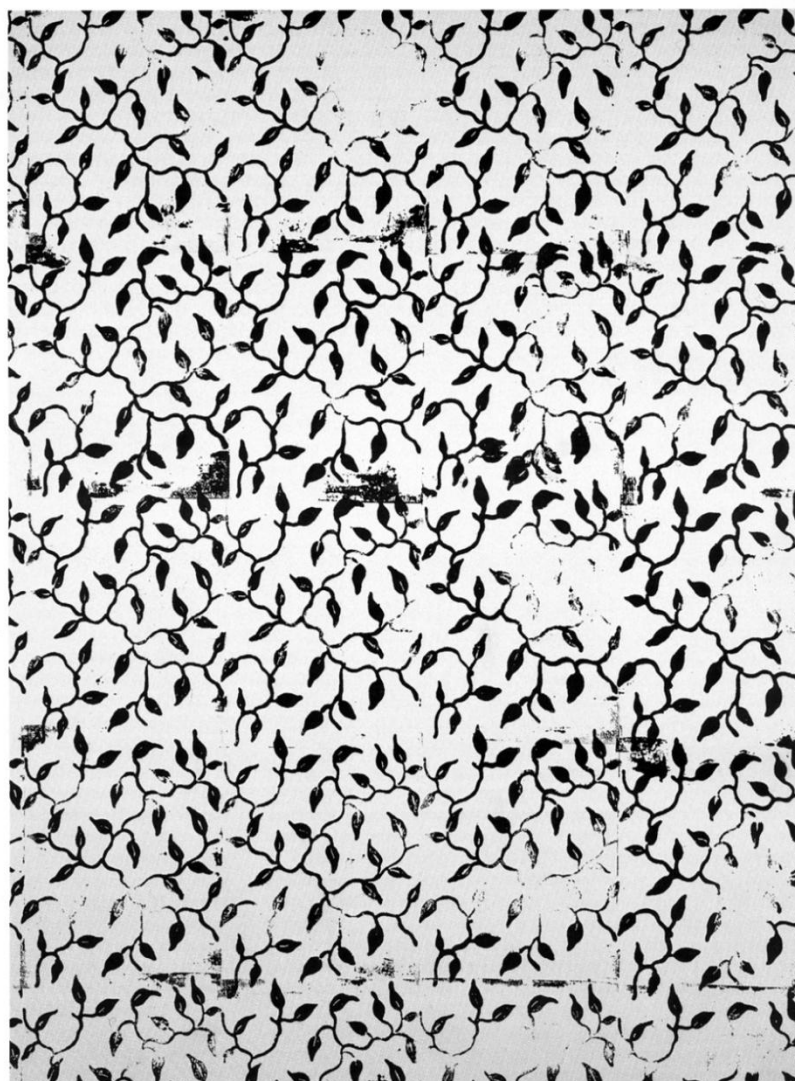# Patterns of Intent

Bruce W. Ferguson

Christopher Wool is a painter by default and by defiance: painting is his medium but not his message. Wool chooses to paint almost in spite of painting's limitations, and his works gain some of their power from the original perversity of that

Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, **1988**, alkyd and flashe on aluminum, 96 × 72″.

choice. His painterly activities do not stem from a need to justify a tradition of painting, nor are they an attempt to address a historical set of questions within painting's critical discourse, as though that in itself could guarantee his meaning. Like other artists of his generation, his influences range from film and television to literature and other discursive systems — advertising, politics, sports, news, music, etc. — all mediated through language and photography. Wool accepts that he is, and that his paintings are, at any moment, within what Richard Prince calls "wild history," subject to the intertextual meeting of various discourses.

If Wool's painting trajectory were diagramed it would crisscross the activities of personalities as various as Muhammad Ali, James Brown (the singer), Jean-Luc Godard, Philip Guston, the Fugs, the Lounge Lizards, Sherrie Levine, Bruce Nauman, Dieter Roth, Martin Scorsese, and Andy Warhol, to name but a few. And the more recent word paintings might be seen as strongly connected to and inflected by the linguistic productions of the likes of Lenny Bruce, Spoonie Gee,

George Clinton, Jenny Holzer, Last Poets, Public Enemy, Hubert Selby, and Big Youth. If these seem eclectic lists that is because his paintings admit to heritages that are diverse, even eccentric, an admission that imposes a cultural self-consciousness prior to the act of painting.

Wool's strategy as a painter, then, is to plunge deeply into this culture, acting complicitly with its essential tensions, in order to bring new intensities to the level of visibility. Rather than attempting to secure an autonomous space for painting apart from the vernacular culture of signs, he paints to encounter the culture from within its constraints. He insistently welcomes the impurities of cultural collision because they increase the potential of each painting's interaction within a political field, however narrow those parameters might prove for art.[1]

Wool's paintings confront the areas of decoration, design, intersubjectivity, language, and signage into which Modern painting has already been absorbed in the process of its commodification. Pattern painting in the 1970s reminded Modernist practitioners of the way in which avant-garde art had often been unconsciously engaged with decoration and the values of repetition fundamental to design. Wool's early "roller" paintings, begun in 1985, with their floral images, effortlessly admit to this (now) forgone relationship with decor by introducing mass-producible images as their leitmotiv. But pattern painting didn't complete Modernism's course of development as much as it acted as an unacceptable reminder of one of its constraints. In a continuing opposition to pattern painting and performance-based art, Minimalist procedural painting of the same time continued Modernism's engagement with a poetic appearance of facture and its desires for transcendence, rigorously and rationally avoiding any hint of passion and furthering an abstract rationale for painting. Surprisingly, Wool's floral paintings also enact that Minimalist scenario by an application of paint whose methodical processes are stringently yet arbitrarily defined, forfeiting any sign of personal flair. Wool's roller paintings, then, are blatantly contradictory; tense on the surface, they exceed and bypass any ideological position. Modernism's classical constructions of cool abstraction and Modernism's baroque decorative compositions are forced here into an uneasy co-conspiracy, made to lie together uncomfortably, with the dangerous certainty of a liaison.

As decoration, the floral paintings remain arch and aloof — products of a pre-fabricated rubber roller — the distanced results of an almost mechanical action. The detachment provided by the painting tool resists a full fall into the sensuality of adornment. And, in many ways, the floral image chosen is already too banal and too exhausted to be completely decorative. Although Wool's artistic procedures

are a product of Minimalism's ethic of paint application, the eminently prosaic results are just enough in the world to retain their bourgeois cultural connotations as well as to function formally in terms of figure and ground. Wool's "figurative abstractions," if they can be called that, avoid the usual arguments between abstraction and figuration, between style and content, between surface and depth, by encouraging all sets of differences and all sets of painting faiths to coexist, if impatiently, on the aluminum surface of each work.

Whereas Robert Ryman might attempt to resist a decorative label through more and more assiduously defined and refined procedures of (un)painting and (un)framing, and Robert Kushner might celebrate the enticements of decoration in a personal kaleidoscope of forms, Wool's roller paintings deliberately equivocate between the extremes of Modernist painting's binary opposites.[2] The routinely applied images delay a historical reading in favor of a visual dialogue between pattern and printing, between paint and image, between poetry and embellished rhetoric.

Wool's consistent and almost exclusive use of black and white paint allows for an equivalent neither/nor or both/and visual oscillation to postpone the choice of any single principle of painting, to suspend any move toward belief or ideology. The wetly painted surfaces of most of his works approach the expressiveness of a Willem de Kooning or a Jean-Michel Basquiat, all sloppy and gestural and indicative of a visceral undertaking and unconscious desires. At the same time, the trace of the tool—roller, stamp, or stencil—sustains a register of noninvolvement, even indifference. Wool's detached acts of painting still suggest a strong sensibility—a Warholian stylistic mark of a personality that impiously emerges through rendered anonymity.

A number of Wool's paintings approach the pure abstraction of earlier Modernist monochromes. In some, white paint has been dripped onto black paint; in others, silver paint has been dripped onto black paint; and there are at least three in which black paint has been dripped so lavishly as to create a continuous surface. The unequally dense surfaces range from an openness that allows a full visual cognizance of how they have been painted to more closed areas whose covered surfaces mimic the alloverness of a Color Field painting, revealing next to nothing of the gestures by which they were composed. But even in the almost-black paintings, viewers are denied entrance into the "sublime" space of monochrome abstraction, as they are inescapably reflected back to themselves in an uneasy mirror formed of bubbly veneers of paint. It is tempting to see these works as parodies of the monochromatic search of Modernist painters; to see them as ready-made signifiers of sublimity that mock transcendence. And yet the paintings resist this impulse to parodic interpretation because each work has all the qualities that attend serious paintings and serious research into order and chaos: individual marks and repeated formulas, individual expression and cultural determinations, and so on. Each expectation of the Modern viewer attuned to art-historical categories is countered internally—visually—by paradoxes or contradictions. Yet the apparent lack of subjectivity equally forecloses any romantic narrative possibility. The image may mean something, but not enough for major significance to be anchored to a metanarrative of heroic grandeur. At the same time it means more than the model or facsimile from which it is taken.

In the floral paintings and the black and almost-black paintings, Wool established a deliberately insecure ground of inquiry and a conscious set of inconsistencies from which to pursue his work. This was continued in the paintings whose stamped surfaces have a grill-like visual effect. Working both to and from the grid cipher that controls so much of Modernist painting's history, the repeated curled emblem of these works performs somewhat as the floral image had before, stopping the
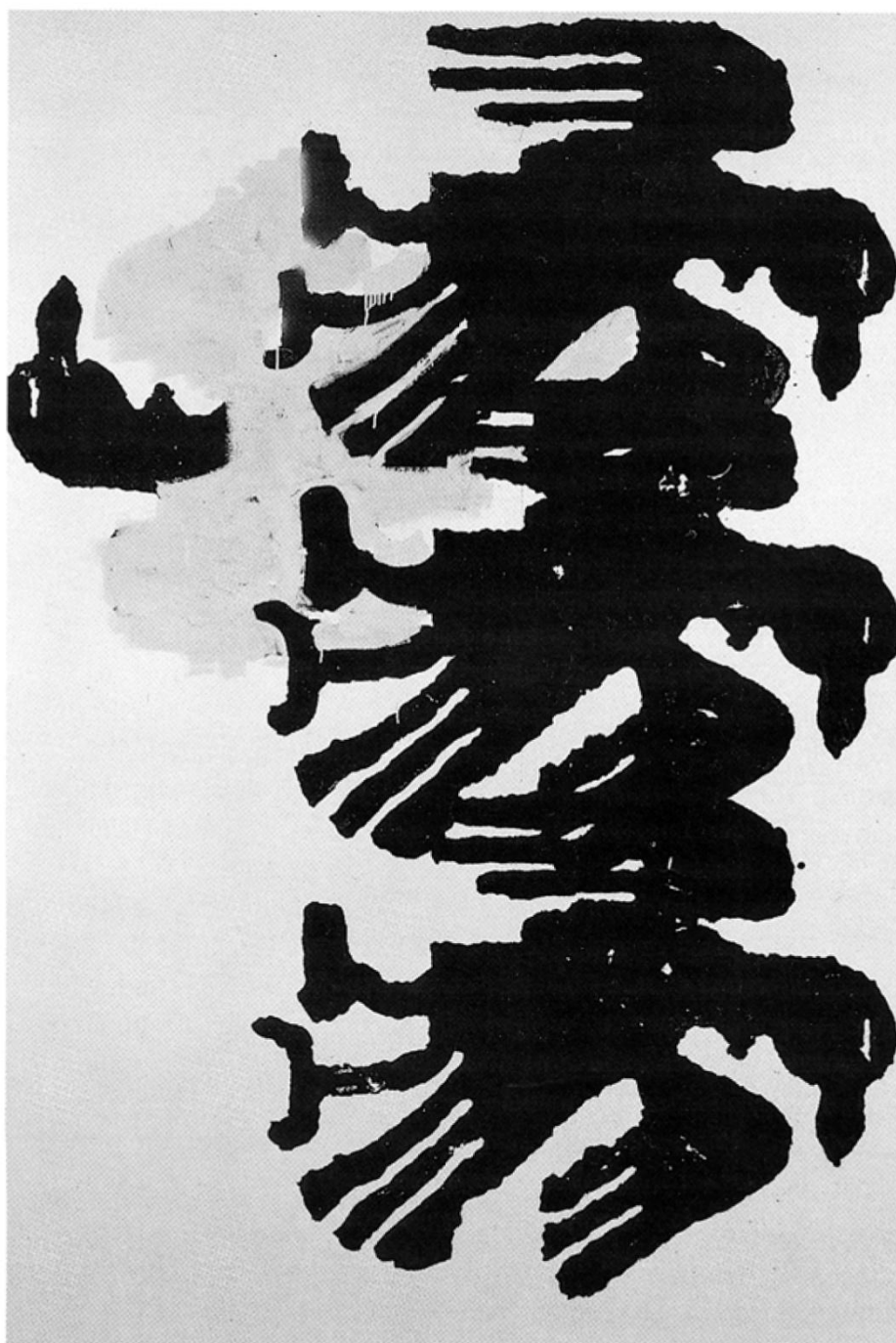
Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1990, alkyd and acrylic on aluminum, 90 × 60″.

viewer at the painting's surface, acting as a warning against entries and territories beyond it. The stamped paintings also appear iconic or symbolic, but the icon or symbol presented is so vague and generic that, upon scrutiny, it immediately withdraws from specific meaning. It's not simply that the works of Modernism could be absorbed as decoration, these slightly smeared paintings seem to say, but also that any attempt to go beyond the surface — to transcend the specific — is accompanied by foreboding.

But it is in the so-called "language" paintings, which he began to make in 1987, that Wool reached a maturity in which his interrogations of painting and culture have taken on an even larger consequence and force. If Modernist painting's attempts to exempt itself from design, decoration, photography, and other cultural sign systems have been a failure, nevertheless, in maintaining its integrity as a "visual art," it has powerfully resisted the verbal. That resistance has been signaled by a belief in the viscerality of painting and in an image world beyond language, or perhaps prior to it. Abstract paintings, especially, have been confirmed in art's discourse as something like Julia Kristeva's explanation of the *"sémiotique"* (semiotic), an organization of significance that is primary or fundamental, existing before (language) meaning itself.

Such an attitude might still be viable, but it is ever more difficult to establish. For the fact is that, despite all attempts to liberate it, painting would appear to be sentenced to the "prison-house of language," fated to be repressed and reinscribed in terms other than its own.[3] Michel Foucault has suggested that there is an "infinite relation" of tension between words and images, and that it has often been art's goal to keep the difficult distance between the two discourses alive — to stress the relation beyond repair. However, examining the evidence of history, which is written after all, it becomes clear that language's inevitable responsibility has been to keep art in line — to return it to the kinships, affinities, and comforts of language's home ground.

Titles are unusually off-frame and discreetly powerful, but in Wool's language paintings, they become the very works themselves, moved to the center of the frame where their linguistic force is put in question. Paradoxically all of them are untitled. What Wool has done by using words as a visual subject is to restress the relation and to undo its mutual recognition of difference by conflating the acts of painting and printing. By reproducing language in paintings as the subject of paintings before they can be reproduced in a language context, such as this magazine, he sets up another set of interrogations of painting, authorship, quotation, visualizing, and reading. Words in these paintings are first seen rather than read, decontextualized and liberated from the sentence's progressions and narrations. Then one apprehends them in an almost vertiginous act of interpretation that holds both seeing and reading in a persistent if ambiguous balance. Appre-

hended in paint, the words PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE, for instance, act as signifiers of both plea and pleasure, resisting a narrative denouement, a closure of meaning.

Word usage as both subject and object is an extension of the split desires that command all of Wool's work. Repeated, the words are deflated by the fact of reproduction, by the risk of repetition. But repeated, they are also emphasized, even made hyperbolic, that other use of repetition. Encouraged by their large, almost human scale to seem more than they are, these single words also hazard a depreciation of meaning. And both the scale and the materiality of paint can then offer the viewer a psychological weight of (dis)association that the printed page or a commercially produced sign usually cannot.

The nouns in a 1989–90 series—PARANOIAC, PESSIMIST, COMEDIAN, PRANK-STER, INSOMNIAC, HYPOCRITE, PERSUADER, TERRORIST, and SPOKESMAN among them—go a bit further, posing unanswerable questions. Are these words implicated in a process of naming that is always proper, because categorical, or are they naming a question that might be improper to ask? Is it an accusation made of the viewer or of the artist? Or is it the description of a third party, an interloper who might unbalance the relation between viewer and painting? Who is who and for (or against) whom? What kind of communication is taking place at this compressed level of language? Floating nouns, each defining a kind of hyper role of discursive possibility and persuasion, a kind of psychology and a kind of politics, shift uncomfortably in the gallery space between immediate viewer recognition and the immediate dislocation caused by the noun's homelessness. TRO/JNH/ORS might evoke the Greek legend of the Trojan horse or, today, a Japanese heavy metal band, or it might signify the great legacy of painting itself—an allusion to painting as the subversive container for disguised and unforeseen consequences. As language is distorted to an uncomfortable and unwieldy scale in these works, its legacy of enlightenment is diminished to the level of T-shirt literacy or rap music's mechanical bursts of rhyming couplets. The paintings move into the world on the back of language, charging the contemporary space of vision with poetics and diversity, with seriousness and comedic impact.

Another series of paintings, begun in 1989, takes the connotative space of the four-letter word to accomplish something like what the word says—to urge its performative value into the open. AWOL and AMOK are logo-approaching words that mean more than their austerity might suggest. Already evocative, here they also seem to long for other letters—to want to become A WOOL or A MOCK, for example. Even in themselves, they overstate the military disturbances they stand

PRANKSTER
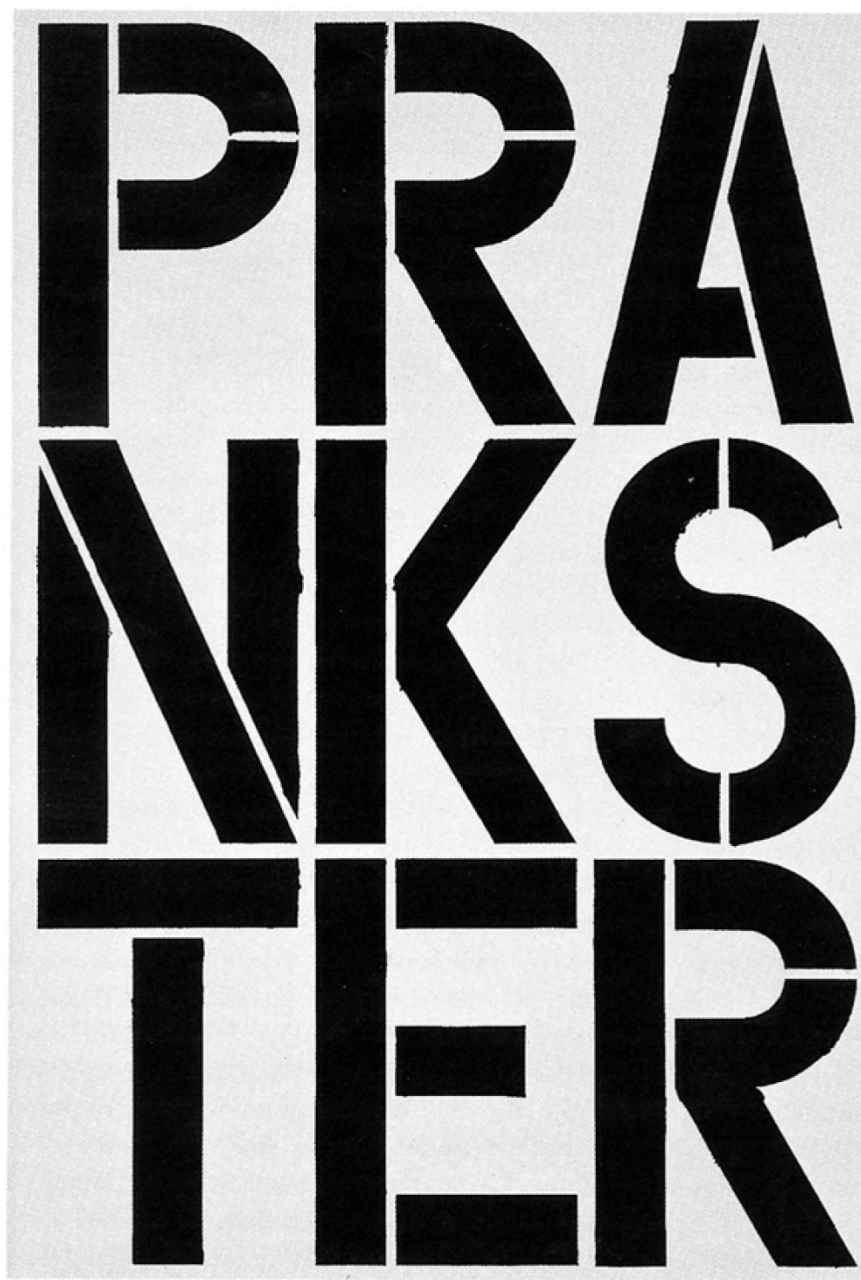
Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1989, alkyd and acrylic on aluminum, 96 × 64".

for, the betrayals of reason that they both describe and somehow enact. Other paintings like TRBL (from Raymond Chandler's line, "Trouble is my business") are capitalized and capitalized on by the elimination of vowels ("True Blue" and "Terrible" have been deduced by different viewers). Reduced to their consonants, these four-letter words are undependable, promiscuous even as nouns, truncated and opened to the possibilities of new vowels and, thus, interventions of reinter-pretation. The gridlock of Modernism is undone by the wanton word's formation.

What distinguishes Wool's work from pattern painting and other paintings using language as subject is the unexpected anger, even rage, that informs it. As with many of his contemporaries, Wool's options have been increasingly narrowed by the history and reception of painting. No longer able to rely on "pure," "natural," or "instinctive" strategies of artists even just a few years older, he shares the young artist's frustration at being out of time or out of sync with the "normalized" discourse in which painting was uninterrogated as an art form. Just as almost every adjective in this paragraph's description of earlier painting, to be vital, must be set in quotation marks, so a painting today must face the reality of an ironic, if not cynical, environment of reception. To overcome and to work through this hyperbolized state, Wool has accordingly upped the ante and increased the force of the subject by a compression and massing of the words and images on his paintings' neutral surfaces. Lying just below them is an emotional resentment that paradoxically gives the works their force as an analytic and rational alternative to painting. The highly charged experience reveals itself slowly and almost contemplatively. Initially masked, the high hopes and sincere rhetoric make their entrance unobstrusively and late, yet they are always present.

The new paintings are visually aggressive, demanding attention and then denying the possibility of locating that attention anywhere but in the psychological and cultural associations of the viewer. An oscillation between chaos and order is set into motion, like that of an expatriate learning a language without control of its nuances and socializing tendencies. Some gestalt, visual or cultural, is inevitable given the geometric order that prevails, but it is not a happy or a complete one, grammatically assured and visually complete. Rather, the word paintings signal the desire for completion, the desire for a viewer to be complicit with meaning and a desire for an anarchistic pulse beyond language to be maintained as well. If painting can still forcefully offer the idea of such freedom and such bonding, despite how complicated its strategies and procedures have, of necessity, become, then Wool's work strongly points to the relevance of its raptures today in ways that are both critical and compliant, both estranging and strange.□

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1. Christopher Wool's books and catalogues, which deconstruct his own paintings and reproduce them in formats from which they may have originally emerged, reinforce his indifference to each painting's importance and instead emphasize the notion of distribution over production.
2. I am using "equivocate" specifically to evoke Jean-François Lyotard's use of it: "Equivocality is thus not a state of provisional obscurity, but a state of tension between (at least) two opposing signifieds searching for their signifier. There is an inequality between signifier and signified because at a given moment there are more signifieds to be expressed than signifiers to express them. The equality of signifier and signified is never reached, there is no end to equivocality." Jean-François Lyotard, "Analyzing Speculative Discourse as Language-game," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 267. The image-text relation, when sublated as it is in Wool's paintings, is always a presentation of equivocation rather than of ambiguity. For a fuller thesis on visual oxymorons as the equivocal trope par excellence, see my "Paradoxical Images," *Abstraction in Question*, exhibition catalogue, Sarasota, Fla.: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 25–30.
3. The idea of the "prison-house of language," and the dread that accompanies it, is Friedrich Nietzsche's. Although it is impossible to believe that everything *is* language, it is not difficult to believe that everything is *in* language. This is best articulated by Roland Barthes when he writes, "There is no place without language: one cannot contrast language, what is verbal (and even verbose), with some pure and dignified space which would be the space of reality and truth, a space outside language. Everything is language, or more precisely, language is everywhere. It permeates the whole of reality; there is nothing real without language. Any attitude that consists in hiding from language behind a nonlanguage or a supposedly neutral or insignificant language is an attitude of bad faith. The only possible subversion in language is to displace things." Roland Barthes, "Pleasure/Writing/Reading," in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale, New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 162.