

## NOTES ON A PAINTING

Jerry Saltz

# This is the End

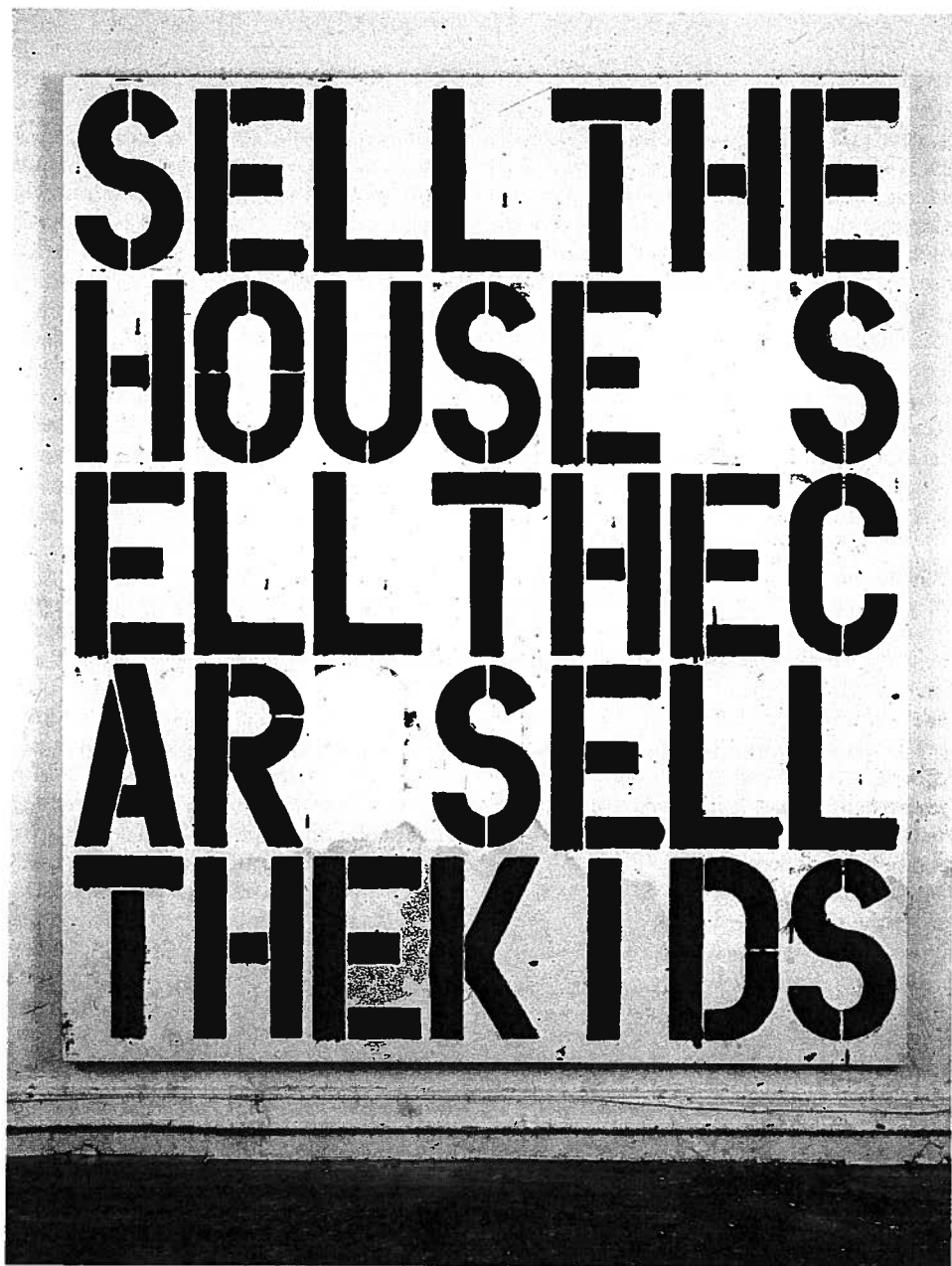
## Christopher Wool's Apocalypse Now

As part of a collaborative installation with the sculptor Robert Gober at the 303 Gallery in New York City this past April, Christopher Wool exhibited a new painting that represents both a continuation of his exploration of abstraction and a fascinating new development.

In the painting titled *Apocalypse Now*, Wool makes an image out of language, and the words used, taken from the well known film of the same name, telegraph a sense of impending disorder and chaos. The words are those of Richard Colby, a special-services captain sent to assassinate the film's most sensational character, Captain Kurtz (played by Marlon Brando). Instead of carrying out his mission, this soldier becomes one of Kurtz's zoned-out followers. Having "crossed the line," he communicates his radical change of heart and disenfranchisement in an angry, despairing letter home, scrawled in pencil across a scrap of paper, which simply says:

sell the house  
sell the car  
sell the kids  
find someone else <sup>back</sup>  
i'm never coming <sup>home</sup>  
forget it

Wool's work, which has heretofore been abstract, is characterized by a formal randomness, a minimum of pictorial order, and also by a surprising associative power. His paintings downplay the decision-making process and any suggestion of personal touch. Wool's images are crowded with half-described flecks and scant patches of meaning which somehow come together and create semi-specific non-memories. They are painted on sheet metal, vertical rectangles which are usually human-sized. Some are made by applying black, white, or silver enamel paint with patterned paint rollers, or a stamp process, either found or made by the artist. These paintings are often evocative, as their all-over fields of pattern and seeming disorder converge to recall wallpaper in old homes,



Christopher Wool, *Apocalypse Now*, 1988, Alkyd and flashe on aluminum and steel, 84" x 72". Courtesy the artist.

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or metal grill work, or the unidentified peripheral observations made over the course of a lifetime. Some of the paintings are the result of a layering of small drips of monotone enamel paint. Gravity creates the barely rippled surface, and these seemingly random drips evoke a night sky brimming over with protoplasmic phenomena. A feeling of almost cosmic vastness is implied, as if Islamic complexity had been spliced together with microscopic details of paint. These deliberate and highly restricted techniques give the works a distanced and cool look, as if they had been baked in a furnace and were as hard and as cold as steel.

A scary feeling—claustrophobia or vertigo—permeates the work. You can't look at any one place, can't quite get a foothold. There is a uniformity, an "overallness" to the work derived, at least partly, from Jackson Pollack. The paintings could extend infinitely in any direction without so much as an "X marks the spot" respite. But this feeling of fear is slowly replaced by something vaguely familiar, as Wool benevolently quotes from a huge reservoir of visual perceptions, mingled with bits of remembered experience.

In *Apocalypse Now*, language and the letters of the alphabet replace the rolled-on patterns and drips of Wool's previous work. The breakdown of pictorial order and the visual chaos expand to include the social. Wool uses only the first three lines of Captain Colby's letter home: sell the house, sell the car, sell the kids. However, the viewer initially sees not the words but just letters, seven across in five stenciled rows, which at first glance form an undifferentiated field, similar to Wool's other paintings. But an important change has taken place. Whereas previously the "reading" had been perceptual, it is now cognitive, linguistic rather than stylistic. The stenciled letters are generic in appearance—much like the lettering on

packing crates—and applied to the dripped-on surface with no particular concern for traditional notions of taste or beauty. This use of the stencil recalls Jasper Johns, and also connects the work to Frank Stella. The letters are like the mechanically applied black stripes or the shapes derived from protractors and other pre-existent measuring devices which Stella employed. With Stella it was: what you see is what you get. In *Apocalypse Now*, Wool alters that axiom and suggests that what you see is congruent with, and yet radically different from, what you get. Wool, following Stella's lead, fills the whole field, border to border, edge to edge, thereby causing the painting to be seen more as a slab, or an object, than as a painting.

When the viewer goes on to "read" *Apocalypse Now*, the words run together and appear at first to be some kind of bizarre gibberish—something you can hear but can't quite make out. This breakdown of sense is disturbing, and the painting begins to function as concrete poetry. Spoken from the void as if from some machine, the meaning is scrambled in a riddle of obscure sequence. Then decoding begins in earnest. The letters can be read not only left to right but up and down and even diagonally. Words like *ellthec*, *thekids*, *ar*, and *sellthe*, confusing at first, fall into place and the message materializes before the viewer's eyes. It is just when the viewer finds comfort in deciphering the code that the bottom falls out of the painting and a whole new field of meaning opens up below.

The words Wool has painted come from the most intimate sort of communication: that of a husband to his wife. Yet the words transmit a sense of dread and despair, hysteria and catharsis. As if cued by the work of Barbara Kruger, or to a lesser extent Jenny Holzer, Wool has chosen words that are directive, preemptory, somewhat accusatory. They express terror suc-

cinctly and bluntly. We are instantly put in touch with an unraveling mind in an unraveling time. The quote is like some joke gone monstrously bad. This is a last communion from a soul whose world has been turned inside out; a message to the living from the dead. It is a message in a bottle from someplace gone wrong, imparting a sense of Dickensian catastrophe (like losing the farm), on a global scale. Desperate and hopeless, forlorn and heartsick, this is the mantra of the lost; a lamentation of the irretrievable. All those things held dear by the world are renounced and relinquished. Family, possessions, home, and love are all worthless now. Order is replaced by total social breakdown and social chaos. Wool has applied the letters with a graffiti-like touch, thereby echoing, in the painting, the scratched quality of the letter. *Apocalypse Now* is like an evil crossword puzzle filled in by the damned, the words breaking down with indeterminate angularity into chaos and confusion. The painting becomes a chant, a rant, a slogan, and a scream.

The painting turns words into image and image into memory, memory into nightmare and nightmare into moral. "Sell the house, sell the car, sell the kids" is a foreboding harbinger, an ominous warning for all those who entertain the idea of "going over to the other side," "partaking of the forbidden fruit." The advice given is (in the words of the terrified soldier in the film, who gets off the boat in order to go into the jungle to look for mangoes, is nearly attacked by a tiger, and runs away screaming), "Never get off the boat! I gotta remember, never get off the fuckin' boat!" □

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*Jerry Saltz is a writer and has edited several books on contemporary art. His column, which concentrates on a single work of art, appears monthly in Arts.*