

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

CHRISTOPHER WOOL, Studio, New York, 1993.

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Christopher Wool

FIONN MEADE

...unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.

—Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City"¹⁾

Syntax for Minor Mishaps

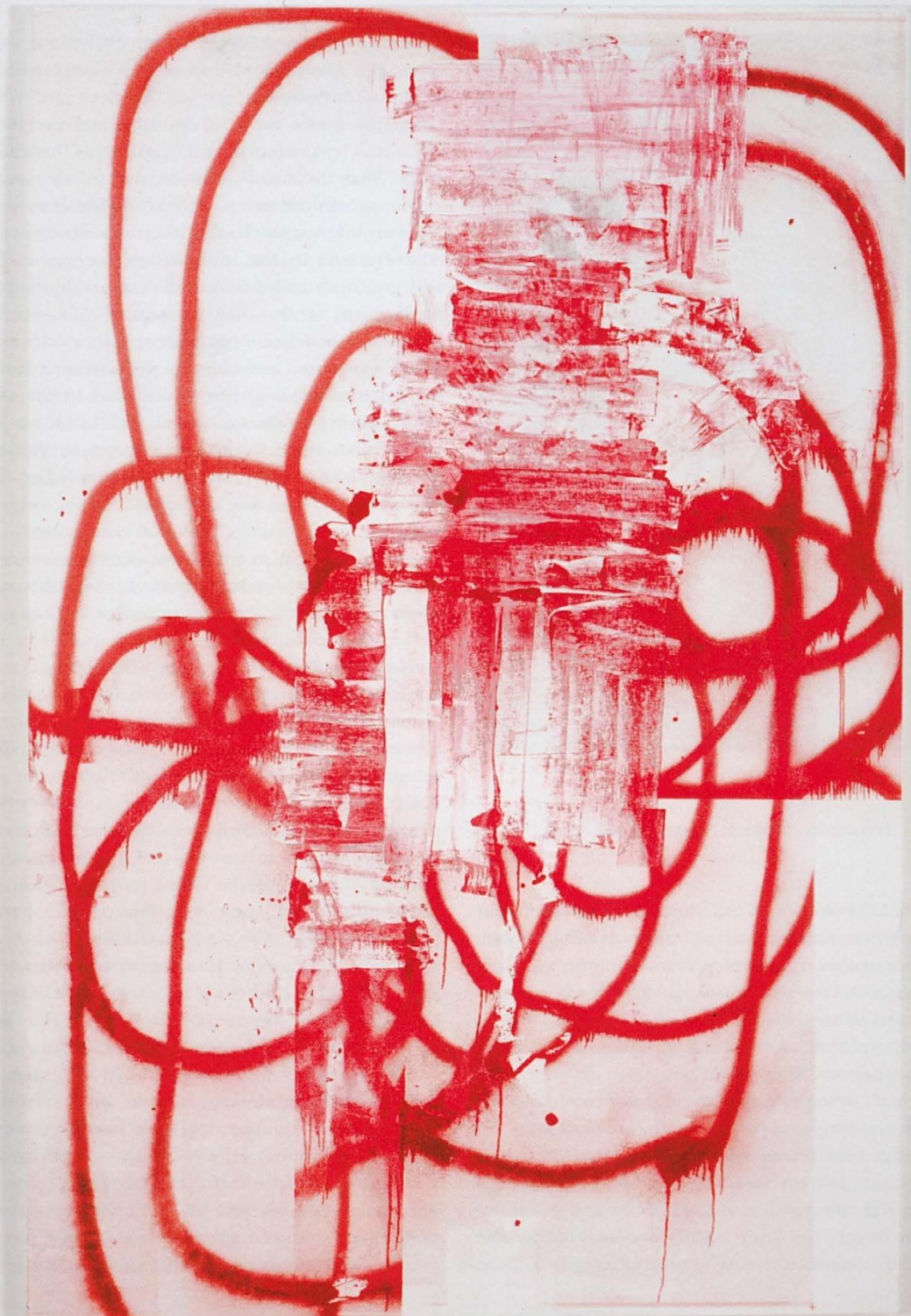
When Michel de Certeau writes of New York as a city of the perpetual present, he writes of a place where the paths of the "Wandersmänner,"²⁾ the walkers, counter a vision of urban order as viewed from above and afar, where the gambol of moving through the streets posits an inherent improvisation of so many "countless tiny deportations"³⁾ that a total administering of the city's contradictions is defied; where fissures open up in the over-saturation of signification that typifies the urban landscape, and a different set of demands as exist along the dispersed and inverted routes the walker encounters can begin to take on "a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation."⁴⁾ For, in de Certeau's argument, it is the tacking route of the walker, literally and figuratively lacking a place in the restless, impending wake of the next decision, that makes possible a transition from lacking a place to "an indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper."⁵⁾ In thinking about

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Christopher Wool's recent paintings and silkscreens, it is helpful to have de Certeau's essay in mind. The shifting nature of Wool's reduced abstractions plays on just such a syntactical back and forth as can make an indefinite proper of absence, and likewise turn cancel, delete, and erasure toward positives.

That Wool's painting style has long owed something to the dispersed style of the urban passerby is readily acknowledged by the artist's own in-the-street anecdote of "sex" and "luv" appearing before him in black spray paint on a white van, the initial inspiration for a series of stenciled text paintings that catapulted Wool's career in the late eighties.⁶⁾ Similarly, his first-hand experience of the No Wave post-punk downtown scene of the late seventies—and interrelated experimental films by James Nares, Amos Poe, John Lurie, and others of the same loose milieu—recalls a moment of anti-aesthetic style wed to urban decay that has continued to influence Wool's work. There exists, however, a more directly applicable enactment of "tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation" in Wool's *East Broadway Breakdown* (2003), a photo book project that captures the

CHRISTOPHER WOOL, UNTITLED, 2001, enamel on linen, 90 x 60" / OHNE TITEL, Email auf Leinen, 228,5 x 152,5 cm,
(COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK)



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CHRISTOPHER WOOL, *Studio, New York, 1994.*

artist's 1994–95 nocturnal wanderings between studio and home in the form of hundreds of black-and-white snapshots. The emptied-out night scowl of Manhattan's Lower East Side and Chinatown conveys a longstanding interest in urban entropy that is erased, replaced, and covered up in layers of residual appearance and disappearance.

Crucial to understanding the procedural, layered, and increasingly sequential turn in Wool's recent paintings and prints, *Breakdown* updates the street encounter first invoked in the word paintings. As image after image records the infinite detritus of the city at night, the frail codes of control, that are revealed after most human agency has gone inside,

appear: overturned furniture hunkers along empty sidewalks, splatter and drip adorns shuttered storefronts and doorways, police barriers and rolling chain-link fence seem to multiply, and everywhere stains and leaks of unknown origin cross the walker's path. That the inside/outside shift of this project also occurs in the paintings is related to Wool's turn from an interest in effaced interior abstractions—as characterized by the mid- to late-nineties rollover and graffiti canvases that used readymade wallpaper applications and other decorative insignia as a basis—to a renewed engagement with modes of the urban exterior. The challenge of how such forlorn, baleful tracings might be transposed to the studio work takes prominence in all of the subsequent work. As Benjamin Buchloh has written in relation to the work of Simon Hantaï and Jacques Villeglé, the "dialectics of painting's dispersal"⁷—a fairly apt description of Wool's ongoing formal concerns—has repeatedly sought to transfer street encounters into abstract procedures that might counter insistence upon the authentic mark as inherent and ultimately definitive of painting.⁸

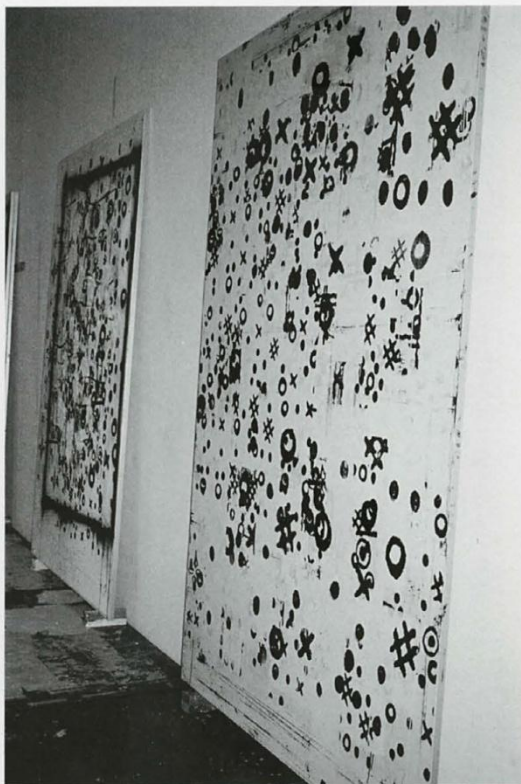
How Wool's paintings take advantage of an in-between position in the remarkably self-conscious history of abstract painting has been repeatedly observed, between immediate gesture and mediated remove, between Pollock and Warhol, between a retinal quiver and allover legibility of process, between paroxysm and cool. But to follow this condition in his newer work is to take note of the increased temporality that occurs in Wool's presentation of a series—the rapid jump now encouraged between large canvases to the punctuated skip of a framed silkscreen, back to attempts at reading sequence, the inevitable falter that ensues, and so into the specific incidents of a given canvas. These are surfaces where intrusion and retreat interrupt the trajectory of each spray-painted mark. Taking place at different times in the enamel's attempt to set, the solvent-laden rubbing varies in intensity from the grey smear of immediate erasure to the recalcitrant rubbing out of a long-standing line that thereafter bears trace of its absence, losing enamel but maintaining a ghosted outline within the composition. Links between works are further complicated by rotating the canvases—as

evinced by the up, down, and side-to-side direction of the drip down—indicating a session-like approach of attending to more than one painting at a time in order to further elaborate serial yet conjunctive relationships.

These “tiny deportations” result in an experience of time rather than depth as an index emerges from the mix of clouded gesture and lacerated crossings, one that makes a positive of cancel and activates Wool’s propulsive vision of null and void further into the frame with each pass. For even as illusionistic space seems to break through, the afterwards of erasure always intercedes, rendering such traditional notions as *pentimenti* largely performative.⁹⁾ And while the hand remains conspicuously removed by spray paint and rag, a re-assertion of expressive gesture—though impoverished and reputed—is increasingly prominent. This move toward what was previously disallowed is familiar as Wool often overturns his process: whether reversing painting procedures in his silkscreen enlargements—where a splotch, drip, spiral, or wash of paint is often zoomed in on to give a molecular, microscopic feel of immediacy—or by foregoing the hit-record status of the text paintings, Wool has repeatedly moved away from hallmarks. As he has said, “You take color out, you take gesture out—and then later you can put them in.”¹⁰⁾

To claim that a certain post-punk pedigree of cool-yet-advanced-directness was lost when Wool stopped producing the immediate, jarring pleasure of the text paintings, might be accurate, but the formal balance of the recent work is hard won and expansive. The peculiar syntax of abstraction holds even as it repels, courting an increased austerity despite surfaces pullulating with anxious activity. And perhaps this is why color is so restricted, nothing beyond the black enamel and shallow gray of mark and smear and the muted brown, blue, and sienna of the prints. Wool has likewise disavowed the playful release of idiosyncratic titles—a characteristic that extends from the appropriated titles of the early text paintings to more recent works like the 2001 silkscreen *MINOR MISHAP*, taken from a hard bop jazz tune recorded by Freddie Hubbard, Tommy Flanagan, and others.¹¹⁾ Indeed, not unlike the transition that occurred in 1960s avant-garde jazz from the

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CHRISTOPHER WOOL, *Studio*, New York, 1997.

still blues-based forms of hard bop to the collapse and build sequences of a musician like Ornette Coleman, Wool has moved from adeptly cool in style to uniquely complicated in procedure and presentation.

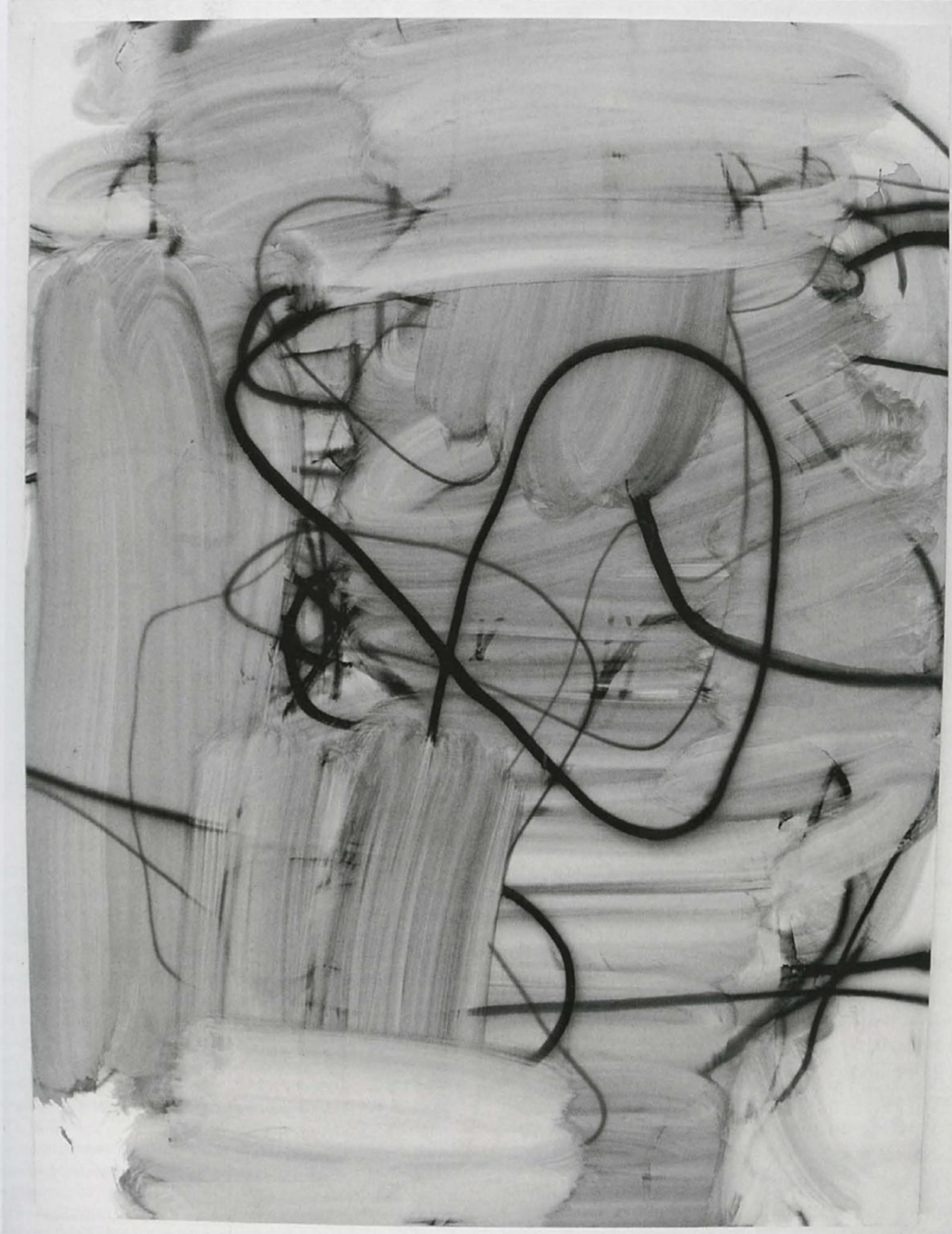
A vertical imposition is also worth noting here as the most recent paintings have reached more than ten feet, surpassing the doorway-like scale of previous works. Grouped closely together in his tenth solo show at Luhring Augustine, Wool’s newest series pushes a sense of discomfort even in the Chelsea-scale grandeur of the gallery; while the metonymic possibility of an individual canvas intimating a graffiti-laced wall or storefront is called forth by how easily a single work swallows a one-to-one viewer to

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CHRISTOPHER WOOL, UNTITLED, 2008, enamel on linen, 126 x 96" / OHNE TITEL, Email auf Leinen, 320 x 244 cm.

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CHRISTOPHER WOOL, UNTITLED, 2006, enamel on linen, 96 x 72" / OHNE TITEL, Email auf Leinen, 244 x 183 cm.

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painting encounter, the work resists such readings via the uneasy proximity of the canvases. A deliberate crowding of the works appears to ward against the elegant status that an isolated Wool painting—removed from its syntax—has come to represent for some when viewed in a private collection or museum. Orphaned from its brood, a single Wool canvas can elicit a “got it” moment, or a similarly over-simplified reading: of the interior-minded abstractions as nothing more than elegant, slightly derelict patinas. It is this legibility that lent Wool’s eighties output a kind of immediately iconic, sought-after status that has only increased over the years.

And yet isn’t there something of filmmaking—a stated early aspiration of Wool’s—in this structured tension between performance and editorial remove?¹² It is detectable not only in the formal semblance that could be explored between Wool’s recent abstract work and the scratch, perforate, and coat experiments of direct filmmakers like Len Lye, Harry Smith, and Stan Brakhage—where layered abstract marks become mobile motifs repeated at the velocity of a flicker—but it is primarily visible in the sequential underscore of Wool’s project. As with the many book projects devoted to his paintings—all fastidiously designed and edited under his direction—the image after image encounter is key to how Wool intends the work to be viewed.¹³ In book reproductions, Wool will often limit the camera’s view by positioning a beam or wall as partial obstruction, and, in a related move, paintings often appear in the photographs propped against the wall like separate takes waiting to be edited into a final cut.¹⁴

Likewise, the silkscreens cull from a photographic index of prior moments in the painting process, allowing accidents and outtakes to become part of the sequence. In their composite character—previously brought together in quadrants that echoed the evidentiary axis of an x-ray and so highlighted the glitch and remove of the print process—the silkscreens now provide a surprising amount of depth and resolve, encouraging the eye to rest and quell before jumping back to the nervy present of the canvases. And while much has been made of Wool’s reliance on silkscreen as a kind of Warholian maneuver informed by the “Pictures” discussion of appro-

priation that immediately preceded Wool’s arrival upon the New York art scene, it is equally important to note that Wool’s technique is one of quoting himself—and so references a different inflection from Warhol’s repertoire—and of quoting paintings that continually risk an ongoing, fraught relationship with how gesture, performance, and immediate environs can still relate to painting as a medium. Distinct from some who claim Wool’s influence, the decoding employment of silkscreen and other print procedures unleashes a series of decisive moves that will become formative in Wool’s serial approach.

The perpetual present of Wool’s paintings may be attenuated, striated, and highly edited but it refuses retrospective terms for the medium as it continues to unsettle the relation between active and residual spaces. Far from merely mapping the route or process taken in a composition, Wool makes room for voids and clearings to repeatedly occur and cancel each other within and across his paintings; not unlike the walker recuperating from a rented universe of emptied-out places, Wool continues to liberate spaces for temporary occupation even as he places more and more obstacles in his way.

1) Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 91.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 93. “They are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”

3) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 97.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

6) As mentioned and discussed by Thomas Crow in “STREET-CRIES IN NEW YORK: On the Painting of Christopher Wool,” *Christopher Wool* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998), p. 282.

7) Benjamin Buchloh, “Hantai, Villeglé, and the Dialectics of Painting’s Dispersal,” *October*, no. 91 (Winter 2000), pp. 25–35.

8) Another Paris-based painting practice of interest in considering Wool’s recent work is Martin Barré’s sixties serial spray paint abstractions recently on view at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

9) Rosalind E. Krauss, “Cy’s Up,” *Artforum*, vol. 33 (September 1994), p. 118. Rosalind Krauss has written incisively on the performative nature of graffiti in relation to the work of Cy Twombly, an artist important in considering Wool’s later work: “For graffiti is a medium of marking that has precise, and unmistakable, characteristics. First, it is performative, suspending representation in favor of action: I mark you, I cancel you, I dirty you. Second, it is violent: always an invasion of a space that is not

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CHRISTOPHER WOOL, *Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon*, 2003.

the marker's own, it takes illegitimate advantage of the surface of inscription, violating it, mauling it, scarring it. Third, it converts the present tense of the performative into the past tense of the index: it is the trace of an event, torn away from the presence of the marker."

10) As quoted in "Artists in Conversation: Chuck Close, Philip Taaffe, Sue Williams, Christopher Wool. Moderated by Alan Schwartzman" in *Birth of the Cool: American Painting from Georgia O'Keeffe to Christopher Wool* (Zürich: Kunsthau, Hatje-Cantz, 1997), p. 34.

11) An interesting side note, *Minor Mishap* (2001) is owned by artist Richard Prince, as detailed in "Christopher Wool," *ANP Quarterly*, no.1 (2005), p. 37.

12) Coincident with the "Pictures" discussion of appropriation that dominated New York via the writings of Douglas Crimp in

the late seventies and early eighties, Wool returned to painting in 1981 after a two-year flirtation with filmmaking that included studies at NYU.

13) Investigating one's own work through book projects is no doubt an influence from early exposure to Dieter Roth's many book projects (Wool's parents had a varied collection of Roth's work). A not unrelated Roth-like tendency is exploring possible shifts in his work through collaboration. Far from predictable, the long list of Wool collaborators includes Richard Prince and Josh Smith but also Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Harmony Korine, and, most recently, Richard Hell.

14) This mirrors a Wool habit of propping canvases along a studio wall in order to edit down to works that he will then continue with on a different floor of his studio. "Good on Paper," *Another Magazine* (Summer 2006), p. 126.