Christopher Wool

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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View of "Christopher Wool," 2013–14. Photo: Kristopher McKay.

THE HOME PAGE of Christopher Wool's website greets visitors, somewhat cryptically, with a black-and-white photograph of a discarded office chair on a dilapidated sidewalk. Taken with a flash at night on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the photograph has a dramatic immediacy, but seems more than a straightforward image of urban decay. With its atmosphere of isolation and estrangement and its invocation of such classic tropes as the destruction of public space and the loss of interiority, it appears to represent a kind of primal scene of expressionist art. Listing languidly on a broken caster, the chair is clearly a denizen of a world in which, as Walter Benjamin famously observed, the city has become at once exterior streetscape and dioramic *intérieur*. Inevitably anthropomorphic, it is an allegorical stand-in for a modern subject who has been cast into a liminal zone where inside and outside, expression and stylization, are not easily distinguishable.

The photograph is part of the series "East Broadway Breakdown," 1994–95/2002, which, along with other photographic works, was an integral part of Wool's recent retrospective at the Guggenheim, curated by Katherine Brinson. At first glance, Wool's photographs—as well as his artist's books, record-cover designs, invitations, and posters—appear to have an ancillary, explicatory function in relation to his painting. In particular, his shots of New York suggest analogies between his painterly gestures and the city's visual noise, its characteristically dissolute forms and textures: puddles, graffiti, oil stains, scattered garbage, and broken windows. Within the exhibition, the photos served to emphasize Wool's engagement with issues of painting's autonomy, or rather, its loss of autonomy. In his work, however, this loss is not an inert given to be commented on. It is an unfolding process, a border conflict between pictorial immanence and its undoing. His paintings are parergonal: They don't merely blur the distinction between what lies within the frame and what's beyond it, but take this blurring as a precondition of perception. They cannot be seen as distinct from their contexts. According to their setting—museum, private collection, corporate collection, domestic space—they take on different meanings.

For example, whether the curvaceous allover pattern of *Untitled*, 1988, appears lushly ornamental or sterile and mechanical cannot be solely determined from within the picture itself. The effect depends largely on where the work is installed and which other works are displayed nearby, and on whether it is hung, say, in a living room or shown at the Guggenheim next to the text painting *Trouble*, 1989. As documented by the artist (who has photographed his works at collectors' homes and other sites), the pictures *behave* differently depending on the context; they can come across as grumpy or intellectual, reticent or cheeky, distressing or amusing.

This responsiveness to context may account for the fact that Wool's work proved a surprisingly good match for the Guggenheim's architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright's modernist *parcours* can be a rather tight corset, perhaps especially for contemporary painting practices, which rarely map cleanly onto the implicitly progressive, linear trajectory of the ascending spiral. Presumably not least for this reason, a noticeable tendency at the Guggenheim over the past few years has been to use the rotunda for installation-like interventions such as Tino Seghal's, Maurizio Cattelan's, and James Turrell's. If the architecture inherently generates a tension between the museal seclusion of the recessed viewing bays and the promenade-like openness of the walkway, Wool's painting was capable of making this tension serve its own purposes. Across the breadth of the space, connections emerged among groups of works, allowing the shocks of color and the allusive slogans—TRBL, YOU MAKE ME, RUN, RIOT—to unfold their effects. A rhythm emerged, a groove, minimalist and at the same time full of surprising variations—

surprising because Wool's entire oeuvre is so fiercely consistent, in that for decades he has pursued a mere handful of devices and strategies, exploring them ad infinitum. This restrained dynamism influenced the way the viewer moved through the space. In some of the bays, pictures were displayed in iconic isolation, while in others paintings were paired or ensembles of works were brought together in larger units. Intimate moments with small-format drawings gave way to encounters with effusive graffiti whorls that look spontaneous but are actually silk-screened, or epithets and aphorisms—FOOL, THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER YOU LOOK—that say a lot while saying nothing at all. Without extensive didactic aids and seemingly without effort, the development of Wool's work was laid out, not in rigidly chronological order but as a series of unpredictable traverses. Each of the paintings commented on its neighbors and was itself commented on; meaning morphed as the viewer moved.

The counterpoint that emerged in the hanging of the paintings worked so well, in part, because it corresponded to the principle of improvisation underlying Wool's practice. However calculated his "moves" and strategic maneuvers might seem, their rhythm actually comes from the discontinuities, the impulses or perhaps even accidents that break into the picture from the outside. *Minor Mishap*, 2001, features a silk-screened image of a formless orange splash, suggesting that the aleatory result of some studio misadventure was carefully preserved and reproduced. Such unforeseeable incidents are transformed by Wool into motifs, made into the point of origin for the next phase of discovery. Thus, for example, in 1994 Wool launched a series that involved overpainting the floral imagery he'd been working with for some time. With the heaviness of a house painter's slathering, the blooms are covered over, sealed, extinguished. *Untitled*, 1994–95, has a layer of paint so thick that it sucks in the gaze like a black hole. Just visible around the edges of this optical abyss are the petals of a flower rendered in a kind of generic, illustrative manner, as if appropriated from an old catalogue of clip art. This glimpse of mundane representation only increases the sense of intense expressivity emanating from the black strokes. Wool's combination of intuitive, improvisational strategies and reproductive ones is emphatically not about parodying expressivity by portraying it as Pop or by subjecting it to a conceptual distancing. It is, rather, the opposite: For Wool, expressive improvisation is what grounds the tactics of Pop and appropriation in an arena of actual painterly investigation. But here, too, inside and outside depend on and interact with each other. If the *ergon* or artwork is the proper site of pure expression, then in Wool's parergonal painting, expression steps outside itself, as it were. Affect is channeled in fits and starts through such mediated forms as catchphrases and graffiti—prefabricated elements that are combined intuitively, spontaneously.

With their ostensibly naive and idealized conception of the subject, expressionist rhetorics have, of course, been getting bad press for decades now. Mary McCarthy's attack on Harold Rosenberg—"You cannot hang an event on a wall, only a picture"—distills the familiar critique of gestural painting as eliding the inherently metaphorical nature of art. Wool's work challenges such oversimplified views. It is significant that one relatively early painting, dated 1997, consists of the text YOU MAKE ME, an allusion to the cover of Richard Hell and the Voidoids' epochal 1977 record *Blank Generation*. With his shirt open wide, Hell reveals his naked chest, on which YOU MAKE ME ___ is written. It is the punk version of the Romantic topos of the "heart laid bare." Reiterating Hell's cri de coeur, after a two-decade delay, as both primal scream and cultivated allusion, personal confrontation and blank, stylized stare, Wool's picture maps a liminal moment, a moment that cannot be accounted for simply via a postmodern logic of appropriation, co-optation, or spectacle. The radical openness of the phrase "You make me" (who is being addressed, who is doing the addressing, who is "making" what?) sets up a ricocheting subjectivity in which beholder and beheld, source and iteration, interior and exterior, seem to oscillate, switch roles, project and recede like an optical illusion.

The canonical position that Wool holds in the recent history of art has emerged in light of the renewed interest in the medium of painting. It is not based on his contribution to painting's "endgame" but rather on his ability to delineate the sites of contestation that keep the discourse around painting open and painting itself alive. And this, in turn, is why his work has been so important for a younger generation of painters, from Wade Guyton to Josh Smith. His text paintings, for instance, are by no means a simple transfer of Conceptualism's linguistic paradigm to painting—this would be a pat gesture of closure, an implicit endorsement of the notion that word and gesture, concept and expression, are discrete in the first place, and that we can therefore mourn or celebrate the end of one form of art while continuing with the other. Rather, the paintings shed light on the expressive condition of *all* artistic use of language. The word TRBL, shrunk to the edge of comprehensibility, conveys a cramped emotionality, a stuttering, an undirected energy that is yearning to get out—a cry that couches itself in language but seems poised at any moment to break free.

"Christopher Wool" is on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through May 11.

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Translated from German by Alexander Scrimgeour.