

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

PART I

CHRISTOPHER WOOL AND HIS UNLIKELY HEROES OR CONCEPTUAL OR NOT?

TEXT BY RICHARD HELL





Previous spread: Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1993, enamel on aluminum, 90 × 60 inches (228.6 × 152.4 cm) © Christopher Wool; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York
This page: Christopher Wool, *I Can't Stand Myself/When You Touch Me*, 1994, enamel on aluminum, 108 × 72 inches (274.3 × 182.9 cm) © Christopher Wool; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

This page, top: Martin Kippenberger, *War Is No Nice*, 1985, oil and silicone rubber on canvas, 71 x 59 1/2 inches (180 x 150 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Emily and Jerry Spiegel. Artwork © 2019 Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY
 This page, bottom: Martin Kippenberger, *Ohne Titel* (aus der Serie *Lieber Maler, male mit!*), *Untitled* (from the series *Lieber Maler, male mit!*), 1981, acrylic on canvas, 118 x 78 3/4 inches (300 x 200 cm). Private collection. Artwork © 2019 Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo: Rob McKeever

Christopher Wool resists being interviewed and gets frustrated when he does agree to talk about his work. That's because everything he can say is provisional and partial. After all, his aim, as with most good artists, is to go beyond what he knows. (Poet's duty: not to understand.) "That's why I hate this stuff! You know, with painting, you can contradict yourself from one painting to the next, you can contradict yourself from one painting and that's really exciting to me, and you sit here and you say something and if you contradict yourself the next sentence, you sound like a fool."¹

Still, I asked him for an interview because it's my job and because I wondered about some things, and you can't talk to a friend like an interviewer. You have to put on your interviewer hat. Wool is a friend and I am one of his greatest admirers. I have a lot of competition in that area—his paintings have auctioned for over \$20,000,000—though some of it is partially begrudged. Peter Schjeldahl, for instance, said in *The New Yorker* about Wool's 2013–14 Guggenheim retrospective, "Like it or not, Christopher Wool, now fifty-eight, is probably the most important American painter of his generation."² Schjeldahl would have preferred a more sensuous, life-affirming painter.

It's true that there's an aloofness to Wool's art, often disconcertingly mixed with apparent aggression, but Christopher painted some pretty flowers too! Even if they were blotted, heavy, solid-black enamel caricatures on brightly white-painted aluminum. I find his paintings almost intimidating. He gets right to the point. When you see one of his paintings among other people's in a museum, typically the other paintings in the room are thrown into the shade. It's surprising that elegance can be so blunt.

Wool has long resented any reading of his work as conceptual; he insists it's strictly visual—in no way is he doubting or rejecting the classical art of painting (or photography, etching, etc.). This has always made me itch a little, and even more when I found out how much he admires the quasi-Dada-esque Germans Dieter Roth (half Swiss), Martin Kippenberger, and Albert Oehlen, whose work seems so different from his (though there are similarities between Wool's later gray paintings and paintings of Oehlen's), along with the equally unexpected Wool heroes, his American contemporaries Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, and Mike Kelley. I hoped to get him to explain the values that led him to his first breakthroughs as a young painter, namely his paint-roller pattern paintings and then the word paintings, which are also patterns (with a little added literally "expressive" thwack—for instance "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE IF YOU CAN'T TAKE A JOKE"), all almost always in black paint on white ground. I wanted to learn how the values that led to those paintings could be reconciled with his admiration for those other artists, if it wasn't at all about doubting painting.

CW I'm only going to guess that it's possible that the Germans we're talking about were always influenced by Dada.

RH Of course, the first thing you think of is that. When you think about Kippenberger or Oehlen, they're picking up almost directly from Francis Picabia in the sense that they're making paintings that are antiart on some level but on another level are fascinating, and often pleasurable, to look at.

CW I'll try and answer some of that. I discovered these artists' works at many different times. I didn't know about Albert Oehlen's work until the late '80s, mid-'80s. The Dieter Roth—okay, here's a good point, we were just talking about Jean-Michel Basquiat, here's a way of dating the Dieter Roth stuff: I think I met him in Chicago first [Wool's father in Chicago had become friendly with Roth after Christopher had already moved to New York to study art]. But he came to New York once, it was 1981 and he came to my studio. It was really important to me. I knew that Basquiat, who I knew, had just hung that small room at Annina Nosei, his first gallery show.



1. Christopher Wool, in Martin Prinzhorn, "Portraits of Artists 78: Conversation with Christopher Wool," in *Artists Talking. Art and Language: Gappmayr, Holzer, Weiner, Wool*, DVD (Cologne: Koenig Books, 1997). Available online at museum.inprogress.com, www.mip.at/attachments/222 (accessed June 28, 2019).

2. Peter Schjeldahl, "Writing on the Wall: A Christopher Wool Retrospective," *The New Yorker*, October 28, 2013. Available online at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/11/04/writing-on-the-wall-3 (accessed June 23, 2019).



It wasn't even a one-person show, it was just the small room in the back. And so I got Dieter, who had no interest in looking at contemporary art, I got Dieter to walk from my Chinatown studio over there and look at these paintings. He had to stop in at least four or five bars to get from Chinatown to SoHo [laughter]. It was interesting, he kind of, he wasn't ecstatic but he was excited by the paintings. So I was still pretty young and Dieter was such an unusual character, I never really thought of him as a German in the same way as those other guys who were peers of mine. But in recent art—I don't know how far back it goes, '60s maybe—besides America the most active place was Germany.

RH In a way it kind of reminds me of American punk and English punk. The Germans were actually the originals and the big boom in the '80s and '90s in America that appeared to have learned a lot from them didn't much acknowledge them. I mean, I sure wasn't aware of the Germans until I found out later myself. You didn't hear them talked about much.

CW I had not heard of Sigmar Polke until he was—

RH You hadn't heard of Polke even though he'd been painting since the '60s?

CW Yes, and when I saw the first show he did in New York, in the '80s, it had elements of Dieter's work in it, and what I was hearing about Polke reminded me very much of Dieter and his attitudes. Dieter was antiart. He didn't believe in paintings, he thought they were fake. So I said, "Why do you do them?" and he said, "Only for money."

RH But to me this is the interesting thing I'm talking about, that he didn't respect painting. And that's true of Kippenberger, that's true of Oehlen.

CW No, those two tried to make good paintings.

RH They tried to make bad paintings that were somehow still worthwhile. And I think Oehlen succeeded in making very bad paintings. That book that has the interview between you two—I didn't know that existed, it's a fairly recent catalogue from Gagosian, and in preparing for this I found it.³ And you know, I'm an admirer of Oehlen's except now I'm rethinking that in a way: I'm an admirer, that's unequivocal, but still those paintings are so ugly [laughter] that I wouldn't want to be anywhere near one of those paintings. My ultimate criterion for a painting is would I want it in my house, and I would not want one of those paintings in my house.

CW You might change your mind.

RH I might, I could well. But what I'm getting at though is that lineage, that relationship, Roth-Kippenberger-Oehlen. And I think that feeds into the way you get these art critics and scholars who are horrified by your work because they think you're putting them on, or corrupting painting, or just being defiant or something, they think there's some motive apart from making a good painting. And there's a lot about looking at many of your paintings that would make someone wonder how conceptual they are. And to me, when somebody like Oehlen tries to make a painting that's bad, that's a concept. That's conceptual art. You do look at it too, and you dig what you see on levels, but it's a concept.

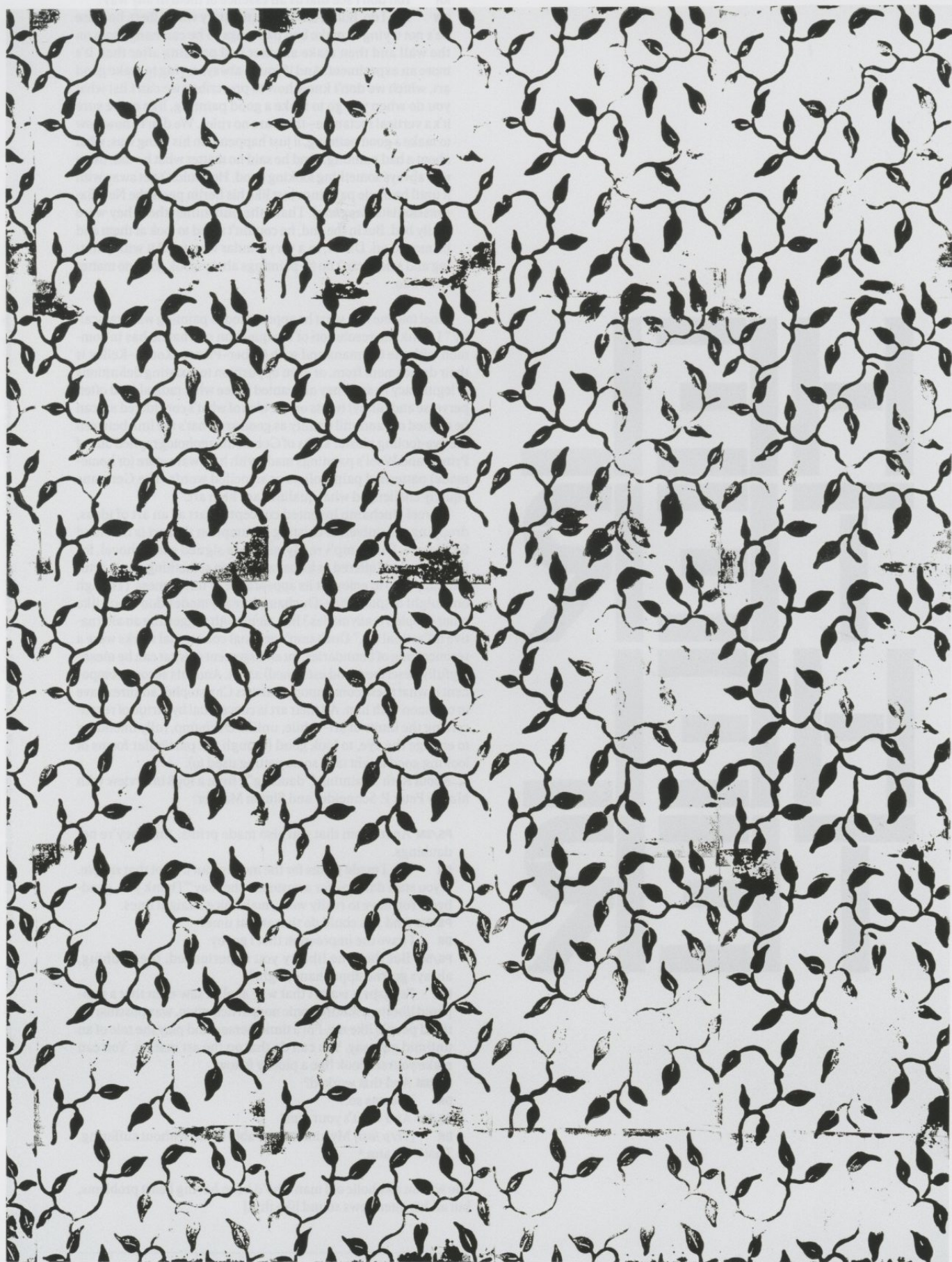
CW He did that one particular body of work, that's not his lifelong—

RH The thing I'm getting at is that you relate to these guys who are antiart in a lot of ways—who are making fun of art, or subverting art. And at the same time, you completely deny that as a way of ever looking at anything you do. You're making visual art. And I just think that's interesting, that you feel such a connection to those three Germans while at the same time there are a lot of works of yours that could be read similarly but you insist that that's completely wrong.

CW First of all, I don't think Dieter and Albert were all that similar. I think Dieter really believed there was no such thing as a good painting. He also believed that if he put paint on canvas it always looked good. He believed in writing. He believed in writing and music. Painting to him was fake. He said it was eye candy. So let me just tell this story because I think it's a great story. By chance they both had these projects where they were trying to make bad art.

This page, top: Albert Oehlen, *FN 33*, 1990, oil on canvas, 107 7/8 × 84 1/4 inches (274 × 214 cm) © Albert Oehlen
This page, bottom: Albert Oehlen, *Self-portrait as Holländerin*, 1983, oil on wood, 78 3/4 × 59 5/8 inches (200 × 150 cm), Collection of the Marciano Art Foundation, Los Angeles © Albert Oehlen
Opposite: Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1988, enamel and flashe on aluminum, 96 × 72 inches (243.8 × 182.9 cm) © Christopher Wool; courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York

3. Albert Oehlen, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian, 2012).





RH You don't see that as an essence of them in any way?

CW Yes, I do. But let me tell you the story with Albert, because he's not trying to make bad paintings so he can hang them on the wall and then make another bad painting after that. It's more an experiment. And if you're always trying to make good art, which we don't know how to prescribe—we can't list what you do when you go to make a good painting, like make sure it's a vertical rectangle—there are no rules. We don't know how to make a good painting, it just happens. So his thing was, what about a bad painting? And he said no matter what he did, there was always something looking good. He couldn't get away with it until he made paintings just like his Berlin peers the Neo-Expressionists [*laughter*]. That's the punchline: then they were really bad. But in the end, he couldn't stand to look at them and he moved on. Dieter, in a very similar way, tried it with painting and said, I can't do it—paintings always look good no matter what I do.

Wool told me that what he appreciated in painting was “radicality.” I think the resolution of the question of what he has in common with the Germans and with Gobe-Prince-Koons-Kelley is their detachment from, or even opposition to, existing definitions of legitimacy in art. They all wanted to see what radical (and often perverse and funny) twists on the idea of what's considered art can be carried out and still qualify as good art. That's the link between the eye-fooling plaster sinks of Gobe, the rephotographed ads of Prince, and Wool's paintings made with hardware store (or home-made) patterned paint rollers or stenciled words. The Germans equally challenged what qualifies as “high art.”

Marcel Duchamp invented conceptual art as an art of ideas, dropping the universal existing assumption that art is intended for the eye. Duchamp's readymades—a signed snow shovel, for instance—were offered as ideas rather than something one is actually supposed to enjoy for its appearance or uniqueness. (Though one might dispute that—Duchamp's readymades don't look like other people's readymades.) But, along with suggesting an alternative to “retinal art,” Duchamp's original conceptual works were a reconceiving of boundaries, an enlargement of what can be meaningfully described (and esteemed) as art. And this second component is what these contemporary artists Christopher admires have in common with him. All their art is conceptual by virtue of reconceiving the limits of art—while, unlike Duchamp, fully intending to engage the eye, to look good (though the particular forms of looking good might take some getting used to).

About Roth's painting (“daubing”), from a 1998 interview with him by Peter P. Schneider and Simon Maurer:

PS/SM Apart from that you also made prints. And they're not daubings.

DR Yes, I made prints for the money. But it's not that simple. If you start daubing for a customer they say “Thank you, goodbye.” You have to really work, make nice straight lines.

PS/SM And you could do that at that time?

DR I have the impression that I got by.

PS/SM But then the liberty you experienced, the daubing, always got the upper hand, right?

DR Perhaps it wasn't that way at all. I saw then that a tempered liberty, a mildly ironic nonparticipation, was possible for timid people like me. I'm a timid person and play the role of an untimid one, say. You can do that on the art market. You can make yourself look like a plucky fellow.

PS/SM And that worked?

DR It seems so.

PS/SM And what's your aim?

DR [*Very fast*] My aim is to be able to die without suffering. That's my aim.⁴

[He was an alcoholic old man who'd been having heart problems, but all his interviews sound like this.]

4. Peter P. Schneider and Simon Maurer, “Conversation with Dieter Roth,” 1998. Available online at www.dieter-roth-academy.de/dieter-_i_ll_get_through.pdf (accessed June 28, 2019).