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.

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."

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 countercultural 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. 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
“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 polished floor of the gallery. Flavin himself described the effect as “rather difficult to take,” 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 came with 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 continued to inflect his work. 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 education began in 1971 at Sarah Lawrence College in suburban New York City. Frustrated by the institution’s idiosyncratic charge 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—an idea 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.” A more hegemonic classicism pervaded Wool’s yearlong stint at the New York Studio School, where he enrolled the following September. 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 Twerkow 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.” 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 sensibilities and countercultural politics, Wool immersed himself in a creative milieu that was jettisoning the pictorial 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 bowling alley 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 anti-aesthetic and three-chord, DIY abandon of punk and No Wave music found parallel expression in the unparalleled 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.

After a number of years given over to volatile experimentation, Wool established a steady painting practice in 1982. 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. Continental, 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 appropriation strategies to probe the mechanisms of desire embedded in mainstream visual culture. 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. However, in one of the most resonant critical hoots of the period, Crimp’s question “To what end painting in the early 1980s?” 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 declamatory 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.” This particular scuffle was of course only the latest chapter in a larger cycle of death and resuscitation 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 pivotal point of heavy agreement between Crimp and Lawson was a dismissal of painterly abstraction as “the last mannerist tics of modernism.”

Excruциatingly 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 1983, featured 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...
toward an all-over uniformity rendered in a palette of blacks and silvery grays (such as Type B, 1966, 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,” 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.29

Wool made a defining advance in his work between 1968 and ’70 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 decor that was more eco-nomical 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 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 unfixed 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.”30

Perhaps most epiphanic for Wool was the way this new technique nearly 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 problematic 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.”31 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,”32 and a potently boughy 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, hand-made objects. Wool dates his recognition of the strange charisma of the handmade readymade to the experience of visiting

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 captivations. 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 formalism. 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 1987–90, 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 eye, 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 collaged and stamped works, as a means to create pictorial discord.

In one of the more complex paintings in this series, Kist (1989/90, plate 30), the vine forms are stamped in consecutive layers that are slightly misaligned, as if the image is being chased by its own shadow.33

In his pattern paintings, Wool developed a body of work that trod the same conceptual territory with a more stringent visual presence. Echoing the paradigm established with the pattern works, his “word paintings” took a system of pre-existing 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 deriving 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
The work’s pristine monochrome surface has been interrupted by stencils, the word paintings have a resolute material presence as their velvety white grounds and stylized letters rendered in blackish cast more tangible than in Apocalypse Now. The singular aura of anxiety in Wool’s word paintings anticipates mounting horrors, a contemporaneous painting of a shadowy regime in which hypocrisy and betrayal are the only viable options for survival, the Black Book Drawings. While a number of the words could be interpreted as neutral — assistant, for example, on counter — they are overwhelmingly preparative, and epithets such as assassin, adversary, and terrorist radiate hostility. 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-idealizing 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 absurdity and vulnerableness repeatedly surfaces in the work of this period. It echoes through the deflated Borscht Belt shtrich of the 1988 paintings My Act (plate 15) 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 brusque self-admiration in the painting Blue Flag (1990, plate 16), which Wool acknowledges to be in part a melancholely self-portrait. The paranoia was fulfilled.”

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. This horrifying denouement to a summer of alienation and impending disaster was indisputably conveyed 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.” Wool viewed his contribution of the phrase into a geometrically framed repetition to be an act of reanimating 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 this works culminates in Untitled (1988, plate 29). The painting depicts a series of paratextual statements that render a world where even

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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 Lipshtick 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.52 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.”
> But the fur coats and the houses have all vanished.

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 overlies the imposition of Vietnam with the anarcho-repudiations of punk—Captain Corby’s letter, with its deleted home, meets the Sex Pistols’ “No Future.” Further exploring the state’s insidious 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 “sharde of prosperity” left in the wake of Reagan-Bush.53 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 1991 “stack” work created to benefit the New York nonprofit group Printed Matter (fig. 5). Framed by Gonzalez-Torres’s practice, the vision of an abrupt curtain drop on Russian history. “The performance is over.” Wool was explored in a new medium in the culminating project of a 1993 DAAD residency in Berlin, a photobook titled Absent Without Leave (pages 17–18).55 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 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 militia that Wool had conjured in Apocalypse Now. Although the book’s 260 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 home at any tourist slide-show, 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. In line with the spirit of raw contingency, they MCthemselves 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, 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.

Wool had already experimented with the disruptions of photographic processing in the 1991 artist’s book Cats in Bag Bases 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 purported the phrase from the acerbic dialogue of the 1997 film The Sweet Sinal感 of Success—stands in enigmatic relation to the book’s contents: photographs of Wool’s pattern and word paintings that have been run repetitively 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 yellow, pink, and torquoise bloom across the pages as a result, vignetted 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 slippages 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 dispatch from their source and use as a unit of composition, divorced of any narrative associations. The resonantly evocative 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 Cats in Bag Bases in River (two details), 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

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**Fig. 9** Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Christopher Wool, “Untitled,” 1980. Print on paper, roadside copies, 6 inches at ideal height x 37 x 55 1/2 inches (original paper size)
iconography with Wite-Out or a redacting marker. 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. 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 into 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.44 In some ways, Wool’s photographs correlate to the Situationist notion of the dérive, an undirected excursion through the urban landscape that aimed to dissolve established patterns of behavior and shed light on meanings hidden beneath the spectacle of city’s surface.45 East Broadway Breakdown embodies this spirit of surrender to dislocation, an aleatory move 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 1980s 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 1995, 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 pouting 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 24), thereby supporting a gamut of potential meanings. The same disarmingly direct address to the viewer is found in a 2000 work that presents the brusk intonato THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER YOU LOOK (Untitled, plate 49).46 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.” 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 treading with increasingly complex representational strategies, and in fact Wool’s formulation is 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 work, 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 ruminations on the singular aura of the original art object as defined in antithetical relation to the mechanically reproduced image.47 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.”48
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 significance 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.

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, Wool created the second incarnation (plate 55), while the gray paintings’ effacement of the literal loss 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 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 “5th Street Run Down” 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 hard orange phantom of the original reenters the pictorial space as an onomatopoeic double that is at once familiar and alien, as if something experienced in daylight is being recalled in an altered and irrationally disturbing form.

Through this reappropriation, Wool’s second-generation abstractions create through methods of recursion and negation a new 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 antithetic 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 insist on plurality.”

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This strategy of self-appropriation marked a new phase in Wool’s practice in which original mark-making, tentatively committed, coexists with works that deny the hand entirely. In Wool’s practice in which original mark-making, tentatively committed, coexists with works that deny the hand entirely. Thus He Said She Said (2001, plate 52) 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 screenedprint pattern are faintly visible (fig. 13). Wool created the second incarnation (fig. 14) by dividing it into four screens placed with the edges slightly misaligned, dissecting the flow of the original into disjointive quadrants. Subtle veils of paint are reduced to dirty occlusions within 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 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 “5th Street Run Down” 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 hard orange phantom of the original reenters the pictorial space as an onomatopoeic double that is at once familiar and alien, as if something experienced in daylight is being recalled in an altered and irrationally disturbing form.
“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 deconstruction and resurrection, Wool’s sanguine washes and lines invite a search for figurative reference while perceptually 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.” 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.”

A decade later, his built-in cavets 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 metaphysics 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 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) comprises 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 eriscavesed 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 exploiting visual things have expanded,” explains Wool. “But it’s not a paradigm shift, it’s the same old paradigm.” As with earlier silkscreened reincarnations, the artist’s machinations in Photoshop enact a forensic discovery of the origination gesture as much as its dilution — an effect incisively demonstrated in a suite of eight untitled paintings created 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 12-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 in 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.

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 arched stone windows of an ecclesiastical complex in central France. Commissioned to create the windows for the chapter house at the Clunais 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 luminous. 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 anything. You don’t have to believe in art.” And art doesn’t have to believe in anything.
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6. Wool, conversation with the author.