

NEW OBSERVATIONS

NEW

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TRAWERS

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ARTISTS ON ART



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Mira Schor

MR. KLEE GOES TO WASHINGTON

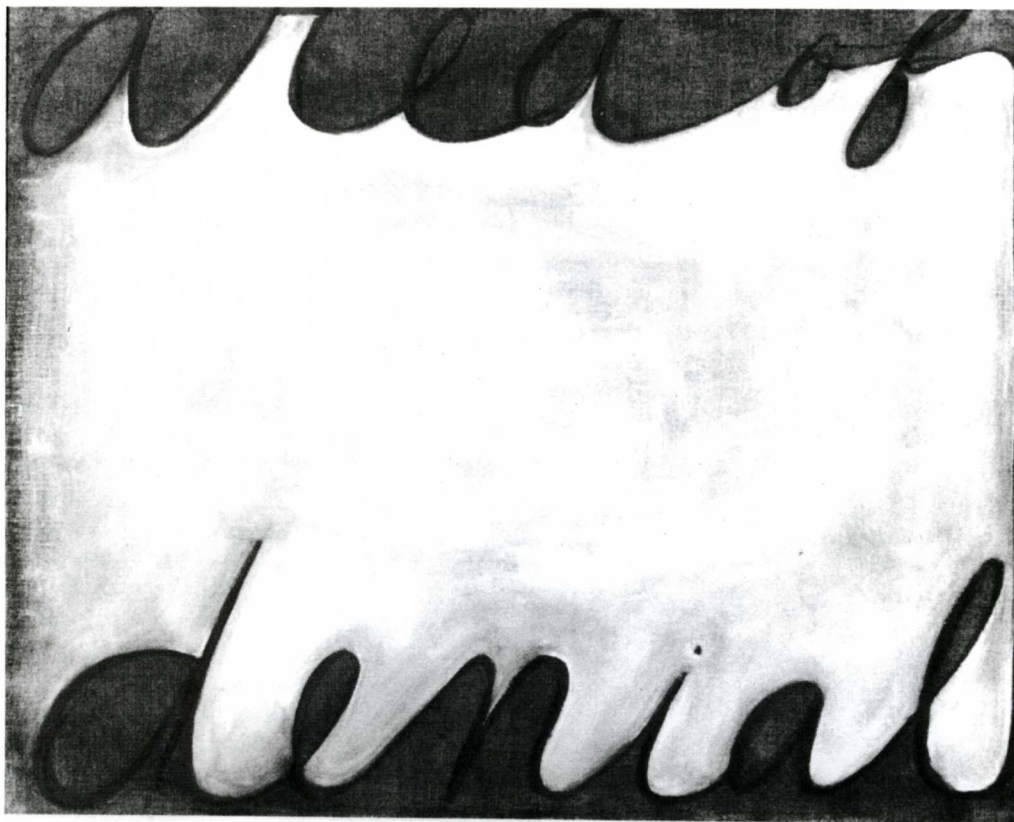
Fine artists today struggle to work and to survive within an atmosphere permeated by an ongoing and steadily increasing pressure to abandon any type of marginal art practice — a pressure all the more daunting when, for most, if not, it could be argued, for all artists, some form of marginality, whether 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



MIRA SCHOR *Area of Denial*, 1991. 16 x 20 inches, oil on canvas

meaning to their struggle for attention and economic survival — was unveiled by Marxist-inspired criticism as a complicit or self-deluded pawn and lackey of the bourgeoisie.¹ At the same time, critiques of the auratic, hand-touched, unique art object contained an implicit condemnation of private art practice so that the refuge of the studio came to represent cultural escapism rather than a potentially fruitful escape from a market driven art world.

From the eighties into the nineties, the predominant prescription for a way out of this undialectical position was to recognize one's role as just another cultural worker within an ideological framework and to attempt the unmasking and subversion of this frame by mimicry of its forms and tropes through appropriation of mass media images and technologies of representation. In the ensuing effort to mimic mass commodity culture, the artist has been drawn down a path of increasingly excessive theatricality and romancing of the abject. Now the cycle is complete and the artist again is self-imaged as a clown within bourgeois culture and proud of it (witness recent fun house installations by Damien Hirst, Paul McCarthy, and the Chapman brothers).

This summer I heard Karen Finley speak on an artists' panel. She announced that she wants artists to be celebrities just like actors or sports stars. In that pursuit, she had appeared on Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* but, she admitted, had been frustrated in her efforts to state her point of view. A few weeks later, I channel surfed my insomniac's way into a rerun of that particular show. Finley, who at her best is a manic and occasionally brilliant stage presence, and at her worst is at least self-

indulgently theatrical in a way that you might think would suit the requirements of the Christians v. the lions atmosphere of Maher's show, seemed tamed by an effort to present herself in a mainstream way — she was dressed in a relatively conservative black suit and had clearly been made up for TV — and she was indeed unable to successfully counter Maher's and some of the other guests' flat out condemnations of government funding of avant-garde art. She couldn't condense her views or speak fast enough, she was too nervous to be funny, and she didn't fight dirty. Given the opportunity to convert noto-

riety into celebrity by performatively enacting transgressive art practice on network television, she lost her nerve and behaved herself. Or, perhaps, despite herself, that part of her persona that speaks art language and contains real criticality of social injustice could not function in the world of celebrity. Marginality turned out not to be a choice, it is not merely instrumental, not a condition one can shed at will, but a direct outgrowth of moral and aesthetic beliefs fundamentally (even when unintentionally) at odds with the mainstream.

As Finley spoke, I considered what kinds of art works would correlate to success in a superficial and sensationalist forum. It seemed that, as ever, quietude and subtlety were doomed by the requirements of a sound bite culture. I began to imagine various artists of the past appearing on *Politically Incorrect*: Picasso might have managed it, but can you picture Paul Klee² on such a show? Or what kind of pictures he'd have to be making to be able to hold his own in such an arena?

"So, Paul, the Kennedy men, rapists or abused children?"

"Vel, hem, Herr Maher, I tzink ..."

NOTES

1. As, for example, in Benjamin Buchloh's analysis of clown imagery in works by early twentieth-century vanguard artists such as Picasso and Beckman, in his essay, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October* 16 (spring 1981): 39-68.

2. Significantly, my spell-check program recognizes Picasso as a word, but stops at Klee as an error, "not found," pointing to the way that Picasso is a trademark product: he is the prime exemplar of the commodifiable, Protean rebel, artist persona, popularized in fiction and the public imagination, whereas Klee is, well, just an artist.