

**INCONVERSATION**

# Mira Schor and Jason Andrew WITH PHONG BUI

On the occasion of the painter Jack Tworkov's retrospective *Against Extremes: Five Decades of Painting*, which will be on view at The UBS Art Gallery until October 27, 2009, and the publication of *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov*, published by Yale University Press, both curator, Jason Andrew, and editor, Mira Schor, paid a visit to Off the Rail Hour at Art International Radio to talk with Publisher Phong Bui about Tworkov's life and work.

**Phong Bui (Rail):** Having read the whole volume of writing and seen the show, I was struck by his incredibly astute observations which seemed to me must have derived from the capacity for self-criticism and self-analysis, and which gave him a sense of deliberate eloquence in his continuity as a painter and thinker. There are two things I remember reading from the book which really stayed with me: one is the first sentence from the journal entry, which he started right after the war, 1947, the same year as his first one-man show at Charles Egan Gallery, "Style is the effect of pressure. [...]" In the artist, the origin of pressure is in his total life—heredity, experience, and will [...]—but the direction flows according to the freedom he allows his creative impulse." Two is the long article "Notes on My Painting," which was published in *Art in America* in 1973 under the invitation of Brian O'Doherty, where in the end he says, "Above all else, I distinguish between painting and picture." Of course he's making reference to Cézanne and Picasso, "where I have to choose between them, I choose painting." While the former reminded me of something de Kooning had said similarly: "The desire to force a style beforehand is a mere apology of one's own anxiety," the latter, which was elaborated in the letter he wrote to Andrew Forge (whom he knew and admired) on June 30, 1981 where he emphatically stated, "Cézanne's grandeur parallels the severity and seriousness of his search. Nowhere did Cézanne indulge in humor as Picasso did so extravagantly." What are your thoughts on these remarks?

**Mira Schor:** I think the intense self-critical awareness

and the observation and the honesty of self was characteristic of Tworkov as a person and one which he brought to the writing, to his work, and to his view of himself in society as well as the art world. He was very hard on himself, in a sense, in this sort of razor's edge between the Apollonian and Dionysian that he was maintaining the balance of in his work. As to the wonderful line, first of all, "style is the effect of pressure," must have burst out of his head with such urgency and clarity. He was 47 when he wrote that so you just feel like his whole life, all he'd gone through, like many of the difficulties that all of the artists of his generation had to go through during the Great Depression in the 30s and after his time in the WPA, has prepared him for that moment. Secondly, his choice of the word "painting" in "Notes On My Painting," was particularly revealing: I just had a seminar class on contemporary art issues, and we were reading Greenberg's "Modernist Painting," and one of my students said, "Why is it that Greenberg talks about something as a good *picture*, but if it's done by Velasquez it's a *painting*?" And I thought that then Tworkov's deliberate use of the word "painting" is perhaps a way of addressing Greenberg's language. In other words, by saying "painting," you're not only talking about the object of the painting, you're talking about the devotion to the process of painting as well as the history of painting.

**Jason Andrew:** It's the duality of Jack Tworkov, as writer and painter, that makes him the standout of his time. The publication of his writings and the retrospective exhibition of his paintings hopefully convey this. The exhibition acts as the visual content to Jack's written word. Tworkov would write about his process in the studio, his life as a painter and what an artist meant to society. Mira has done a remarkable job editing text to recreate the artist that was Jack Tworkov. The writings are an important read for anyone claiming to be an artist.

**Rail:** How long did it take you [Jason] to curate this first retrospective?



"Adagio," 1953, Oil on canvas, 80 × 28 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift, 1955.

**Andrew:** About two and a half years. From proposal to installation. Again, the inspiring fact which drove me and my arts organization, Norte Maar (the organizing agent behind the UBS show and the concurrent exhibition of the artist's papers at the Archives of American Art Research Center Gallery and Research Center, located just steps away from the painting exhibition), is the re-evaluation of Jack Tworikov as writer and painter and further, the seemingly neglected of Tworikov's contribution to American Art.

**Schor:** Jason basically did the whole show himself, work that would take normally about twenty different people in a museum! I don't know how he did it really.

**Andrew:** I'm very proud to have played a role in bringing about what is the first retrospective exhibition of Jack Tworikov's work ever held in New York City. It amazes me that it took my little arts organization, which functions on a half-a-shoestring, to mount this exhibition which features major loans from The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. Given the response, and coupled with the publication of the artist's writings, it seems to be to have been a complete success.

**Rail:** Considering the current economic crisis, it did happen, miraculously.

**Schor:** And just under the wire, because unfortunately this is the last show at UBS Art Gallery, and it's been very sad to read different responses in the comment book. Some people say, "Thank you so much for introducing me to this artist that I didn't know," and then a lot of them remarked about the work itself, while many others commented that, "This is just such a wonderful space to bring art, onto the street and into the business world, what a great loss for us all."

**Andrew:** I think this show is reflective of Tworikov in a lot of ways. Like many artists, he had more minor hits than home runs when it came to smashing exhibition successes. There were moments throughout his career where if he'd only done this or if he'd only done that. Case in point at his first exhibition at the Charles Egan; Egan wrote him a letter and said, "Jack, I want to show your abstractions," and Tworikov made it very clear that he wanted to show the still life paintings.



"Untitled (Still Life with Blue Pitcher and Grapes)," 1946. Oil on canvas, 24 × 32 in. Estate of Jack Tworikov, New York

**Schor:** He had very clear ideas about the direction of the work at any given moment, and it's almost as though he set certain rules for himself to work on one specific body of work in order to grasp the full comprehension before moving on to the next. A good example of that is the one that Jason has just pointed out. Knowing that he was going towards abstraction, he nevertheless decided to tackle and focus on still life in order to work his way into abstraction in a manner that would have

a solid basis for him, not just be impulsive, automatic, subjective. In my introduction to “The Extreme of the Middle,” I analyze the way in which art history and the whole canon is produced. And he experienced in real time how he did or did not fit into the canon; it was being created around him as he lived. And that one decision actually determined for one thing the notion of first or second—you know, who came first? Who did it first? And so on. Whereas actually what he was doing was very much in relation to what everybody around him was doing.

**Rail:** That’s true. How did the book get started initially? How long did it take you to edit? And was it intended to come out at the same time with the show?

**Schor:** I first got involved with doing the book in 2000. But Wally Tworokov had begun to organize Jack’s writings and conceive of a book right after Jack died, and Hermine [Ford] and Helen [Tworokov], his two daughters have been working to make this happen ever since. I knew Jack since my childhood, and though I felt I knew his work and ideas well, I only became aware of his writings when I read some excerpts which were included in the catalogue of his 1987 retrospective held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (curated by Richard Armstrong). I didn’t really start working on it seriously until 2003, and it took us a few years to select the materials and two or three more years for me to edit the whole book. It was quite a challenge to figure out how to organize so many different types of writing from a forty- year period so that it would be chronological, typological, and autobiographical. In fact, when I first started working on the book, Jason was not in the picture. Although once he came on board, not only did he bring his great energy, but also, he found all sorts of amazing materials. That the show and book ended up happening the same summer is an unbelievable coincidence basically.

**Rail:** Let’s go back to the very beginning. Tworokov was born in 1900 in Poland in a small town named Biala, which was later adopted by his sister, Janice, as her exhibited last name.

**Andrew:** The Tworokov story is an American classic. Jack and Janice came to New York in 1913 and settled in a tenement housing on the Lower East Side. After seeing Cézanne for the first time at an exhibition of French painting at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1921,. Jack dedicated his life to painting. Cézanne was Tworokov’s path to painting. Jack and Biala exhibited quite heavily in the early 20s in Provincetown. And in an effort to distinguish herself from her brother, Janice, at the suggestion of William Zorach, reclaimed the name of their birthplace as her own, and became the artist known as Biala. Zorach said that it was a big mistake of his wife (Marguerite Zorach) not to change her last name as an artist. Jack and Janice struggled to assimilate to American culture as Jack wrote: “The first years in New York I remember as the most painful in my life. Everything I loved in my childhood I missed in New York... in the new land I had to face a new culture and adolescence at the same time. What saved me then was reading.” As I understand through Biala’s letters, Jack picked up English very quickly and learned how to read quite effortlessly. For instance, one of the first novels that he picked up off a cart on the street was Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

**Rail:** Quite impressive. He then went to Stuyvesant High School and then from there to Columbia

University as an English major and graduated in 1923.

**Schor:** My impression was that he didn't matriculate. Although he later got an honorary degree from Columbia at the same time as Alfred Hitchcock, who, he said, was one of the funniest people he had ever met—they were all in stitches from laughing at the reception. I mean he started out thinking he would be a writer but by that time he had already discovered Cézanne and Matisse, and ultimately this led to his decision to become a painter by the time he was in his early twenties. And from there he had studied with Charles Hawthorne and Ivan G. Olinsky at the Academy of Design, with Guy Pène du Bois and Boardman Robinson at the Art Students League, and with Karl Knaths and Ross Moffett in Provincetown.



"Cross Field I," 1968, Oil on canvas, 80 × 70 in.  
Collection of Beatrice Perry, NY.

Getting back to that sentence, “style is the effect of pressure,” Phong, you said to me earlier this summer, “only an immigrant could have written that.” I found that to be true in that both Tworkov and Biala, within ten years, went from being poor immigrant children on the Lower East Side to being in the most avant-garde circles in New York City and beyond. That's quite amazing.

**Andrew:** A good example, which shows how ferocious Tworkov and Biala were, is that in the summer of 1924 Biala convinced Tworkov to hitchhike to Provincetown to study with Charles Hawthorne who was the co-founder of the Provincetown Art Association. By the time they got there they both hated it, especially Biala who didn't care much for painting en plein air. But it was there that they met Edwin Dickinson.

**Schor:** I would say if you look through the book, and read his writings, Cézanne and Dickinson are the two names that appear quite often. And I think in both cases he probably would say he wasn't so much influenced by them but rather admired their passions for structure and their honesty, humility, in a sense. In the case of Dickinson, you can detect the subtle use of tonality that can be cited also in Tworkov.

**Rail:** I agree. And between 1942 to 1945, he gave up painting and worked as a tool designer at an engineering and defense company?

**Schor:** The tool designing job, which was 70 hours a week, was war work: he was over forty and had two small children so he wasn't drafted, and he was anxious to get off of the WPA. He, needed to make a living, and wanted to do his share for the war effort. Although he didn't write about this, I've often thought of what a wonderful draftsman Jack was, and also how much he loved and cared

for tools. There's a great photograph Renate Ponsold took of him in his Provincetown studio late in his life: every palette knife and brush has a designed space. Stanley Kunitz said, "Jack took care of everything— his car, his house, his lawn, his tools, his studio, his brushes, his family, himself. Nobody could have led a more admirably moderate, regulated, or disciplined life."

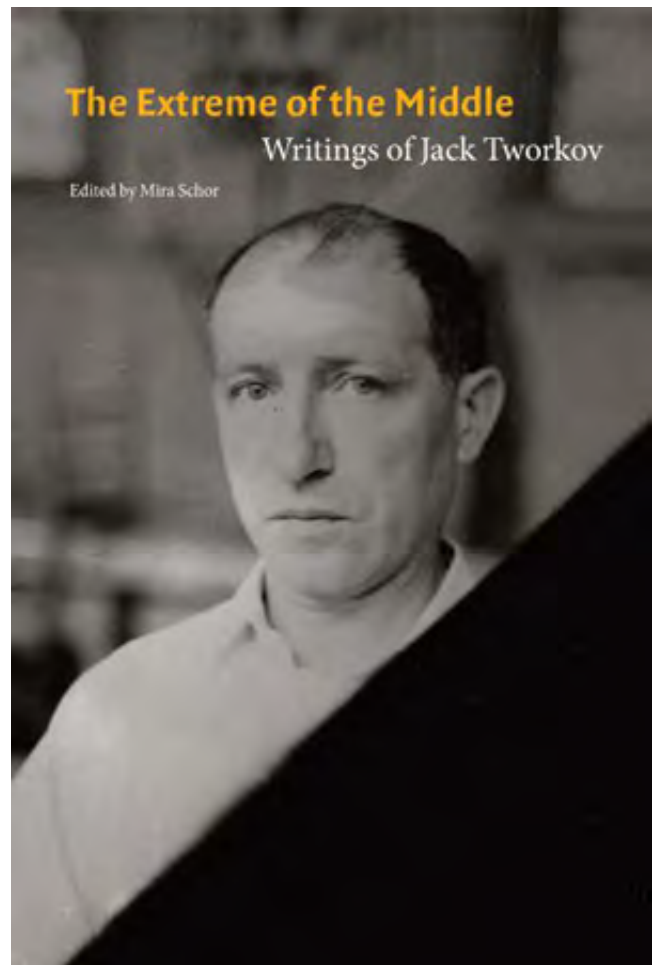
**Rail:** What was the reception of the Charles Egan show in '47? We know that he showed a group of still life paintings, and one of them, "Untitled (Still Life with Blue Pitcher and Grapes)," from 1946, is in the show.

**Andrew:** Tworokov major seven in New York The show at Egan put him on a new critical platform. Within the next year his first one-person museum exhibition opened at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

**Rail:** What would have happened if he had shown the abstract paintings at Egan and the still life at the Baltimore Museum? The other way around.

**Andrew:** Well you've got Pollock in 1943 having his first one-person show at the Art of the Century. And the whole New York art world of abstraction is in full gear by '45, '46, then Tworokov had a still life exhibition. That's against extremes! That's an artist being committed to what he felt was right. Though in a later interview with Irving Sandler, he acknowledged that was probably a mistake that he didn't show his abstractions: "Egan first wanted to show my abstract pictures," Tworokov said, "but I asked him to show the still lifes and since then I was treated like a Johnny-Come-Lately and this was a painful thing. It set back my painting career for ten years." Tworokov continues, "There is a game in the United States: -Who came first? I was eager to paint still lifes and the figure because I was associated with artists who I know couldn't. De Kooning did the same thing, but he was not attacked. Six months before his show at Egan he was painting figures. The *Women* were nothing new for him." Right after the Charles Egan show he writes, "The crisis in my painting is now a crisis of subject." So, just as Tworokov finishes a body of work he's already thinking, "Okay, I need to push forward." The quote continues, "A painting must be handled with a considerable amount of dominating force. The subject must not zap the energy of the painting; you must take no sacrifices for the subject, which subtracts from the energy of the painting." So, it's a nice segue into '48, '49, when he really starts revisiting abstraction.

**Rail:** What seems to be subtle and not so subtle differences between the treatment of the figure, in let's say, de Kooning's late 30s and Tworokov's late 40s are while in de Kooning's there were issues regarding the uniformity of surface, which came from his obsession with Ingres and the Pompeii



mural, which he shared with Gorky, in Tworokov's there was a greater agitation in both gestures and surfaces, which was a synthesis of both de Kooning's black paintings and the early "Woman" of the late 40s. But what is more pointing and indicative of Tworokov's maturity is the way in which he adopted de Kooning's few paintings of two standing women also from the late 40s, a motif which de Kooning picked up again in the mid-50s and mid-60s. I mean, we see in that phase of de Kooning's that he was striving for a kind of equal distribution from fairly broken up and small and aggressive brush works to broader and sensual ones, whereas in Tworokov's, beginning with "House of the Sun Variation" (1952) and "Duo" series, the gradual shift towards a more even painted brushstrokes, which at first seem to insist on vertical and horizontal movement, though ultimately the tendency of diagonal movement that leans on the right side of the painting becomes more pronounced. Paintings such as "Transverse" (1957-58), "East Barrier," and "Friday" (both painted in 1960) are just breathless. Especially with "East Barrier" with the passage of red area on the right side.

**Andrew:** Absolutely. The red swatch of paint pulls the viewer, along with the mass of gesture above it, to the edge of the canvas, away from the center. It's like what Tworokov was trying to paint was out of his field of vision, motion out of the canvas. And that blue tornado that sort of rips up through the center. It's beautiful. How off balance and balanced the composition is.

**Rail:** Yeah, and much has been cited about his love and admiration for Soutine, which he wrote so elegantly in his essay.

**Schor:** "The Wandering Soutine," which was a very important essay because it was a marker of the interest in Soutine among the artists of his generation in the early 50s.

**Rail:** And when I was standing in the gallery I felt the visceral power of his sweeping diagonal must have been his deep identification with Soutine's instability in ways which Soutine, particularly in his Céret and Champigni landscapes—the paintings of the winding road, windy day at Auxerre, or avenues of trees at Chartres—painted the trees either leaning to the left or right in such predominately diagonal movements.

**Schor:** Here is what he wrote in 1959: "In such paintings as 'Watergame,' 'Pink Mississippi,' 'Cradle,' 'Transverse,' and others, the mood is anything but lyrical if I take lyrical to mean singing, subjective, moody. The central image of these paintings is an action brought near by a telescope but out of earshot, silent, and meaningless. In a thicket, the actors might be lovers, or a murderer and his victim—the anxiety is that of silence of an action without sound, without meaning. When the spectator identifies himself as one of the actors he wakes up screaming and nothing is there. I see action as an engendering, an arresting action. Action leads to action leads to stand still. I see an opposition between action and time, as between life and death."

**Rail:** That's beautiful. Can we talk a bit about his role as a teacher?

**Schor:** He's one of those people who was a natural teacher in that he thought so carefully

everything out for himself before he passed it on to his students, friends, and even his wife and two daughters. He really had an engagement with young artists and he learned from them as much as he gave them. His teaching began as early as 1933 at the Fieldston School. Beginning in 1948, he was a regular at American University in Washington, D.C., where he was instrumental in curriculum development as well as developing a visiting artist program. Then around the time of the Eighth St. Club he was teaching at Pratt Institute, Queens College, and then the summer of '52 at Black Mountain College. He also was doing some private teaching. I think it was an activity that opened the dialogue he could have with other artists, with himself, and with his students. We know that he had quite a bit of anxiety about taking on the Yale job because he was afraid of being swallowed up in some way into academia. It actually turned out that he had very exciting students who he was very turned on by, which benefited him in what he was doing in the studio.

**Andrew:** The Yale job was perfect timing for his great exodus from the Leo Castelli Gallery.

**Schor:** It was the moment where basically Ab Ex was on the outs. He writes to Biala in one letter from 1961, “the drive against Abstract Expressionism continues,” and in 1965, “most of the painters of my generation are in the same boat—the ones that are still alive anyway” and mentions that even younger artists associated with Abstract Expressionism are looking for teaching jobs. Pop Art was coming in as the new situation ...

**Rail:** Of course, Rauschenberg was one of his students whom he was quite close to. It was Tworikov who introduced Rauschenberg to Eleanor Ward at Stable Gallery where Rauschenberg had a two-person show he shared with Jasper Johns. We know that Johns had openly voiced his admiration for Tworikov, but at the same time Tworikov’s “Red, White and Blue” paintings show that he was receptive to what Johns and other younger artists were doing.

**Schor:** One of my earliest memories is of one of Johns’s early flag paintings hanging in the Tworikov home, this was in the 1950s. I feel that the grey stroke in Johns’s painting is very reminiscent of some of Tworikov’s paintings, particularly “Idling,” which is one of my favorites in the exhibition painted around 1969. If you think of that group at Yale which includes Chuck Close, Jennifer Bartlett, Michael Craig-Martin, Robert Mangold, Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, Richard Serra, and a few others, who were all interested in minimalist’s and post-minimalist’s ideas of modularity and seriality, there must have been a lot of interchange between Tworikov and them. There was this moment where he’s explaining to Jennifer Bartlett about the Fibonacci series and she listens very, very carefully and says, “Thanks, I’ll use that.” So it goes both ways. He was really palpably excited by what these young artists were doing, and they were lifting off of what he was doing in that decade of the 60s, which I think was a very good one.

**Andrew:** Tworikov also realized that when he came to Yale there was the lack of interdisciplinary communication between the arts, from painting, sculpture, public art, to dance, music, and so on, and he revitalized a visiting program which benefited the students as a result and really made what the Yale program is even today.



**Schor:** That's when he went on this wonderful tour, which is documented in the book.

**Andrew:** Sure, 1967, the "Contemporary Voices in the Arts" tour that focused on the interrelationships between art, new media, and technology and included Merce Cunningham and John Cage, as well as poet Robert Creeley, the kinetic sculptor Len Lye, the experimental filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek, and the sound engineer Billy Klüver.

**Rail:** That was clear in two examples in the book. One was a letter, which he wrote to Louis Finkelstein, where he said, "Every student is a prince and the teacher is there to serve the students," and the other one was an annual report...

**Andrew:** ...from the academic year from '65-'66.

**Rail:** Which more or less voiced his general concerns of pedagogy and how graduate school should be.

**Schor:** Including suggesting getting rid of the MFA degree! He wanted an art school to be a meeting place for creative minds. In that respect I think his experience at Black Mountain had been crucial.

**Andrew:** He also mentioned that you can't be an artist by yourself, "No artist is an artist all by himself. He is an artist only by virtue of the fact that he voluntarily permits other artists to act on him, and that he has the capacity to react in turn. The artist who acts as if he could have conceived his art by himself, sealed off from other artists and their work and their thoughts is stupid—he merely tries to conform to the idiotic romantic image of the artist as a primeval energy...The continual inner-action of ideas among artists is the very condition for the existence of an artist." In essence you need a greater community which you can tap into for your potential growth.

**Rail:** Is there a certain particular painting in your own observation that can be cited more readily where the shift towards geometry began? Could we say "Plane," "Situation L," or "Cross Field?"

**Andrew:** In the retrospective exhibition, I think "Cross Field 1" (1968) is pretty great. But more experimental is "Variable II" (1964-65), which is in the exhibition. In this painting you see it all. The early 50s where he's pushing the charcoal to the edge, which is similar to the ideas of Soutine's paintings where the action happens outside of the actual picture plane. You can see that in the upper left hand corner and then you see the canvas divided in half horizontally with a numbering system which you can read into with a gesture, 1 mark, 2 marks, 3 marks, 4 marks and so on. So there really is a moment of departure from the early 60s where he was at the height of his gesture. By 1965, he's been quoted as saying that geometry was really where he'd renewed interest, but my argument is that geometry was always something of interest to Tworikov, one can find graphs and rulings in some of the earlier paintings, such as "Adagio" (1953), where the canvas is divided into quadrants, into sections.

**Rail:** Another instance which demonstrates that same intense curiosity for geometry was when he was in the hospital, and after having read *The New York Times* about an announcement of a new Nobel Prize Winner in Physics.

**Schor:** Where he says, “A second major discovery in 1961 found that the so-called Symmetry Principle in Mathematics could be applied to Elementary Particle Physics. What is the Symmetry Principle in Mathematics? I must find out.” I loved the fact that well into his old age he would become very excited by a scientific discovery he’s read about in *The Times*—he was addicted to *The New York Times!*—or his own discovery of something about mathematics and immediately translate that into a new burst of energy in the studio.

**Rail:** That’s just great. The other thing I want to bring up is that while he was openly critical of both Newman’s manifesto-driven and Reinhardt’s prescriptive ideologies, he was also incredibly in tune with the younger artists, who, in fact, were influenced by Newman and Reinhardt.

**Schor:** That’s an interesting way of seeing that history.

**Rail:** I think that’s very interesting in relation to his being in the extreme of the middle, against all other extremes.

**Schor:** Somewhere he said, “I intend to forget about those who are waiting for yesterday; or tomorrow, too. It isn’t simply that I am in the middle—I’m three persons and I rather enjoy them all.”

**Rail:** So in that order we wanted to find a way to make paintings that both have structure but at the same time doesn’t exclude intuition and spontaneity.

**Schor:** I remember in the late 70s, there were times where he expressed to me his sense of restlessness about the geometric abstraction he was doing. Even though his intense interest in geometric abstraction was very decisive, there was a part of him that I think missed some of the sensuality that he had had in his work of the 60s, which I think is the one of the most interesting periods in his work for me personally, where there’s this wonderful moment when the sensual stroke meets the geometric structure, in paintings like the “Idling” series from 1969.

**Andrew:** In the 70s, Tworikov writes that the subject of his recent painting is “a contrast between the measured and the random activity. The measured activity refers to the measurement of the rectangle in which I am to paint. And the measuring points to simple proportions, relationships to the rectangle.” So he’s still very in tune with his idea of the gesture and the mark-making, but he wanted to find a new way to create, to discipline that random activity.

**Schor:** There is a relation to Cage, to the effect that you can set up a system and then you respect that system. And within that system, improvisation can take place.

**Rail:** Which reminded me of the beautiful line from Neruda, where he says, “In the net, it’s not just the strings that count, but also the air that escapes through the meshes.” And I think the ease between resting on structure and allowing openness to generate from it is quite beautiful.

**Andrew:** Not so different, and relating to his early studio practice, Tworokov writes, “A basket designed to contain pebbles may leak sand. A net is closed to fish and open to water as it must be. To be closed and open is a necessary and simultaneous function of all vessels. A completely closed vessel is an end and a completely open vessel is without substance.”

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Jason Andrew is the curator and archivist for the Estate of Jack Tworokov. A prominent figure in the Bushwick art scene, he is also the founding director of Norte Maar, which encourages, promotes, and supports collaborations in the arts. He is the curator of *Jack Tworokov: Against Extremes/Five Decades of Painting*. His next exhibition featuring the paintings of Brooke Moyses will open October 24 at Norte Maar in Bushwick ([www.nortemaar.org](http://www.nortemaar.org))

Mira Schor is a painter and writer. She is the author of *Wet: On Painting, Feminism and Art Culture*, and the co-editor with Susan Bee, of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' writings, Theory and Criticism*. She teaches in the Fine Arts MFA Program at Parsons the New School for Design. She recently exhibited her paintings at Momenta Art in Williamsburg. A new book of her writings, *A decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life*, will be published by Duke University Press this winter.

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