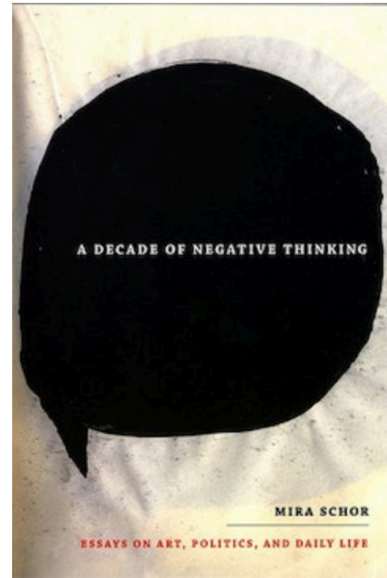


## The Positive News About Negative Thinking

By Abbe Schriber



When Osama bin Laden was assassinated earlier this year, it was an uncanny coincidence that I happened to be reading Mira Schor's essay chronicling the days after September 11. The essay, "Weather Conditions in Lower Manhattan," is published in Schor's collection *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* and epitomizes her interest in the raw tensions between past and present, as well as collective and personal trauma and memory. Despite its seemingly random placement, like the other essays in *A Decade of Negative Thinking* "Weather Conditions" considers these themes while invoking the differences between negativity and criticality. A full decade—its own "negative thinking" spurred by the rhetoric of the Bush/Cheney administration, Hurricane Katrina, economic meltdown, and two wars in the Middle East—has now passed since September 11. But the current, abject moment of bin Laden's death seems to even further accentuate the timeliness of *A Decade of Negative Thinking* and its insistence on asking hard questions and promoting skepticism in a culture that is often overtly polemical, and in an art world that is often afraid to be "against" popular opinion.



It's true that the essays in *A Decade of Negative Thinking* are harsh—on the art market, successful mainstream artists, the feminist movement, the political climate. The book is composed of three sections of essays written between 2001 and 2009—"She Said, She Said: Feminist Debates, 1971-2009"; "Painting"; and "Trite Tropes"—which expand on topics that have fascinated Schor since the early 1980s, born from a "supposition, an intuition, the crystallization of something that emerges from what I have seen or read." Inspired by feminist critiques of power and larger societal infrastructures, she refuses to "drink the Kool-Aid," as she often puts it, of what is accepted or trendy. This vigorous skepticism makes these essays indispensable reading to any artist, writer, curator, art historian, or feminist who has ever felt dismayed by the continued patriarchy, corporate mentality, and formulaic artwork that can characterize the art world. Essays in the "Trite Tropes" section, such as "Recipe Art," lament the relentless recycling of conceptual and aesthetic themes in young artists' work and in MFA programs, and their complicity with the market—as well as many arts writers' fascination with covering these phenomena. Schor writes:

Mira Schor, "A Year of Positive Thinking" blog  
*A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life*  
(Duke University Press, 2009)

These articles...obscure the existence of other, less market-oriented or market-attractive aspects of art practice; they undermine the very real, formal, and conceptual interest of so much artwork, including work that is successful, that addresses major issues of our time—from ecology to technology to war.

Faced with this as the reality, Schor's skepticism points to a *responsibility* to criticality (a word, she recalls, that once drew snide remarks from a colleague), as integral to understanding, even improving, the system. Much as being a good, smart citizen demands constantly questioning a country's governing structures, any practitioner within the art world's confines would do well to

question its modus operandi. “Negativity” might entail simply berating the phenomena Schor considers—but that isn’t what happens in this book. Schor digs deep, reaching for history, roots, and cultural context—not to be snarky or pessimistic, but to seriously examine *why* a certain generation is regularly left out of feminist exhibitions (in “Generation 2.5”), or why indifference or lack of affect in contemporary art is problematic (in “Blurring Richter”). This is the kind of hard self-examination that the “art school-celebrity nexus,” as she puts it, needs to constantly be reminded of. In the “Painting” section, “Like a Veneer” considers the glossy, fetishized appeal of Lisa Yuskavage’s and John Currin’s paintings, and indicates the intense distrust Schor has towards the insider “tools” that legitimize art—namely (male) art historical comparisons that situate artists within the canon. While she writes of Yuskavage’s women as “bulbous half-naked figures waiting indoors for something to happen, trapped in and hypnotized by their own bodies,” this is less a negative read on the work than a parsing out of its patriarchal context. The catalyst for the essay was many writers’ claims that Yuskavage “paints like Vermeer,” an assertion Schor aims to scrutinize, not necessarily debunk.

Because Schor was intimately involved with second-wave feminism—she even includes openly frustrated excerpts from letters she wrote while at CalArts, or “feminist bootcamp”—the essays in the “She Said, She Said” section could be read as straight-forwardly “negative.” However, the essays “The *ism* that dare not speak its name” and “Generation 2.5” provoke vital, difficult questions about the feminist movement, particularly why many young artists openly reject the feminist label. Schor perhaps unwittingly offers herself up as a role model for those who forget that as long as women artists continue to reject a feminist identity in the name of “art market viability” or art historical longevity, a patriarchal art world will continue to prevail. As she reminds us, “if you say you are not a feminist artist, don’t pretend that you are not engaging in a political act.” That everything is a political act is a particular stance, but it’s one that is obligatory in the troubling whirlwind of the contemporary art world. Schor’s observations are pointedly matter-of-fact; she is a one-woman art world vigilante (and no complaints there). Her perspective is similar to that of artist and family friend Jack Tworokov, who said, “I am against any ideology which takes any significant part of humanity as its ‘enemy’ whose extermination it seeks in order to ensure its own survival.”

In recent years Schor has also developed a blog called *A Year of Positive Thinking*, which was a self-initiated challenge to write “positively” about art that she liked. Though her writing is more conceptually sound and astute than knee-jerk, the blog perhaps intentionally poses a counter-argument to those who would accuse her of reactionary tendencies. *A Year of Positive Thinking*, still updated regularly, is by turns nostalgic, politically conscious, and yes, “negative” despite its name, while further demonstrating Schor’s arsenal of art historical insights and the plucky yet graceful clarity of her prose. Here Schor has more room to reside closely with objects, often obscure—one early post titled “Looking for art to love, day two: uptown” dwells enthusiastically on small 15th century tomb sculptures seen at the Met. The blog often directly references and mirrors the book, aiming a critical feminist/activist lens at current events, films, exhibitions, or conferences. Contrary to the anonymous, politically salient potential of blogs that Schor writes about in the essay “Anonymity as a Political Tactic: Art Blogs, Feminism, Writing, and Politics,” Schor’s blog openly asserts her own unmistakable voice, and allows her to apply her incisive, still “negative” observations to up-to-the-minute current events. This makes it a captivating space to visit and revisit. It can also be an intensely personal space—as the book also mentions, shortly after September 11, Schor’s older sister Naomi, also an academic and feminist, passed away suddenly, and in 2006 her mother died at age 95. These three events form the existential backbone and underlying sense of loss and nostalgia in Schor’s essays, adding a personalized interpretation of “negative thinking” to the book’s title and a bittersweet tinge to the blog.

Returning to the Tworokov quote, Schor aims to critique, analyze, and dare I say dismantle those ideologies that continue a status quo of exclusion or denial. While bin Laden’s death was considered a victory for our country, it was cause for alarm and disgust for many of us at the

same time. Just because we weren't joining in the revelry didn't mean that we felt negatively, necessarily—we wanted to slow down, to evaluate our government's actions and the consequences. If this is “negative thinking”—and if Schor's way of thinking is “negative”—maybe we all need to learn to think a little less positively.