



There doesn't seem to be a fitting word for picture literacy—like *picturacy*. Everybody is "picturate" in their own way, depending on what pictures they've seen and how they've learned to look at them. There were a number of shows in New York this fall that used multiple images to enunciate very literate picture essays. Joseph Kosuth, Martha Rosler, and Michael Joaquin Grey's new work sequences many images along the gallery walls in sentence and paragraph-like structures. Curator and critic Douglas Blau and artist Mira Schor employ more idiosyncratic grammars to organize and elaborate their sequences. Analogies between pictures and writing underwrite these picto-linguistic practices. They each actively build or curate from a language *within* pictures, a language *between* pictures.

Grey's openended format sequences 16-by-20-inch mounted photographs on a series of long shelves. The images group into loosely related themes oriented around the eternally recurring pair: nature/culture. Images of fruit, for instance, pass through slot machines, agriculture, and commerce, while topographic maps, travel images, and roadkill circumnavigate similar branching analogies. A dreamy rationalism contrasts Grey's work with the pedantry of Rosler and Kosuth's related practices. A blurry rephotographed image from Leni Riefenstahl's pictures of the Nuba people constitute the only appropriated image, and provides a self-conscious editorial spin to this essay of travel pictures.

Blau's "Genre: The Conversation Piece" is divided into three salon-style installations of hundreds of photographs and reproductions. Like his earlier installation "The Naturalist Gathers" (1992), a dense clustering and uniform framing of related imagery diminishes differences between painting, commercial illustration, photojournalism, and film stills, while amplifying characteristics of genre. The imagined, staged, historical, and contemporary easily coexist while the rhetorical potential of imagery floats across different times and practices. Whereas "The Naturalist Gathers" gave a picture of itself, as it were, in the way it catalogued pictures according to subject matter, "The Conversation Piece" is auto-figurative in its relationship to the spectator. It proposes various versions of the spectator as silent auditor.

To converse with a picture, to enter into its fiction, requires a certain loss of boundaries—a suspending of disbelief. Blau's arrangement of closely related fictions allows a viewer to slip from one picture to another without completely recovering those lapsed boundaries. His images of people conversing range from large public assemblies to small conferences, gaming situations, committees, parties, domestic settings, and a solitary phone caller. The act of conversing is a flexible instrument of social bonding. Do these images converse with each other? Except in the case of a Whistler self-portrait, nestled within a cluster of hazy landscapes and figures at leisure, work, or travel, there are almost no figures that return the spectator's gaze. The viewer's role develops as a trans-historic eavesdropper. By not providing any supporting background material, Blau solicits a lively subjective interaction with the narrative possibilities within and between images. He uses the collection as an instrument for his own meta-storytelling.



Cataloguing, cross referencing, and comparing these images produce not the shape of a clarified category, but a shifting cloud of differential relationships, an unfolding of imaginative sense. Blau stimulates an examination of the ways genre, myth, and ideology are rhetorically interrelated and articulated in the picturing of social groups.

This exhibition is itself, of course, a conversation piece. Like the work of a nineteenth-century gentleman naturalist, we are presented with gathered specimens, seemingly detached from the imperatives of commerce. The intimate character of ownership is rendered paradoxical in a gallery salesroom; the particular history of each image and its origin in Blau's personal history is something no one else could own. Like conversation, each image's existence floats always between. The grandiose, obsessive eloquence of "The Conversation Piece" scrambles the interpersonal and the inter-pictorial.

If Blau's project develops from an accumulation of many little parts, Mira Schor's proceeds from something ostensibly singular into something plural. She often uses handwriting, painting phrases like "area of denial" or "it's modernism, stupid," across strings of canvases. Schor's format, like the flow of English writing, is unrelentingly left to right. Stuttering repetitions of word segments stagger along as our efforts to read upstream are poetically rewarded. The breaks between canvases are used as enjambments within words. "Tu" and "id," painted on separate canvases, flank the letter "p" in a sequence that spells the word "stupid." The phrase terminates with the suffix "ism" going down a toilet. Isolated fragments blossom into luminous wholes as attention lingers and sense is detoured.

Schor's work articulates a longing in the form of a polemic. She engages the mark-making process of painting to construct analogies between writing and the body—for instance, in her use of punctuation as genitalia. Schor recognizes that our sense of touch is already mingled with sight, through the agency of the hand. Writing, particularly script, sustains loose connections to speech and the mouth, as well as the eyes, which guide and survey its flow. Writing merges into painting and grows in some of Schor's works like hair around organizing punctuation marks. Penises appear variously at the end of a phrase, as a period, or at its beginning, as a writing tool. In *Semicolon in Flesh* (all works, 1993), the semicolon articulates a pause in the form of an anus and vagina. The surreal feminism of Schor's work provides new associations to familiar images; feminism's recoding of representations of women and the medium of painting has created opportunities for pictorial imagination oddly congruent with some surrealist aspirations. The historical association of oil paint with representations of flesh—understood as patriarchal—circulates in Schor's transformed images. She reads those traditions, so to speak, upstream. A politics of pleasure informs a carnal polemic. Schor's paintings contribute to a feminist reconsideration of the terms analogy, anatomy, and representation. The long horizontal works *It's Modernism, Stupid* and *Pub(l)ic Hair II* are evidently fragments of a longer 200-foot string of canvases entitled *War Frieze*, intended to wrap around a space a greater variety of

phrases culled from official government utterance. The fleshy voice of Schor's painterly utterance responds, adjusts, and coopts those phrases with a different sexual and critical meaning.

The dynamic, polyvalent, and shifting character of Blau and Grey's picture grammar is echoed in Schor's bodily spaces. They each promote an absorbed gaze into images and a multiple crossing between them; our activated and expanded "picturacy" is encouraged to play with these not yet familiar new toys.

**David Humphrey** is a painter who shows at McKee Gallery. His New York Fax appears regularly in *Art issues*.



**Mira Schor**  
*Semicolon in Flesh*, 1993  
Oil on linen  
12" x 16"

**Michael Joaquin Grey**  
*Untitled (Pool #2)*, 1993  
15 color photographs dry-mounted on aluminum  
16" x 20" each  
5 anodized aluminum shelves  
10' each

"Genre: The Conversation Piece"  
Curated by Douglas Blau  
Installation view