night.
31. This painting exists in four variations.
32. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 62; Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 2001), p. 176.
33. *The Apocalypse of Our Time and Other Writings by Vasily Rozanov*, ed. Robert Payne (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977), p. 277. Rozanov's statement is debated as a possible origin of the term "iron curtain."
34. Kenneth Baker, "The 1991 Carnegie International: Inwardness and a Hunger for Interchange," *Artspace* (Jan.–Apr. 1992), p. 81.
35. Wool has always considered the artist's book an important mode of reception for his work, appealing for its possibilities of an intimate, haptic viewing experience and an inherently sequential presentation. As Lucy Lippard has noted, the artist's book is a particular hybrid of exhibition, narrative, and art object "and must be as carefully considered as the surface of a canvas *and* the space in which it's exhibited." Lippard, "Conspicuous Consumption: New Artists' Books," in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985), p. 53.
36. In 1994, Wool created a 5-minute 30-second video work that jump-cuts between footage he shot of various pages of the *Absent Without Leave* book. It was made while a track by Ornette Coleman played on Wool's stereo in the background, resulting in a disrupted sound track that vividly mirrors the mood of dislocation in the imagery.
37. Up until this point, Wool's deviation from his characteristic black-and-white palette had been restricted to the occasional use of dark blue or red. A noteworthy exception is a painting created in 1993, when Wool's friend Martin Kippenberger suggested that the two trade works. Kippenberger had long teased Wool about his monochrome austerity—in 1991, he had attended Wool's opening in Cologne and at the dinner toasted "Christopher Wool and his BIG breakthrough in blue"—so Wool dispatched a word painting bearing one of his more caustic recurring phrases, "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke," rendered in a hysterical rainbow of clashing reds, yellows, and blues. See Christopher Wool, "Blue Streak (The Happy End of Kippenberger's Amerika as Told to Gregory Williams)," *Artforum* 42, no. 6 (Feb. 2003), p. 101.
38. The series was first exhibited in 2002 in *Christopher Wool*, organized by Anne Pontégnie at Le Consortium, Dijon, Mar. 2–May 4, which traveled as *Christopher Wool: Crosstown Crosstown*, to Dundee Contemporary Arts, Scotland, Apr. 6–June 8, 2003.
39. The subject of the city at night has a venerable history that dates back to the invention of photography itself. From the shadowy street corners of Brassaï's *Paris de nuit* (1933) to the lurid voyeurism of Weegee's *Naked City* (1945), the nocturnal urban margins have held a magnetic appeal for avant-garde photographers.
40. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), in Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (New York: Viking, 1972), pp. 394–422. Later, Walter Benjamin embraces this engagement with modern urbanism through a sustained reading of Baudelaire's lyric poetry in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), collected in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 313–55.
41. Debord defines the concept of the *dérive* as "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences" that "involve[s] playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects." According to Situationist theory, the *dérive* serves as an attempt to counteract the increasingly predictable and monotonous experience of everyday life in advanced capitalism. Instead, it offers a more collective space where potentialities remain open-ended for participants' engagements in new experiences within the urban landscape. See Guy Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," *Les lèvres nues* #9 (Nov. 1956); repr. in *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2 (Dec. 1958). For an English translation, by Ken Knabb, see *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), pp. 62–66.
42. Wool had first experimented with the use of second-person address in a group of paintings that render the phrase "If you can't take a joke, you can get the fuck out of my house." See plate 20.
43. "New Nihilism or New Art?," interview of Frank Stella and Donald Judd by Bruce Glaser, WBAI-FM, New York, Feb. 1964. Published as "Questions to Stella and Judd," ed. Lucy Lippard, *Artnews* 65, no. 5 (Sept. 1966), p. 59.
44. Benjamin uses Kraus's aphorism to illustrate the point that "words, too, can have an aura of their own" ("On Some Motifs," p. 354n77). Wool first learned of the quote during a discussion with the critic Diedrich Diederichsen about its use in the 1979 film *Die Patriotin* (The patriot) by the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge, where the word *Germany* is added below it. Kluge was in turn quoting Kraus, *Pro Domo et Mundo* (Munich, 1912), p. 164.
45. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs," p. 338.
46. Another key shift in this period was in support material, from aluminum panels to canvas, which Wool came to feel was a more "neutral" surface.
47. Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America* 74, no. 6 (June 1986), p. 86. Reprinted in Terry R. Myers, ed., *Painting* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 50.
48. Neville Wakefield, "Paintings Marked by Confrontation and Restraint," *Elle Decor* 10, no. 1 (Feb.–Mar. 1999), p. 62.
49. Richard Prince, "Practicing Without a License," accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.richardprince.com/writings/practicing-without-a-license-1977/.
50. Richard Prince, "I Second That Emotion 1977–78," accessed July 15, 2013, http://www.richardprince.com/writings/i-second-that-emotion-1977-78/.
51. This reading finds an echo in Wool's own description of his imagery: "You could almost say I'm picturing something in a nightmare, or a dream.… You know how nightmares can be so unbelievably powerful withPout really being about anything? Sometimes I have these terrible nightmares and I wake up and Charline asks, 'Well what were you dreaming?' And I was sitting in the park and there was something—it was the scariest thing that ever could have happened. But nothing had happened." Quoted in Richard Hell, "The Happy Nightmare of the Visual," in *Christopher Wool*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Gagosian Gallery, 2006), p. 7.
52. Wool, conversation with the author.
53. Glenn O'Brien, "Christopher Wool: Sometimes I Close My Eyes," *Purple Fashion* 3, no. 6 (Fall–Winter 2006–2007), p. 164.
54. Dore Ashton, *Yes, But…: A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (New York: Viking Press, 1976).
55. Christopher Wool, quoted in Benjamin Weissman, "Eloquent Obstacles," *Frieze* 111 (Nov.–Dec. 2007), p. 136.
56. Allan Schwartzman, "Artists in Conversation I: Chuck Close, Philip Taaffe, Sue Williams, Christopher Wool," in *Birth of the Cool: American Painting from Georgia O'Keeffe to Christopher Wool*, ed. Bice Curiger, exh. cat. (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz; New York: D.A.P., 1997), pp. 32–34.
57. Christopher Wool, quoted in "A Conversation with Christopher Wool," in *Albert Oehlen*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), pp. 50–51.
58. For an insightful analysis of this body of work, see Mark Godfrey, "Stain Resistance," *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011), pp. 362–65.
59. Wool, conversation with the author.