

A close-up portrait of Mira Schor, a woman with short dark hair, wearing glasses on her head and a dark blue shirt with large yellow polka dots. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

# Close Listening

MIRA SCHOR AND CHARLES BERNSTEIN    august 23, 2009

IN PROVINCETOWN LAST SUMMER, poet Charles Bernstein interviewed Mira Schor for his Art International Radio program, *Close Listening*. In the first of two half-hour programs, Schor read brief excerpts from several of her essays: “Figure/Ground” from *Wet*, and “Email to a Young Woman Artist,” “Recipe Art,” and “Modest Painting” from *A Decade of Negative Thinking*. The original programs can be accessed at [ARTonAIR.org](http://ARTonAIR.org) and at PennSound ([writing.upenn.edu/pennsound](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound)).

**CHARLES BERNSTEIN:** You started with a reading from your essay “Figure/Ground” from *Wet* and you brought up again this image of wet. You mentioned Duchamp as a counterexample, but I don’t think Duchamp is really the dry artist that is your target there. Could you revisit that for a second, coming back twenty years later?

**MIRA SCHOR:** I’m not sure that Duchamp requires defending. His turn away from painting towards the readymade and other conceptual interventions is considered one of the major breaks in the dominance of painting. In “Figure/Ground,” I cite Duchamp’s call for “a completely *dry* drawing, a *dry* conception of art” in the context of my analysis of certain critics’ seemingly deep disgust with the wetness of painting.

**How does that work for you as a metaphor for describing kinds of art, wet/dry?**

Wet versus dry. I wouldn’t say that I had decided to choose that binary. I felt that the binary was chosen for me by a certain area of art criticism and art history that was valorizing things like photography and collage and video and film, and definitely critiquing painting. My interest was in analyzing and kind of *psycho*-analyzing the reasons for what seemed like a disgust for pigmentation and for a certain kind of lubricity of paint.

**Also just the visceralness of the artwork.**

Well, that’s it, although I think that some paintings would be described as visceral, and others might not be. But it seemed like there was a blanket lack of interest in painting that was being put forward with a claim for objectivity. I was interested in analyzing the critics’ language and also analyzing some of the references that they made to see whether there were some other deeper reasons why they were in a sense disgusted by the wetness of painting.

**Do you think that binary is as powerful in our thinking about art or the reception of art or perhaps the control of the art market now as it was twenty years ago?**

I think in some ways the conditions are quite similar, because at this point you have a situation which is not unlike the one in the eighties where you had an art market that certainly was very interested in great big paintings. You had Neo-Geo. You had the Neo-Expressionists. And at the same time, you had a lot of political work, a lot of photo-based work, a lot of photo-collage work. Now there’s an emphasis on the digital as well as on video installation. There’s still a lot of painting going on, often with similar features to Neo-Geo or Neo-Abstraction. In fact, they’re just new incarnations of the same.

**In some of the later essays in your new book, including “Recipe Art,” which you read, you speak about conceptual art as being recipe art, market driven. So this is a kind of morphing of conceptual art, because conceptual itself, going back to Duchamp—in many ways Duchamp would be as intensely against recipes as you, against the reduction of his work to this axiomatic level. In fact, Duchamp is entirely anti-axiomatic. So I’m interested in the persistence of the axiomatic, what you call the terrorism of art criticism, and your experience since the time of writing that and then in terms of the new book.**

As you say, Duchamp’s work may well be anti-axiomatic—I’m not sure I agree with you; doesn’t French philosophy love axioms?—but I certainly feel that there has been an axiomatic aspect to the way he is used in the ongoing critique of painting. I think the biggest difference is that at the time that I wrote “Figure/Ground” there was a critical oligarchy. I used to call it “the cartel.” This included *October* magazine, which was then connected to an international curatorial network with great sway at high levels of the art world.

**I recently wrote a piece in *Parkett* talking about this, extending what you say in that first essay. And a young person associated with *October* wrote a response that said, in effect, “This dominance of**

the axiomatic, this critical oligarchy, to use your term, doesn’t exist anymore, nobody subscribes to that. Anybody who says that shouldn’t be listened to. We’ll have no part of them! We must exclude them! They are ignorant!” So exactly exemplifying the continuation by the denial, which I think was quite funny.

Exactly. Whereas, in fact, they are incredibly well-trained clones of the original. It’s like the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—they are clones.

**“We are not clones. We are independent thinkers.” [Here and just below, Charles is speaking in the voice of a robot, or a person brainwashed by aliens in a 1950s sci-fi movie, saying whatever they had been programmed to say.]**

Exactly. They still hate painting, I think, and feminism.

**“We love painting, but just not painting that exists in the real world.”**

And I think that many other young people would say, “Who reads *October*?” That institution may have lost a certain amount of power. Right now there’s a different oligarchy, which is purely the market and a media-oriented obsession with branding and with the kind of quick fame that has replaced serious critical attention. I occasionally find myself favorably remembering the dialogue—unfortunately a one-way dialogue between me and *October*—because at least there were discussions of ideas and things that I cared about, even though they were on the opposite side. Now although it looks like we’re in an anything goes atmosphere, there are still a lot of clues as to what makes something look contemporary as I try to describe in “Recipe Art.”

**Both your book and your newer essays explore, in George Lakoff’s sense, that the metaphors we live by are the metaphors that art sells by. It isn’t you that invented these binaries—they go very far back. But they are deployed in particular ways by the art market, often insidiously and often contrary to their philosophical and aesthetic roots. Another tack of yours is exemplified by the piece you read at the end, “Modest Painting.” It goes against the painting that was most acclaimed in our youth, pitting heroic painting (such as much Abstract Expressionism) against modest. There’s a binary within the realm of painting—modest versus heroic.**

Abstract Expressionism is very much at the root of that essay. I talk about how, as I slow down to look for modest painting, I find myself going back to autobiographical roots. The roots are my experience as a young person within the world of the New York School and Abstract Expressionism—particularly my family’s friendship with Jack Tworkov and my growing awareness, once I began to study the production of the Abstract Expressionist canon, of his place in it. People were asking me, “What is modest painting? Is this a modest painting?” So I compare Myron Stout’s work to Tworkov’s in relation to the notion of modest. I also look at the work of my father, Ilya Schor, which in a way stands outside of the history of modernism, and





LISPENARD STREET LOFT, 1986 PHOTO SARAH WELLS

which exemplifies a modest approach to painting and the world, inspired by memories of Hasidic life in the shtetl. I look also at some contemporary paintings that may appear modest because they are small and even carelessly produced. Some are more about abjection or a kind of fake or spectacular modesty. I don't know if that answers your question.

"Innovative" and "ambitious" are two words usually contrasted with the modest. But you give a positive valence to the term "modest," which tends to be negatively valued. You make this argument in your introductory essay to *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworokov*, which you edited. Still, you maintain interest in eccentricity, which would not be in the middle and could be understood as extreme. "Modesty" strikes me as a very gendered term—women are modest, men are heroic. The heroic, the conceptually grand, the ambitious, is often attributed to male artists. Modesty has a long history in terms of needlework, in terms of folk art, in terms of a more collective approach rather than individuality. You've constantly gone after gender discrimination, to put the word "misogyny" in a more modest way.

Women now have access to do enormous works themselves. The Pipilotti Rist multimedia installation in the atrium at MoMA in 2008–9 would be an example, since it is operating within the rules of the Society of the Spectacle. But she is also someone who has done very modest and powerful interventions into space, such as her little video, *Selfless in the Bath of Lava*, inserted in a small crack in the floor at P.S.1. I apply the idea of the modest to take a feminist approach to the study of a male artist, like Tworokov, who would seem to have been part of the male ambition, yet had an ascetic, sensual poeticism. His ambition was more for the art than for himself. Within the frame of Abstract Expressionism, you have de Kooning, Kline and Pollock, Barnett Newman and Reinhardt, who are not modest in the scale of their work or the boldness of their gesture. Other figures in that group, who were men, seem feminized in that context.

In the context of poetry, modesty and discretion would be related to issues of exhibitionism or sexual display. Immodesty was a possibility

for men that wasn't as easily open to women as it is now. Now, immodesty is commonly a trope for women.

Yes, women are falling into the same trap, the same mechanism.

I'm not saying "trap," I'm saying "trope."

No, I know. You end up with two categories that are not gender related. What I am positing is that you can do work that is extremely rigorous and ambitious for the medium or the genre that you're working in. On any one side you'll have both men and women working without gender restrictions or constraints.

As you know I have been interested in your use of verbal language in your work. You use plenty of words. Don't they mess up a painting? Shouldn't the painting be without words? Aren't words for writers and non-word stuff for painters?

So they say! Of course, I feel I've succeeded in what I consider is necessary to make a painting of language interesting, which is that it has to be interesting whether or not you can read the words. In the seventies, I started to work with language as image in my work, wanting to get across the idea that women were filled with language. I was less interested in presenting legible text. In works like my *Book of Pages* (1976) and my masks from 1977, I began to use my own handwriting as an image. I realized it was beautiful as a graphic image. As you know, I wrote a statement for the "Poetry Plastique" show you curated with Jay Sanders a few years back, which began with the words, "I paint in English." At the moment, English may be a kind of lingua franca, but many viewers may not speak or read English. So that eliminates certain levels of understanding of some people looking at the work. But I would hope that you would get the *idea* of language. And if you also can read the content, that's good.

My goal, especially when I've worked in oil, is to make it so that you can't really separate the language of painting from the text being represented, rather like the balance of figure/ground, so you would see the letter and the surface, the letter and the word, and how it was painted. You'd have to think of both at the same time. I did those large Scrabble pieces, like crossword puzzles, where each canvas represented one letter of my handwriting blown up so there was a semi-legible but also purely abstract form. Let's say the word was *chiaroscuro*. I would find that people would look at the entire installation of fifty canvases and they would first read it one letter, one painting at a time and not understand that they were looking at a word and a series of interconnected words. Then they would understand that they were looking at a word and that word actually was related to how that painting was painted. A kind of synaesthesia was very important to me in those works; the word told me whether the painting was going to be thick or thin, dry or oily, very painterly or very flat. It told me in an intuitive manner to some extent, unless it was *blue*, and then the painting might actually be blue, you know, or the letters would be blue.

I've been an artist for almost forty years and my primary image has been language or written language for at least half of those years, on and off. The rest of the time I've worked with representation of the body or with landscape. Forms from those landscapes, like the landscape of Provincetown, have entered the work. The way I create a letter *t* and the way I depict a bird or sand flat or a cactus frond are very similar. So if you see the paintings with writing, you wouldn't necessarily know that I also have at times been very immersed in landscape or in figuration; yet these underlying connections are embedded, each aspect of my work is a subtext for another. I'm working on archiving my work to emphasize the generative interrelation between my artworks, some of which represent text, and my critical writing.

People sometimes say that you can't look at a word as an image and read it at the same time. Either you look at it or you read it. Overlaying the linguistic and the visual, you may create a conflict or possibly a synthesis, an overlay, a syncretism. Right now we're not writing, we're speaking, and perhaps that doesn't have a visual dimension. But writing always has a visual dimension and that's a crucial to what writing is. But, Mira, do you feel that art criticism interferes with your purity as an artist?

I'm fortunate to be able to use both sides of my brain. I don't consider myself an art critic. I'm an art writer.

You're an essayist.



SIGN, 2005, OIL ON LINEN, 12 BY 16 INCHES

That's always been the rap against artists who write, like Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, or Robert Motherwell.

I like the genre of artists' writing, which tends to be very different than the writing of people who are not directly involved in making art. Not that it's better. But different issues are raised. Different binaries may come up! Possibly a new range of principles come from the practitioner's point of view.

Artists such as Robert Smithson and Allan Kaprow, as well as Tworkov, Newman, and Reinhardt—their writings are another art form. They contribute something valuable that is independent of their visual work.

At the same time, it really can't be differentiated from their art practice in many ways.

That's my point exactly and that's how I feel about what I do. It is all of a piece, a total work.

That again brings Duchamp to mind. That's why I'd contrast the conceptual, as an art practice of a mode of poetic thinking, with the axiomatic, what you call a kind of terrorized regime of positivist approach. In this sense, conceptual writing and poetics, and the larger field of

If something interests me, I pursue it through research, looking for proof. I don't always find it, but I document the search. My writing is a continuation of my teaching and what goes on inside my mind. But I agree with you that there are many people who feel that one can't or shouldn't be both a painter and an art writer. They try to get me to choose. So, "You're really a writer, right?" Or, "You're really a painter, right?" A kind of "Sophie's Choice" because they find it very threatening that someone can do both at an equal level.

This is also true in poetry: you should either be a poet or you should be a critic or scholar. Otherwise questions are raised about whether the criticism, the ideas control the painting.



BOOK OF PAGES, 1976, MIXED MEDIA ON RICE PAPER, c. 12 BY 20 BY 1 INCHES



SEXUAL PLEASURE, 1998, OIL, INK, AND GESSO ON LINEN, INSTALLATION VARIABLE, EACH CANVAS 12 BY 16 INCHES

artists' writing, can be the strongest critique of regimented uniform thinking in favor of multiformity and eccentricity.

Yes, except that now conceptual is often just one more trope that is marketable and is being perverted by the idea that in fact you really still have to make a market object. You can't have a purely conceptual artwork; any image must be consumable and circulated as a commodity.

**CHARLES BERNSTEIN:** You've been listening to a sound recording that you can play and replay of Mira Schor on *Close Listening*, available for noncommercial distribution only, and which has virtually no commercial value. The program was recorded on August 23, 2009, on location at the outermost point of Cape Cod in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and is a production of PennSound, in collaboration with Art International Radio operating at ARTonAIR.org. For more information on this show, visit our Web site: [writing.upenn.edu/pennsound](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound). This is Charles Bernstein, close listening to the inaudible songs in the sonic sea.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN is author of *All the Whiskey in Heaven: Selected Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010). He is Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. For more information, go to: [epc.buffalo.edu](http://epc.buffalo.edu).