

# CAVE CANEM

JIM LEWIS

## NOTHING BUT THE DOG IN ME

Is the implicit answer to the question posed in one of Christopher Wool's paintings, or, anyway, it would be the answer if it were in fact a question; lacking the final interrogative mark, Wool's work lacks room for a reply. "Why must I feel like that? Why must I chase that cat?" sings George Clinton in a loopy, dirty, joyous piece of funk called "Atomic Dog", before yowling a response in the form of the phrase above.

"Atomic Dog" is a celebration of the call of blind imperative, a party record; not so Wool's cover version (entitled, with typical terseness, WHY?), because when the words are extracted from the music, the high mockery of the melody disappears. The song stops singing: it becomes a rant, something blurted out: and the rant becomes the revelation of an agent divided against itself by a psychological force, at once foreign and entirely familiar. Without the comfort of a question closed by an answer, the phrase comes out as the utterance of a man driven, not just to chase, but to confront his drives out loud. The act of putting the words out into the world, then, is less an attempt to convey some content than it is another aspect of the state of mind it refers to. The making of the phrase is of a piece with its meaning; it's a rare example of what linguistic philosophers used to call performatives, which would make Wool a brand new and quite surprising kind of Action Painter—even if the action is a form of psychic paralysis, like the seizing-up of an over-heated engine, and the paint is hardly paint at all.

## LONG GONE

RUN DOG RUN is remade as well, and recreated in the process. The words, of course, come from children's primers, those Dick stories and Jane stories which served to introduce those of us with post-War, middle-class backgrounds into the pleasures of reading. Little of that context remains, either, since Spot, the original object of the command, has evaporated behind the words, along with his doghouse, his suburban neighborhood, and his child owners. All that remains of the poor creature is his piebald black-and-white color, and a sense of plain old, tongue-out doggyness, an abstraction to be understood as shortsighted appetite, a life of punishment and reward, and the ability, or perhaps the tendency, to be utterly shameless. Whence the old joke which has as its punchline:

## BECAUSE THEY CAN.

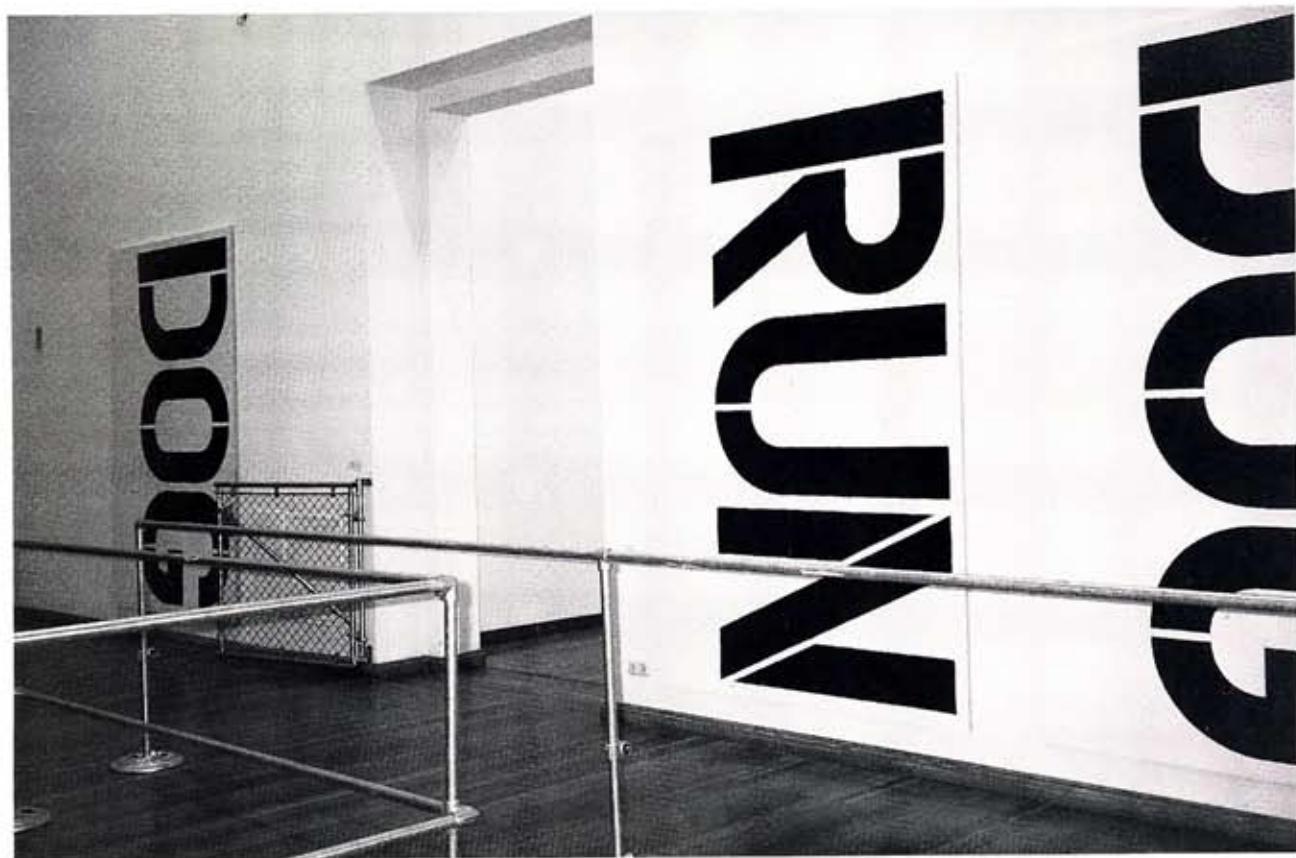
And if they can, they must.

## MAN'S BEST FRIEND?

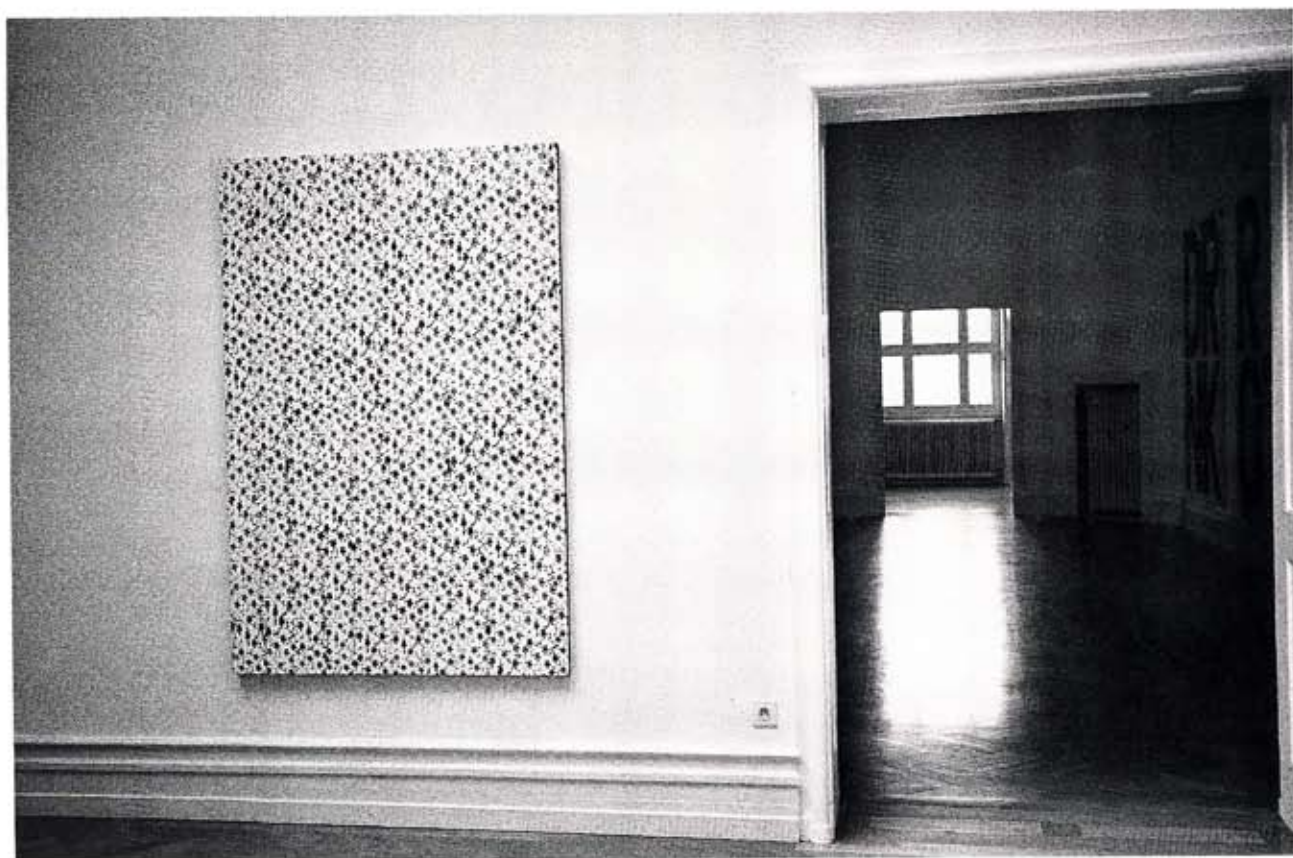
It wouldn't be entirely wrong to think of the dogs here as men and the chased cats as women, but it wouldn't be entirely right, either. True, the dogs are aggressive, led by some innate force to chase, to run, to prowl, and, finally, to submit abjectly to whomever happens to command

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*JIM LEWIS* is a writer living in New York. His first novel, *Sister*, will be published next year by Graywolf Press.



CHRISTOPHER WOOL, INSTALLATION METROPOLIS BERLIN, 1991 (with Cady Noland).



CHRISTOPHER WOOL, INSTALLATION KUNSTHALLE BERN, 1991.



them; while the cat's role is to be the object of just those actions. And we're certainly getting a dog's-eye-view of the whole affair. In any case one is wont to feel... low to the ground; and the joke just mentioned specifically asks why dogs lick their balls. But to tie the figures too closely to gender is simplistic and silly: female dogs are as common a metaphor for women as their male counterparts are for men, and anyway the point is not so much the specifics of dogs per se as the general animus inside any of us that produces fits of behavior strange to our more conscious selves.

## CAT GOT HIS TONGUE

By the same token, it wouldn't be wrong to think of the phrases as messages from the artist to himself, but it wouldn't be quite right, either. With a very few exceptions, pronouns, in the first person or otherwise, have been lopped off, leaving the phrases to stand on their own. And while that old dictum, *ut pictura poesis*, may have found one of its few fair applications here, what unites words and paint in Wool's work is the paradoxical fact that neither is really a medium at all, for neither is used to mediate between anything, be it the artist and the world, dumb objects-and meaningful intentions, or dogs and cats. On the contrary, the subject who uses them is so consumed by his own compulsions, by lust, or rage, or fear, or sheer want, that what would be media for their expression instead become intransitive, opaque, and terminal. So the paint, which in any case is as far removed from pictures as possible, invariably drips and strays beyond its allotted boundaries; and the words are submitted to stutterings, strange enjambments, and swallowed vowels, until they, too, take on the status of objects, untied from any intention. The man behind the voice disappears, and, at last, what began as simple terseness ends with the speaker entirely absent, like a bark that has swallowed the dog. And all at once one realizes that words, like pictures, like people, have secret lives of their own, a past and purpose that allows them to mean whatever they want to mean, which is why the same phrase, RUN DOG RUN, can serve as an expression of joy, willfulness, excitement, horror, frustration, and finally as none of those things, but as the mark of a kind of closed case, a done deal, an irreducible brute fact, though it's not about dogs, and it's not about running.

## NINE LIVES

At that point there's little left to do with the words but repeat them, as indeed Wool does, again and again. Whatever it is that bothers him isn't going away, so it must be said again, and the rhythm according to which it reappears sets up a kind of backbeat to a chant that constricts to unrelieved consonants (RN DG), and then expands into yet another variation on aggression (CATS IN BAG BAGS IN RIVER) or submission (WANNA BE YOUR DOG). In the end the sheer inability to escape achieves a black humor, like the relentless returns of a comedian's routine that keeps circling back to the sticking point with which it began. And in fact COMEDIAN is one of a dozen or so occupations which occur in the artist's *Black Book*, a great big edition of printed epithets (INSOMNIAC, CHAMELEON, PRANKSTER, PESSIMIST), descriptions which often seem to predicate the plates themselves, and at least sometimes the artist who makes them. After all, Wool himself is something of

## A WAG

For it has to end somewhere, this cycle of begging and running and fetching, and so it does: propped against the wall in a corner of the artist's studio is a small painting, about the size of a gravestone, with the lettering crowded into the top third. It is presumably the last of a series, in spirit if not in fact. DOG DEAD, it says.

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