

Read My Lips: Mira Schor Camila McHugh

In the early 1990s, Mira Schor punctuated a series of vaginas with semicolons, nestled between labia or a bristle of pubic hair, the mark's point and curve a deep red. The semicolon denotes a pause; then the sentence carries on. It can signal continuation; let's move forward with attention to what came before. It can also indicate a shift; marking a move in a new direction. Schor's feminism drives her work as she moves deftly between criticism and painting, often positioning language itself as the image or concept of her visual art. In the afterword to her book *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (1997), Schor describes her aim to "literally embed the gap between verbal and visual languages with each other's materiality and meaning."¹ This searing, still-subversive collection of essays bears the semicolon-vagina *Slit of Paint* (1994) on its cover.

In the wake of Hélène Cixous' seminal 1975 text on *écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Schor answered Cixous' call for outpouring ("I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs") with the semicolon's pause.² For Schor, flow is how abuse of power moves cyclically and relentlessly. Her work aims to breach: it is explicit. She takes aim at amnesia. She works in series, often on small canvases, to depict this violent and shape-shifting power that courses through history. Her cycles include allegorical erotic conquests in California landscapes, titled *Story Paintings* (1972-1973); *Language as Image* (1990-2005), comprising word paintings in scrabble-like installations; the *Dickheads* (late 1980s), adorned with ears or red caps that could pass for condoms or missile heads; and *The Avatar Paintings* (2009-2014) of stick-figured women, often with speech-bubble or skull-like heads. In *Red Tie Paintings* (2017-2018), recently exhibited at Lyles & King, New York, this transmission stems from Donald Trump's red tie. The red line transmutes into a noose around a limp dick, from semen to swastika to bloody entrails, before it twists into words.

After participating in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1970 and the *Womanhouse* exhibition led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1972 in Los Angeles, Schor taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada, from 1974 to 1978. There she began working with language as image, layering diary-like entries on translucent rice paper until her handwriting was indecipherable. In *Book of Pages* (1976) she bound these papers, layers of text largely obscured by bleeding ink, rips and redactions, layers of paint and pigment. She also created masks (*Ten Masks* [1977]) and V-neck dress shapes (*Dress Book* [1977]) measured to her body's dimensions from this delicate paper covered with performatively personal and illegible scrawl.

Schor's use of language is distinct from her contemporary Betty Tompkins, for instance, who in 2018 laid pale pink phrases over photorealistic genitalia, a return to her *Fuck Painting* series (1969-1974; reprised 2003). Tompkins uses language—often crowdsourcing reliably misogynist phrases used to describe women—to play with juxtaposition: misogyny in pale pink, stencil against airbrushed grisaille. By contrast, Schor mines political rhetoric or art world refrains where the connection between words

and their meaning is already loose. For instance the term "undue burden"—part of the wording of a Supreme Court abortion decision—circumscribes a deep magenta painting (also titled *Undue Burden*) from 1989 in looping white cursive. In a work in ink and gesso on tracing paper, a speech bubble in hasty handwriting juts into the frame to inquire, "Are you a feminist artist?" (*"Power" Figure #18: Are You A Feminist Artist? [red book]* [2015]). Schor takes language as line; its shapes occupy the same plane as her visual forms.

Returning to New York in the early 1980s, inculcated in the semiotics of the era, Schor painted language like still life. She drew upon the same deep sense of language as an aesthetic form that informed her parents' work in Judaica, particularly Hebrew engravings on silver mezuzahs. She still lives and works among these objects in her Upper West Side apartment—the one she grew up in. From this consciousness coupled with her continuous political activism, Schor created *War Frieze* (1991-1994). Never exhibited in its entirety, this work is a sequence of thirty-by-forty-centimeter canvases arranged in sections of two to six meters in length, stretching nearly a hundred running meters. Borrowing the phrase Griselda Pollock used to describe Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theatre?* (1940-1942), *War Frieze* is an "event in the history of art."³ Though it is more loosely narrative, Salomon's *Life? or Theatre?*—which stretches across a thousand works of gouache on paper—also operates sequentially in language and image as well as musical notation, to hover in the possibility that meaning lies between them. *War Frieze* envisions transmission of power as a linguistic bodily fluid propelled from penises into undulating loops that spell "Area of Denial" (a weapon used during the Gulf War), "Essence of Joy," or "Modernism" before inseminating an ear, a womb, or a swollen breast. Sometimes shaded with an amber glow, her thin and steady line recedes into pinkish murk, emerges in strident yellow. *War Frieze* imagines how patriarchy is metabolized, metastasized. What is a body to do? As Schor's fifty-year career indicates, an expansive and evolving notion of how the personal is political and the political is personal is an ever-urgent place to start.

1 Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 213.

2 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 876.

3 Griselda Pollock as quoted by Toni Bentley. "The Obsessive Art and

Great Confession of Charlotte Salomon." *New Yorker*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-obsessive-art-and-great-confession-of-charlotte-salomon>.

105 Mira Schor, *Flesh*, 2013. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York. Photo: Charles Benton

106 Mira Schor, *Area of Denial*, 1991. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York. Photo: Charles Benton

107 Mira Schor, *Slit of Paint*, 1994. Courtesy: the artist and Lyles & King, New York





