

'The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around... No more coats and no more home.'

— From Situationist text Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes generations (Treatise on Living for the Young Generations, also known in English as The Revolution of Everyday Life),  
Raoul Vaneigem, 1967

Arkwright Road  
London  
NW3 6DG

T +44 (0)20 7472 5500  
F +44 (0)20 7472 5501

**Camden**  
arts centre

[www.camdenartscentre.org](http://www.camdenartscentre.org)

Registered charity 1065829  
Registered company 2947191  
VAT reg. no. 586 9041 03



Funded by Camden Council

Cover: *Untitled* 2003 (detail) / Enamel on linen / 108 X 72"  
Courtesy the artist and Private Collection

# Christopher Wool

01

Camden Arts Centre / January — April 2004  
List Note 01 Christopher Wool



*Untitled 2002* / Enamel on linen / 108 X 72"  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne  
and Luhring Augustine, New York

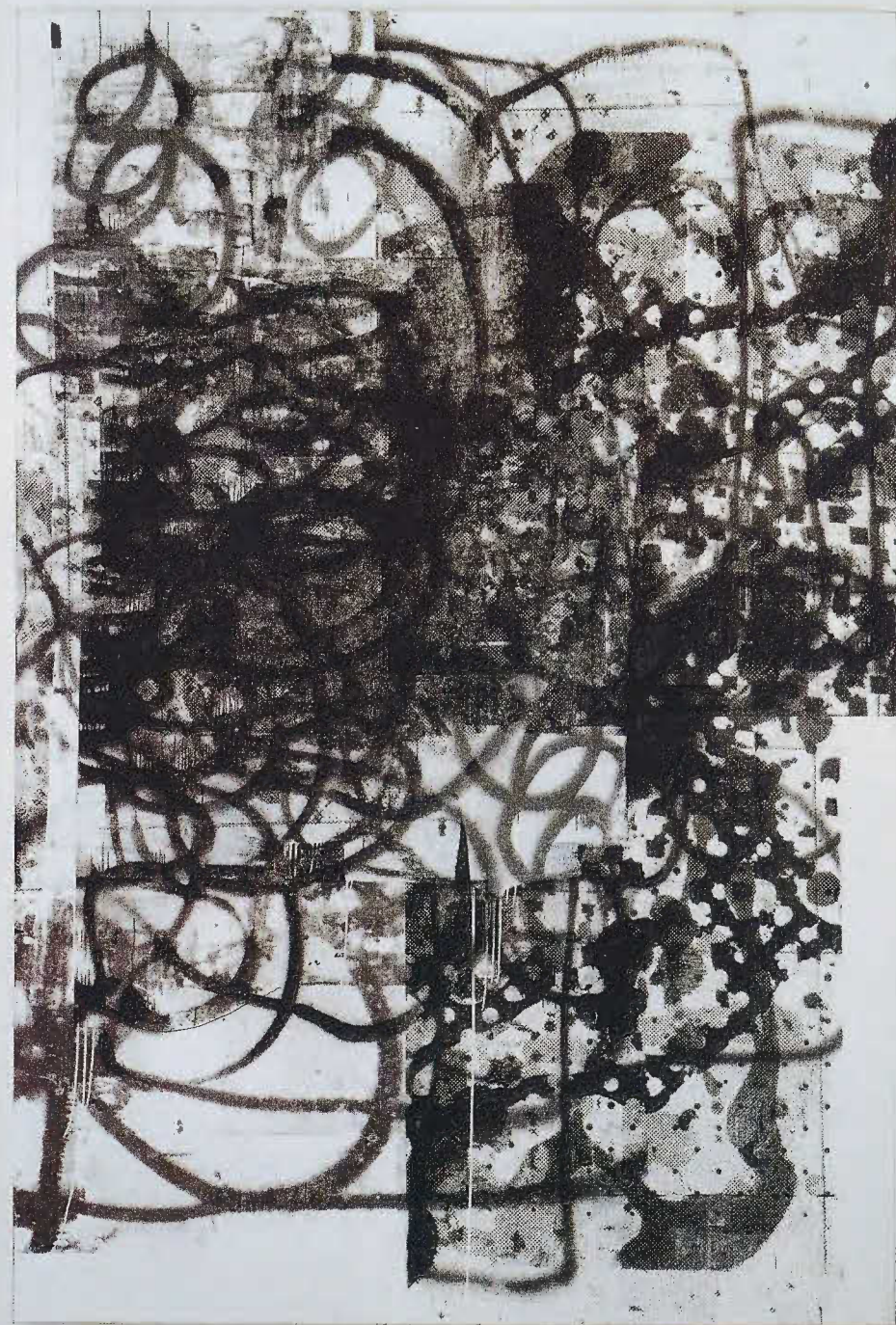
Mark Harris

# Image as Noise

From the apparently disengaged patterned images of the mid-80s, calculatedly rolled onto aluminium panels, through the brutalist *FuckEm* text works stencilled in the early 90s, to the matted dreadlock entanglements of the recent flower and graffiti enamels, until the gestural wipe outs of these new works — all periods invariably using just black and white — Christopher Wool has set a course that teeters at the limits of what is tolerable as painting. Tolerable, that is, in different senses, for as they collapse the mechanical and handmade into each other as if enacting an error ('can't he use a stencil?', 'can't he use a brush?'), these works restage the visual rhetoric of antisocial ad hoc street signage — advertisements obscured by tagging, whited-out graffiti, sidewalk spillage, hand-painted commands on garage doors. Wool's works seem to become paintings according to a measure of emphatic presentness, like the sudden appearance, on rounding a corner, of the unencompassable directness of street graphics in their function as an anti-architectural visual terrorism. This is the aspect captured by Wool's numerous installation snapshots, his paintings glowering back at us unapologetically from gallery and studio walls. Their mix of deskilled manual technique with basic mechanical processes, and of street iconography with motifs from the history of gestural painting, triggers aesthetic discomfort and results in images with the intractable functionality of signs. A kind of nervous breakdown of painting is visible in this commingling of antagonistic codes and we are riveted by the unsettling experience. Wool's recent works overwhelm with their incident, by the mass of painted events, yet there's the sense that the inconsequence of all this piling up may be exactly the point; that this matter which uninhibitedly floods the surface in a deluge of painterly reaction is like the stuff out there in the city, pressing into every pore of our bodies. These are urban paintings, not so much because of their superfluous

graffiti and grunge, as by their enveloping noise articulated with finesse through gradations of car horn and tyre-screach unreasonableness; the criss-crossing conversations in the darkest East Village bars; the experience of distanced sounds on the same streets after midnight; the eerily muffled traffic after the first heavy snowfall; the reliable silence of that same neighbourhood before midday. In this way, through the same plethora of unaccountable marks these paintings are very precisely tuned. The format of Wool's paintings is without exception vertical, not landscape. This standing form is for a confrontational address and recalls the experience you always have in New York (an experience we like for its relentlessness) of being faced, or challenged, by buildings. And how is the noise drawn through this new work? What is happening with the paintings' breakdown to which we have become attached? The overpainted cancellations, a motif of work since the mid-90s, are now the principal image. Columns of white enamel scud across the surface of screen-printed underpainting already drained of tone. These cancellations are brusque and jarring, like uninvited interruptions to an otherwise manageable experience. In a second group of works the underpainting is indifferently wiped away in a functional manner to leave a residue of dirtying gestures extending to all four sides. Amongst other things, here is a rehearsal of not being able to get rid of painting. Like a conjuring trick going off the rails, the harder the erasing, the more signifiers appear. And then in an especially perverse sleight of hand, as if covertly replacing a confusing map with its even poorer replica, Wool photographs these erasures and screens them onto linen, more or less the same size as the original (*Untitled (P418)*, 2003). Sometimes, as with *Untitled (P402)*, 2003, the replica of an erased work is screened over and obliterates the residue of actual painting. Even so, we can't succumb for long to the illusion since the borders of the screens leave conspicuous right-angled lines across the smear strokes. In the ghostliness of their brushy weave (their ever-fainter physical appearance a decomposition that reverses gestural painting back towards nothing), they make a spectre of some distant examples of epiphanic painterliness like Willem de Kooning's figures or Brice Marden's Zen abstractions. Though this brings them into closer relation with mainstream New York painting, their dulling of immediate seductions leads them back to intolerableness as a productive discourse. They give the finger to the gamut of sensual gratifications that had become an ethical *sine qua non* of American factored painting since the late 70s. To put this antidote to seduction into practice Wool takes methods from other contexts to make art-like forms. It's as if these paintings are made with the unconcern

*Untitled* 2002 / Enamel on linen / 108 X 72"  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin  
and Luhring Augustine, New York



of someone cleaning up after a day's house painting, wiping the surfaces more or less clear and getting rid of the excess paint on the roller by running it across the wall. Here is the move of painting blind, without a compositional motive or standard to privilege that looking which prevalues what is about to ensue. It's worth going back to the idea of image as noise for a different analogy of the paintings' sound. Wool's text pieces and titles have incorporated snatches of song lyrics — from Richard Hell and George Clinton, for example — while his stencilled typeface resembles the handmade posters of punk bands, most obviously the graphic work of the English collective *Crass*. The surging noise of these new works, where gestural incident accumulates into a definite and singular tone, recalls the spartan texture of early punk, where one-chord guitar chopping makes the percussive body of the music. The resourcefulness of The Damned's *Neat, Neat, Neat*, The Buzzcocks' *Breakdown*, The Clash's *Complete Control* or The Adverts' *One Chord Wonders* lies in making relentless impact through cutting out all embellishments. Wool's restriction to black and white, his restrained inventory of motifs, his retention of rough mechanical procedures, are left remaining after much of what constitutes painting is stripped away. His full-size screened reproductions of gestural originals are a more extreme renunciation that tests whether such work still has presence in a space. Once again these take us onto the streets which Wool has routinely photographed at night, in particular to the numerous shots of chain-link fences, security shutters and reflective windows as they impede our vision. The screened layers of Wool's paintings function similarly as they accumulate texture from beneath and allude to the obscuring of prior imagery. In this play of limitations these latest works prolong the interaction between studio and street that has been so productive for Wool in maintaining a critical engagement with painting.

Mark Harris is an artist and writer

*Untitled* 2003 / Enamel on linen / 108 X 72"  
Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York  
and Sprüth Magers Lee, London

