

NEW OBSERVATIONS

NEW
116

SECRET ART SECRET ART

GUEST EDITOR:
Diane Karp

ARTISTS ON ART



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Mira Schor

MR. KLEE GOES TO WASHINGTON

Fine artists today struggle to work and to survive within an atmosphere permeated by an ongoing and steadily increasing pressure to abandon any type of marginal art practice — a pressure all the more daunting when, for most, if not, it could be argued, for all artists, some form of marginality, whether economic or cultural, is a persistent condition. The artist who is not represented by a gallery may feel marginal in relation to the artist who exhibits regularly; the artist with a respectable local career may feel marginal in relation to artists represented in international exhibitions, and they, in turn, to the few artists receiving consistent art world wide attention for a number of years. All of these may feel marginal in relation to TV, pop music, and sports stars — only a relative few want to be like Jasper, but doesn't "everyone want to be like Mike"? And even such celebrity figures must acknowledge cultural and historical marginality in relation to Bill Gates (beyond that point I won't speculate!).

The pressure to abandon marginal practice is irrational in the sense that it is not clear to *what* one should conform, nor that it will help even if you figure it out, because, while success is based on work's current use value to contemporary discourse, the work must be, in some sense, genuine. Nevertheless, it seeps into the studio, even poisoning the artist's relationship to her work, like anger at a beloved child who is flunking out of school.

The pressure comes from widely disparate segments of society as a whole and of the cultural world. The destruction of the NEA is only the most visible symptom of mainstream demonizations of what artists do. The control of cultural outlets, from publishing houses to cable TV networks, by mass entertainment conglomerates threatens to police content for purely mass market value. These culture monopolies are all the more dangerous because, unless the consumer is constantly tracking company ownership, sameness and safety of product may seem like cultural fact rather than corporate strategy. Curiously, it seems that it is only the language of the product (literally, in its degree of rawness; aesthetically, in terms of its discursive strategies; situationally, in its predetermined space of "high art" or mass entertainment) rather than its subject matter that determines marginality. For example, successful network TV programs such as *Seinfeld* or *E.R.* — both strongly supported by ratings and advertisers — often deal with controversial subjects such as masturbation, homosexuality, rape, or AIDS that would be condemned as unsuitable subjects for government funding if mediated by the codes of the art world.

While the consequences of these developments may be dire for individual artists and small artist-run organizations, more insidious to continued art practice are pressures coming from within the art world.

If, especially since the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, the government has seen artists as easily dismissible yet dangerous subversives, during the same historical period, post-modernist art theory targeted certain types of artists' roles as well as certain types of art practice. For example, the romantic image of the artist as alienated rebel — a familiar and even comforting self-image for artists compelled to ascribe