



Untitled, 2010, enamel on linen / émail sur toile,
96 x 78 inches (243.8 x 198.1 cm)

IMPROPOSITIONS: CHRISTOPHER WOOL, IMPROVISATION, DUB PAINTING

by John Corbett

“The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” —F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”

Given 15 seconds to describe the difference between improvisation and composition, soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy once said: “In 15 seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in 15 seconds, while in improvisation you have 15 seconds.” His statement was unedited. It was improvised. It lasted 15 seconds.

As a starting point, let’s try to hold these opposed approaches, so intimately related and yet mutually exclusive, simultaneously in mind. On one hand, the spontaneous mark or sound as an index of a thought, impulse, or action. On the other, the act of pre-planning, rethinking, retracting, retooling, or editing a mark or sound. To improvise, in the purest sense, means to work without a plan and without reconsideration, to make decisions instantaneously, free from editorial oversight and open exclusively to the contingencies of the current moment. The art of improvisation, its sense of freshness and special quality of frankness, relies on a willingness to proceed uninterrupted, without second thoughts or reconsiderations. Composition, on the contrary, takes its sweet time. It assumes that all things made are due to be remade, all thoughts free to be contradicted, arrangements liable to be reconfigured, decisions open to be interrogated, tape to be spliced, manuscripts to be cut and pasted.

In the work of Christopher Wool, these two nodes of improvisation and composition can be felt as sort of twin tidal entities, each with its own force acting on the methods and processes Wool uses to create canvases, drawings, and prints. As I see it, they operate dialectically, as a means of refreshing one another, keeping the body of work from growing

stale and falling into a univocal mode of expression; considered in this light, the works don't seek to reify these two concepts, rather they are drawn into a state of mutual critique, subtly undermining one another's precepts. Improvisation is there to bring the unexpected to bear, to call the viewer back from the editorial/compositional hall of mirrors, while the compositional/editorial element undermines the seductive implication of "freedom" in improvisation. Sometimes one is more dominant, sometimes the other, but they're locked in a perpetual exchange, waves moving back and forth, extracting and adding energy to the work. Looking at Wool's paintings of the last decade with these ideas at the fore, and in particular keeping their application in a musical context in mind for reference—I'm thinking here of two kinds of music, especially: free improvisation and dub—offers a productive way of unpacking and understanding Wool's practice.

Wool's so-called gray paintings, which constitute an important part of his work over the last decade, are spontaneously created with black spray paint and turpentine-soaked towels. The artist himself has described them in terms of improvisation. Wool: "It starts someplace and reacting to itself progresses." Starting with linear black marks, Wool then smears and erases them partially, in the process making new marks (the gray marks of the gray paintings, in fact) of turped-down, grayed-out paint, then painting black (sometimes white) again atop them, and so on until the work is finished. These marks can be considered at once as erasures and as marks of their own; the result most often is a complex and rich interplay between gesture and interruption, between one moment's impulse and another. Think of the devil character in Captain Beefheart's "Floppy Boot Stomp," who threatens to damn the listener to an eternal present, to "pitch you from now to now, from now to now." Which marks are the "now" in these works? Wool leaves this an open question.

The gray paintings are made directly, rather quickly, in what might constitute "real time" in a painting sense. Of course, in music "real time" suggests a lack of recording, the fact of something happening in the moment, without being time-shifted, while in a visual art the painting itself is a material register of the time it took to make, thus a painting *becomes* a sort of recording. Here we encounter many of the ideas—some legitimate, some riddled with misunderstandings and clichés—that link Abstract Expressionism and jazz improvisation. The suggestion that an "action" painting is an act of pure spontaneity is one of the great myths of the movement, perpetuated primarily not by practitioners but by observers and

critics. To be quite specific about this mythology, it takes as a given the idea that a gesture—particularly one that results in a sweeping, continuous, often curvilinear mark—is an index of an authentic expression, made in a single moment of uninhibited passion. This is related to the assumption that action painting is “genuine,” “honest,” “unfiltered,” and other such loaded terms, the same kinds of words associated with the “autobiographical stories” told by soloists in jazz. There are a range of different ideological subtexts to this mythology, in both musical and visual arts contexts, focused on the persistence of identity, style, and individualism, all fodder for a different consideration than this one. Suffice to say, this mythology has been the subject of an ongoing debunking, from Wool and Albert Oehlen back through Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, even further back to the original AbEx artists themselves. Indeed, as a litmus test, try to parse the sequence of events that culminates in any given Pollock drip painting; hardly the product of a single emotive expression, it turns out to be an elaborate construction, built in many interlocking parts, mapped in a general way and executed in the moment. Not a denial of expression, but a more circumspect conception of the expressive act and its result—a composition, not an ejaculation.

Wool’s gray paintings in fact offer a smart response to the expressionist mythology. They are made directly, improvised in fact, but they are not without an editorial component. In fact, they imbed this editing into the process of improvising, as another facet of the ongoing improvisation. Rather than think of each of the lines in one of these paintings as the material of the improvisation, the expressive component, one can consider the entire piece as the improvisation, as Wool puts it, “the painting moving from point A to point Z.” In other words, it’s not that the elements of the painting—the lines, the erasures—are either improvisational or editorial. They are equally part of the painting-as-process, the notion that a painting can be pushed and pulled directly, but without recourse to the expressionist mythology of the authentic indexical mark. I see works like *Last Year Halloween Fell on a Weekend* (2004, p. 35) or the extensive group of untitled gray paintings from 2005 to 2009, as monumental solo improvisations, akin in stature to the great musical improvisers who worked alone. Listen to saxophonist Joe McPhee’s “Knox” from the essential LP *Tenor* or any of Evan Parker’s soprano saxophone solos. The affinity is clear: like these musicians, Wool has thought through the contradictions inherent in improvisation; he embraces the practice without naiveté, in its full complexity, as a process, as a mode of making a family of

rich and durable images, all closely related to one another but each one solving the problems of its existence uniquely, at once similar and singular.

Perhaps here we can understand why some musicians have resisted the categorical distinction between improvisation and composition. Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg, for instance, prefers the more holistic term “instant composition.” With his group, the ICP Orchestra, Mengelberg has explored methods for incorporating pre-scripted material—songs, structures, games—into freely improvised music making, confounding the supposed distinction between composition and improvisation.* Wool has explored this blurred distinction in the area of his work that integrates silkscreen into the process, further debunking the expressionist mythology by means of an elaborate and sustained exploration of the continuity between painting and printmaking.

Wool is fond of a quotation attributed to Jasper Johns: “It’s simple, you just take something and do something to it, and then do something else to it. Keep doing this, and pretty soon you’ve got something.” If, in the gray paintings, this is accomplished in short order, with the artist making something and then doing something to it right away, he has also approached work in a different, more indirect way, using silkscreen as a way of introducing another method—and, importantly, another time scale—into the work. For a clear example, take *Little Birds Have Fast Hearts* (2001, p. 108), which takes its title from a CD by German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann. Here, the source image contains one of Wool’s wallpaper patterns with a large pour of paint covering the upper right quadrant and dripping down into the lower right quadrant. In monochromatic brown on white background, this image is printed onto a large, vertical canvas. Hence, we find a painting that uses silkscreen as the means to reproduce an image of the intersection of print and free painting. As it was with Wool’s word paintings, the point is not to create a fancy or clever method, but to produce an interesting painting; in the process, by refusing to adhere to the distinctions between printmaking and painting and between improvisation and composition, he further interrogates some of the most persistent and insidious ideas in contemporary art.

Let’s consider another group of related works, which I think of as having a certain recursive process at their core and which show in a bit more diagrammatic detail the way Wool thinks about these things. *The Flam* (2001, p. 83), which takes its title from an LP

by the free jazz saxophonist Frank Lowe, is another screened painting, this time a tangle of freely executed looping black spray-painted lines; part of the image has to do with the slight repositioning of the screens, with the top half shifted left so that the lines don't quite meet. A subsequent painting, this time in monochromatic red, takes *The Flam* as its source, turning it into another silkscreen (a silkscreen of a silkscreen), which Wool enlarged, adjusted (actually moving the screens back, so the lines meet again), then scraped into and worked, thereby creating a revamped but recognizable version of the original painting. Finally, a third work was made using the second painting as a source, reverting to black-on-white, this time a more or less "faithful" silkscreen reproduction of the scraped and worked version, but with no further scraping or working. In this transition from original free painting to silkscreen to free/silkscreen mix and back to silkscreen, we see the recursive process. A source, a treatment, a treatment of the treatment, a treatment of the second treatment, and so on. As in dub reggae, an original is used to create subsequent versions, but in the process the original loses its authority, becoming yet another permutation or variation. These are Wool's dub paintings. When I see them, I hear echoed-out voices, sound effects, drastic shifts in the mix. They walk me into a hall of mirrors in which there are no givens, no safe assumptions, no need for originals or copies or hierarchies of value around whether an image is obtained through print or paint, through free or mechanical means. The image is there to be contemplated. Look at it.

The series of very large paintings Wool made for the Venice Biennale in 2011 and the subsequent works in the same vein extend this idea, but they concentrate on the differences between screened hemispheres or quadrants, the way that making these parts either darker or lighter or changing the resolution of the dots in the screen can totally shift the way they read. A source image, which may come as a highly amplified earlier work, is treated to a series of permutations, and in spite of the enormous size of the works Wool tries out some that he discards. The editorial component, both in terms of the construction of the works and in the assessment of their viability, is clearly central to these pieces, but it's important to remember that they have an element of improvisation as well. While there are two distinct processes that distinguish the gray paintings from the silkscreen works, namely the freely improvised character of the former and the mechanical process of the latter, there are some of the screened pieces that are made improvisationally.

Again, here I think of music, in particular Evan Parker's ElectroAcoustic Ensemble. In this group a team of improvising instrumentalists is met with another team of sound processors. The music made by acoustic means—Parker's saxophone, Philipp Wachsmann's violin, Paul Lytton's percussion—may be subjected to delay, stretching, shifting, and all other varieties of manipulation. Impulse and memory—the interplay of what happens in the moment and what lingers, confusing and confounding the listener into, perhaps, a state of just hearing what's happening rather than wondering who did what and when. In Wool's silkscreen paintings, the potential for a mix of mechanical reproduction and improvisation has opened up an equally exciting array of possibilities, forcing a viewer to look carefully at the image for what it is rather than searching for original sources or trying to parse the teleology or genealogy of a given image. Ultimately, Wool says the process itself isn't important, and neither are the source materials. "Each iteration," he says, "is a next step, not 'better' than the last." Pushing and pulling the image, using direct or indirect means—whatever it takes, the proof is in the pudding.

In recent works, Wool has investigated other ways of extending and recombining these methods and processes. In many new drawings, he has used silkscreen backgrounds, often made from photographs of his freely dripped or poured paintings, with hand painted events placed atop the screened images. These seemingly casual marks are, in fact, often carefully and deliberately worked out. Wool's point here is the creation of "a specific duality or visual opposition set up by working one way on top of another, the disjunction/coordination of two distinct actions." Yet another incarnation of this species of work incorporates photographic images of Wool's gray paintings, digitally edited and collaged into a new work, as the silkscreen backdrops.** Improvised paintings provide source material for photo-collages that become backgrounds for drawings. Welcome again to the hall of mirrors, this time with direct and indirect methods facing off, staring at one another, creating productive tension, securing the bold new genre of dub painting.

In reggae, a hit song could become the background for another hit song or a dee-jay's rhymes or the material for a dub version. Music is infinitely renewable, so abundant, as they say with affection, that it's "like dirt." Lee "Scratch" Perry used to plant dub plates—the wordless records used as backgrounds for toasters—in his garden, with the belief that they would sprout and grow. Like Perry, Christopher Wool cultivates his work, tilling the soil,

culling his own images, grafting and hybridizing them, harvesting and then re-planting, sowing seeds for a new crop. Fresh new work improvised and edited, straight to your head. Paintings like dirt.

* A fan of the elder Mengelberg, saxophonist John Zorn has also deployed many of these strategies for confounding the distinction between improvisation and composition. Interestingly, Zorn came on the downtown New York scene at the same time that Wool did; a full exploration of similarities and differences in their approach would be worthwhile.

** Wool has also made photo-etchings using this method, without the freely painted component.