Christopher Wool See Stop Run Print

A Conversation with Carrie Springer

Christopher Wool rose to prominence in the late 1980s as a painter of words: large stenciled canvases that imbue language with authority while bleeding it of direct meaning ("SELL THE HOUSE SELL THE CAR SELL THE KIDS"). He painted abstractions too, laying down paint freely by hand or by any number of printmaking methods, such as stencils, stamps, and screen-printing. About fifteen years ago, Wool began to make sculptures out of small found objects.

Photography and photobooks have always been part of his practice, but while equally inventive, this work—raw, noirish images of busted environments and talismanic objects that linger mysteriously in the mind—is often overshadowed by the sheer physicality of his painting and sculpture.

Last year, Wool filled the nineteenth floor of an office tower in Manhattan's financial district with his art. A critical coup, the show afforded a rare opportunity to see the role photography and photobooks have played in relation to his work in other mediums. He called it *See Stop Run*, a phrase inspired by the Dick and Jane books he learned to read from as a child. The abandoned interior, haunted by traces of pre-pandemic construction, turned out to be the perfect setting for his jaggedly elegant painting, sculpture, photography, and artist's books. Wool met with Carrie Springer at the site of *See Stop Run*, where they discussed the role photography plays in his art process.

Carrie Springer: **Most people know you as a painter. After your high school arts training in photography and painting, you studied with Richard Pousette-Dart at Sarah Lawrence and subsequently took classes at the New York Studio School. When did your involvement with photography begin?**

Christopher Wool: I knew the basics of photography, but I was focused exclusively on painting until the late 1980s.

CS: **The first photograph of yours that I saw was a collaborative project with Robert Gober in 1988 for a joint exhibition. It's an image of a dress on a tree.**

CW: That was the first photograph that I made as a finished print. A similar one-off image was a photograph of a dog that I made as an edition for *Parkett* in the early '90s.

CS: **You took that in Naples, out a car window. Did it relate in some way to your painting?**

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Christopher Wool at his exhibition *See Stop Run*, New York, October 2024
Photograph by Sinna Nasseri for *Aperture*

This page:
From *Incident on 9th Street*, 1996

CW: I was making text-based paintings at the time, and one of them, *Run Dog Run* (1991), was an expression from the Dick and Jane books that I learned to read from. I think the dog photograph was a reference to that.

CS: **Tell me about your first book of photographs, *Absent Without Leave* (1993). Did you initially have in mind to do a book about your travels?**

CW: No, I think that's the only case where I didn't have something in mind to begin with. I began the photographs in 1989 when I was on a fellowship in Rome, and I continued taking them until my fellowship in Berlin, in 1993 and '94. I was thinking about painting and taking photographs of things that inspired me. At first, I considered them more as snapshots or notes, and it was a few years later that I thought of making a book. It's a travel book, in a sense, about being somewhere else.

CS: **Where did the title for *Absent Without Leave* come from?**

CW: It was a phrase I found interesting for a painting—AWOL. The idea of being absent without leave, without permission. It captured the book pretty well.

CS: **You were using a 35mm camera and made small, 4-by-6-inch, commercially printed, drugstore-type prints.**

CW: Yes, which I could do in Rome and Berlin, but I edited the book in New York. I printed the snapshots out on my old-school black-and-white copy machine, which gave the book its photocopied look.

CS: **You also made a video of all the photographs from *Absent Without Leave*, right?**

CW: I did. I shot footage of the book while playing an Ornette Coleman record. He's playing violin, and the music fit the changing of photographs perfectly. It's a very short video, and the only one I've ever made.

CS: **A decade later, in 2003, how did your *East Broadway Breakdown* book come about?**

CW: I had an idea for the book after coming back to New York from Europe in 1994. I was living in Chinatown and would often take photographs on the way home from my studio in the East Village. The initial prints were glorified drugstore photographs that I scanned and worked on in Photoshop. I had just learned Photoshop, and my skills were limited, but I printed them myself with an inkjet printer and those became the basis of the book. The important thing to me with this book was a very early impression I got of New York. I was here with my father, and we were going out to dinner on the Lower East Side. We took a cab down Allen Street, and at night it was really dark. Even having grown up in Chicago, on the South Side, this view left a deep impression on me. The Lower East Side seemed so wild, and so dark and mysterious. The book was trying to capture that old feeling of New York at night.

CS: **Is the title a reference to the street East Broadway?**

CW: It's a play on an amazing Sonny Rollins record, a very famous one, *East Broadway Run Down*. There's another record from around the same time by Arthur Blythe, *Lenox Avenue Breakdown*. I was living at the end of East Broadway, so it all made sense.

Robert Gober and Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1988

CS: **You began taking the photographs in the mid-1990s, but the book wasn't published until 2003. Is that because you were working on other things?**

CW: I was painting. Then in 2001, Anne Pontégnie, a curator and friend I'd met in the 1980s, had the idea that photography was integral to my art practice, and she curated a show in Dijon at Le Consortium that was a precedent for the *See Stop Run* exhibition. I made a portfolio of *East Broadway Breakdown* prints for that exhibition. I later realized how prescient she had been and how important photography had become.

CS: **What sparked your interest in photobooks?**

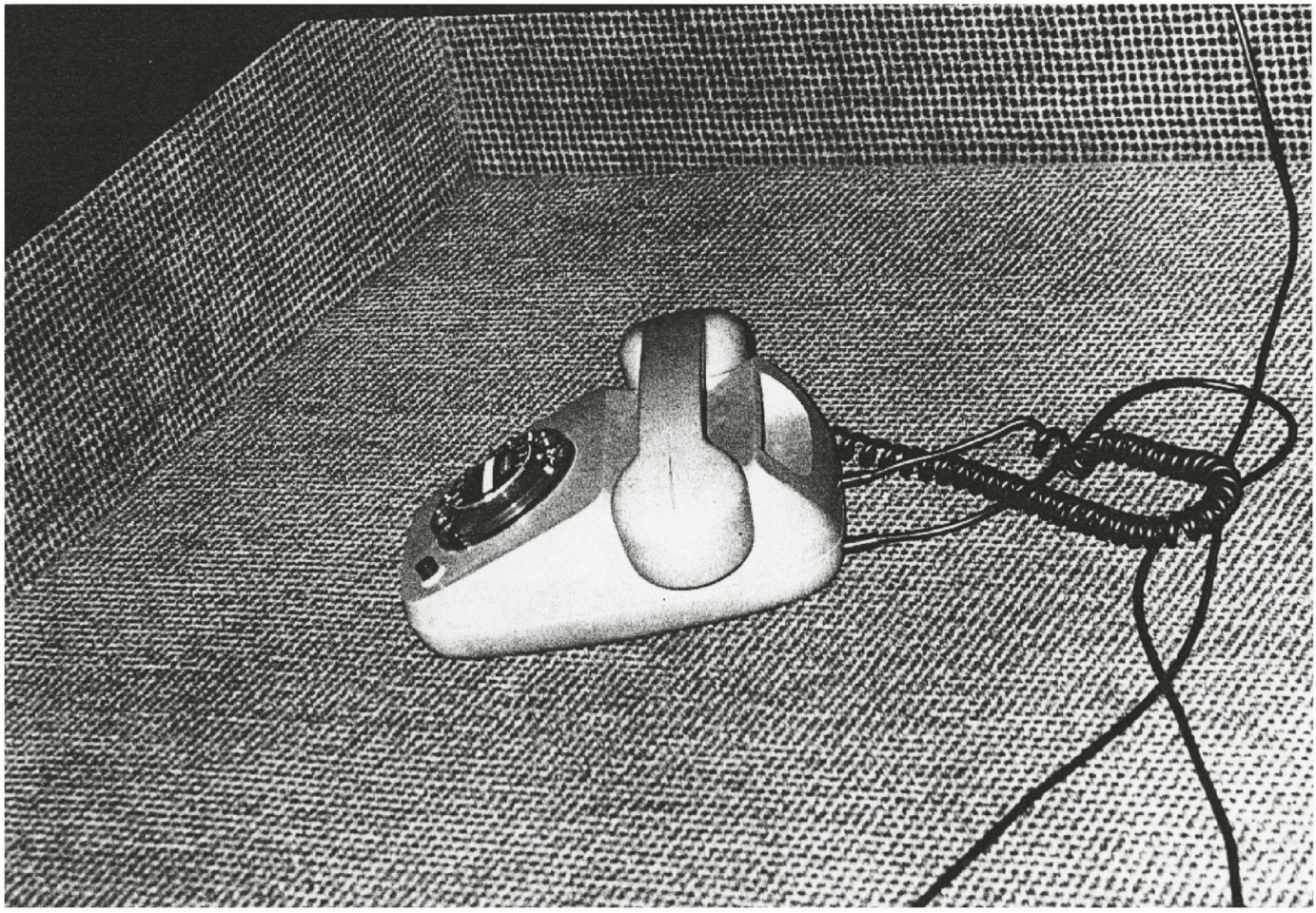
CW: My interest in books was through artists' books more than photobooks. I knew some photobooks, and Ed Ruscha's artist's books opened up the idea of a photo-book for me.

CS: **Your books seem somewhat autobiographical, particularly the early ones.**

CW: Yes, I think it's indicative and important. I was the one traveling in the first book. It's not a travel book for everyone, and *East Broadway Breakdown* was my own view of New York and the feeling of living on the Lower East Side. It's personal, and subjective.

CS: **Were you aware of other photographers who photographed at night, such as Brassaï or Weegee?**

CW: I was super aware of Weegee and flash photography on the street, especially the crime scenes. Lucy Sante's small book with police photographs of murder scenes, *Evidence* (1992), was fantastic, and film noir was important. Also, in the mid-1990s, when I was in Berlin, I was friends with Nan Goldin. She introduced me to Nobuyoshi Araki's books. I became a big fan of all the Japanese



photographers of that Provoke era. I also knew Larry Clark, and, of course, he was a big photobook fan.

CS: **Would you speak about *Incident on 9th Street* (1996), the photographs you made after a fire in your studio? You made a wonderful booklet of the images and a portfolio of prints. Some of them were in *See Stop Run*, and they have an interesting relationship to the show's unfinished space, and to your own history.**

CW: I was at a Knicks game with Larry Clark. I don't know who got in touch with me, but I went down to the studio and immediately started taking photographs of the damage for insurance, which I didn't have. It was snowing and was so cold inside that I had to keep my camera inside my shirt next to my body to keep it from freezing. The fire had been on the floor below me. It burned through in places, but most of the damage was from the fire department. They cut holes in the roof just to get the smoke out. I didn't touch anything, so you can see what was in my studio at the time: the catalog I was working on for my first museum show at MOCA in Los Angeles, a portrait of me that David Armstrong made, a Mark Gonzales drawing, a great poster of Jack Pierson's. The publication was part of a small series that a friend in Vienna was doing with artists. I thought the photographs captured a kind of chaos that was interesting to me in terms of painting too.

Previous spread:
From *East Broadway Breakdown*, 2003

This page:
From *Absent Without Leave*, 1993

I was painting. Then a curator and friend had the idea that photography was integral to my art practice.

CS: **Many of your exhibition catalogs are essentially artists' books of your own photography. Is that how you think of them, and when did you begin that practice?**

CW: Yes, I first started photographing my paintings for a show in Rotterdam at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen titled *Cats in Bag, Bags in River* (1991). I took slides of all the work, ran them through color copy machines, and tightened the residual color, so they looked as far from the paintings as possible. I knew of other artists, including Martin Kippenberger, who made books instead of catalogs, and

they weren't necessarily even related to the exhibition. Dieter Roth also did this regularly. For artists who were involved with books, it was natural to think of the catalog as an extension of the show and to have the ideas behind the show come through the catalog. I've stuck with that to a certain extent.

CS: **The book you made for your show at the Secession, in Vienna, included color Polaroids, didn't it?**

CW: Yes, and it's one of my favorites. I had been using Polaroids in the studio to photograph my paintings as I worked on them. When I looked at the photographs of the unfinished paintings, I had this notion that maybe they were better before I finished them, which is a real postmodern kind of dilemma. The Polaroids showed the idea that the paintings could be looked at as failures as much as successes.

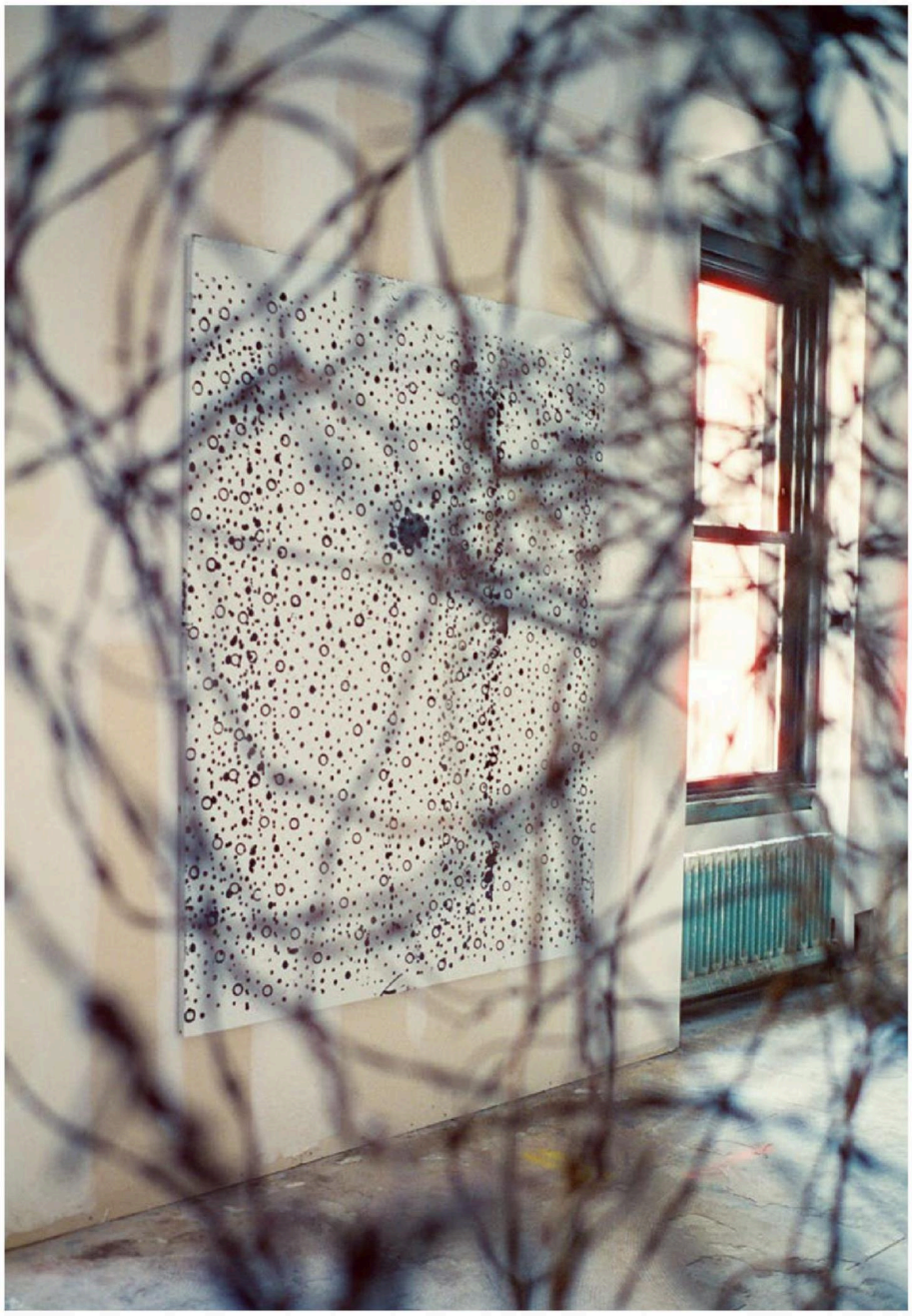
CS: **Photography was also prominent in your Guggenheim catalog in 2013, particularly photographs from your first two books.**

CW: Both series were in the exhibition. In the case of *Absent Without Leave*, we showed the photocopies, and 8½-by-11-inch silver-gelatin prints from *East Broadway Breakdown*. It was quite a commitment to devote that much of the show to photography, and it was the only time I've shown the photocopies.

CS: **Your more recent photobooks are images from Texas. What drew you there?**

CW: In 2006, I was invited to do a residency at the Chinati Foundation, in Marfa, and as it was ending, we bought a house in the area. The first Marfa-based project was *Westtexaspsychosculpture*, in 2017. I had this strong notion that West Texas was a place that encouraged the idea of three dimensions and sculpture, and I was seeing things that could be sculptures. The first thing I saw that I wanted to take a picture of looked like a Cady Noland sculpture. The idea of keeping things and leaving them on your lawn is very local, and people there couldn't understand why I wanted to

From *Absent Without Leave*, 1993



This page:
View of *See Stop Run*, New York, October 2024
Photograph by Sinna Nasseri for *Aperture*

Opposite:
From the exhibition catalog *Christopher Wool: Secession*, 2001
Images on pages 76–81 and 83 courtesy the artist

photograph that. Martin Kippenberger had done a book called *Psychobuildings* (1988) where he photographed crazy architecture, and my title is a nod to Kippenberger's absurdism. With photobooks, you don't have one image—you often have something made up of a hundred photographs. Each image needs to have the qualities of a good photograph, but they're about what each image gives to the whole. I had the two books printed at the same time, *Westtexaspsychosculpture* and *Road* (2017).

CS: **The Marfa-based pictures have a brightness and clarity of detail that's very different from the dark, gritty quality of your earlier works. Was that a conscious shift?**

CW: There was a big switch. I started shooting digitally and adjusting my own images. I'd been doing it that way to a certain extent already, but I started learning more about Photoshop and started taking photography more seriously.

CS: ***Road* seems a distinct departure from your other photobooks.**

CW: Yes, I think so. This really was a concept right from the beginning, of driving down a road endlessly. You could almost think of it as a Möbius strip, except that you never get back to the beginning, you just keep going. I wanted that feeling of an endless road. I knew I was entering into a different look, but each project has its own decisions.

CS: **You also did two related books, *Yard* (2018) and *Swamp* (2019). Would you tell me about them?**

CW: They use the photographs from the previous two books. I decided to make double exposures of them for *Yard*. I thought it would heighten the psycho part of the sculpture. For *Swamp*, I went a step further and made quadruple exposures. Two of the layers are brown and white, and two are black and white. Taking photography this far toward abstraction was interesting for me, and it required some serious editing time. I really was in new territory working on this.

CS: **New territory photographically—but not visually?**

CW: Well, a little of both.

CS: **There were inkjet prints of the photographs from your most recent book, *Bad Rabbit* (2022), in the *See Stop Run* exhibition. How do they relate to your work?**

CW: They're photographs of my small wire pieces. When I first went to Marfa, in 2006, I found a piece of wire on the Chinati grounds that had beautiful curves to it, like what I was trying to get at with my drawing at the time. Later, I started finding more and more wire, and I began looking for them. That began my first venture into sculpture, the small

objects and larger cast works. For *Bad Rabbit*, I took photographs of the small wire sculptures on the floor in our house in Texas. I ignored scale and made them all a similar size in the photographs.

CS: **Where did the title *Bad Rabbit* come from?**

CW: It's the name of a ransomware cyberattack. I liked the sound of the phrase, and it was a bit of a nod to an old painting of mine, *Bad Dog* (1992).

CS: ***Bad Rabbit* also seems like a departure from your other books.**

CW: As a book, yes, but as an idea, no. It's to show all the possibilities. Books are this great way of making groups of images. An important part of the *See Stop Run* exhibition was having the books available. Everything in the exhibition was tied to something in the books. The show was put together with the idea that everything can be connected, the possibility that there are many different degrees of separation.

CS: **Do you have plans for another book?**

CW: Yes. I'm working on a publication about the exhibition. We have a concept that is still in discussion. I would like to illustrate the book with other people's photographs, visitors' social media and cell phone images, et cetera. People's reactions to the exhibition were such a large part of the project's success, and it's uncanny how much that enthusiasm shows in their photographs.

Carrie Springer is an independent curator and writer based in New York.