

BARBARA KRUGER, *YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND*

Katherine Calak

Women's Studies Program

Barbara Kruger explores feminist theory through artistic expression. Her continued use of black and white imagery combined with red blocks of text derive from her background in art and design and her previous careers designing and editing magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *House and Garden*. Kruger voices her concerns over feminist issues through bold images and text and in consequence, she is able to gain the viewer's attention in a manner that differs from that of many other artists.

This paper discusses patriarchal values, discourses of the gaze, and the crises in consumerism in relation to Kruger's work. The problematic social norms that arise from patriarchy are exposed through her designs. In much of Kruger's work, she reveals concepts with such an impact that the viewer is forced to further consider her or his own opinions and perceptions in relation to these issues. Kruger also works with the subject of the gaze and its relation to male power. Through the gaze, men are able to gain control over the bodies of women, creating a tension between the two sexes. Kruger ties this to a critique of consumerism, in that everything in Euro-American culture can be bought, sold, and owned. This ideology extends to relationships amongst individuals further causing struggles over control and power.

Art is not truly art unless it stands for something, gives a point of view or relays a message in some way. There is no possible way to create a visual piece that does not involve communication. A piece of artwork sends some sort of message for the viewer to process, even if only for a split second. When thinking of political or social views, one can often bring to mind an artist or a work of art that attempts to convey the message as well. Mixed media artist and graphic designer, Barbara Kruger sends powerful messages concerning feminism and women's rights through her artwork (Kruger, 1990). In much of her work, she uses bold, sometimes controversial black and white imagery along with text that is laid over blocks of vivid red color to catch the viewer's eye to evoke a concern over a particular topic. In her montage, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* from 1989, Kruger voices her opinion to protect women's rights through an image that also raises issues of power, patriarchy, stereotyping, and consumption.

Kruger's untitled work known as *Your Body is a Battleground*, shown in her book *Love for Sale*, depicts a bold black and white photograph with its meaning emphasized through red blocks filled with white text. The image is of a woman's face split symmetrically along the vertical axis. There is a play of positive and negative space between the two halves of the image, highlighting ideas of "positive versus negative, white

versus black, good versus bad” (Kruger, 1990, p. 87). The figure’s characteristics such as her hair and makeup display that of a 1950s style. Her gaze is directed straight ahead, making eye contact with the viewer. The design was executed in support of the 1989 march on Washington to support the rights of women with an emphasis on abortion (the right to choose) and birth control rights. Kruger stresses her own commitment to these issues by stamping the words “Your Body is a Battleground” down the center of the page.

In this piece, the words “Your Body is a Battleground” relate to an array of political and social stances. Ideas of power and structure in society are often referenced in Kruger’s work. In the book Love for Sale, Kate Linker explains, “Power cannot be centralized; rather, it is diffused, decentralized, and in consequence, anonymous: it exists less as a ‘body’ than as a network of relations unifying social apparatuses and institutions” (Kruger, 1990, p. 27). Since power is something that cuts through all aspects of society, women are forced to defend themselves and their livelihoods in society. The words “Your Body is a Battleground,” reference this constant fight in which women take part. The fight over a woman’s right to choose what happens with her own body is one that intensely revolves around power. In her essay “Biologically Correct,” feminist writer Natalie Angier writes that there is a struggle between men and women “over the same valuable piece of real estate—the female body” (Angier, 2003, p. 10). There is a constant push and pull between the sexes: women fight to have control over their physical bodies as well as their places in society, while men fight to maintain their dominance over women in society.

Thoughts of patriarchy are spoken through Kruger’s artwork. According to Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, authors of Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies, “Literally, patriarchy means rule by the male head of a social unit (a family or tribe for example). The patriarch, typically a social elder, has legitimate power over others in the social unit, including other (especially younger) men, all women and children” (Pilcher, 2008, p. 93). As reviewed in psychologist and writer, Carol Gilligan’s essay “Sisterhood is Pleasurable: A Quiet Revolution in Psychology,” the traditional ways of society construct a barrier that forces women to be inferior to men. Patriarchy is formed when men take the dominant role in the family. If a man is the head of the family, then his ideas diffuse down through the inferior members of the family, causing these members to take his ideas and opinions as their own. In this way, the man’s views dominate not only in his immediate family, but also in society because they become not just the dominant views, but also the only views (Gilligan, 2003, p. 98-100). Linker states, “Kruger’s mission is to erode the impassivity engendered by the imposition of social norms: hence the gist of a work from 1982, in which the words ‘We have received orders not to move’ are superimposed on an image of an immobile woman’s body, pinned against a wall” (Kruger, 1990, p. 28). In this image, Kruger portrays the controlling means of patriarchy by depicting a silhouette of a woman with sewing pins literally fastening her to the background (Kruger, 1990, p. 28). The pins reference “women’s work” and help to show how women are kept in the home, or “in their place,” and away from prestigious, male dominated careers.

Kruger bases much her design work on stereotyping, referring to its “domain as that of ‘figures without bodies’” (Kruger, 1990, p. 28). She attempts to seize and manipulate the stereotypes that Euro-American culture relies upon so greatly. Kruger has found inspiration for many a work in the words of British writer John Berger, who states in Ways of Seeing from 1972, “*Men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves

being looked at” (Berger, 2003, p. 38). The male gaze turns women into objects that are not permitted to think for themselves. Their thoughts, opinions, and behaviors stem from the constant judgments of men. In the work *Untitled, (Your Body is a Battleground)*, Kruger challenges this issue by depicting the female figure in confrontation with the viewer. The subject’s eyes glare directly at the viewer in defense. Kruger takes the opposite approach to this very subject in her piece, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*. In this piece, she shows a porcelain-like female head facing parallel to the viewer with text stacked down the left edge of the page reading, “Your gaze hits the side of my face.” Linker suggests, “She may be referring to the power of the gaze to arrest—literally petrify—its object” (Kruger, 1990, p. 62). This implies that the male gaze prevents a true liberation of women. Women are still tied to the implications of patriarchy and the dominant male figure. In this piece, Kruger does not show what she wishes would happen when women are confronted as she does in *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, but she confronts the viewer with what she feels are the despairing realities amongst which we live.¹

As a slight break from most of her work, Kruger created a piece named *Untitled (You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men)*, which is featured in her book *Love for Sale*. Kruger portrays male figures as opposed to her typical female figures and confronts an issue from the opposite direction. In this piece Kruger pokes fun at the male persona by depicting a group of men who seem to be jokingly wrestling with text running across the right side of the page stating, “You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men” (Kruger, 1990, p. 52). This piece takes the assumption that affection between men is generally unacceptable because by showing affection, one is taking on feminine personality traits. This leads to the stereotypes that women are frail and need a strong, sturdy masculine figure in order to perform in society.

Kruger relates her work to the consumer driven society in which we live. “It is evident in her use of red enameled frames to commodify her images, announcing their market status and pointing to the market as the irrefutable condition that no object—least of art—can evade” (Kruger, 1990, p. 76). Commodity is built into every aspect of our culture, even the purest objects or ideas—even the purest pieces of art are eventually given a value or a price tag. By having her work itself reflect consumerism, Kruger indirectly portrays women as being for sale as well. In this way, she shows how women are generally portrayed in society—as belonging to someone else. This idea of ownership is a direct result of consumer society.

Ideas of consumerism take more direct forms in work such as Kruger’s *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)*. This piece shows a generic hand grasping a red block of color which contains the words, “I shop therefore I am.” In Kruger’s book, *Love for Sale*, there is a photograph of a woman carrying a handbag or shopping bag with this image printed onto it. In reference to this piece, Linker states, “...the consumer world, as Kruger remarks of ‘Pee-wee’s Playhouse,’ is a place where *things* reign supreme” (Kruger, 1990, p. 78). Society

¹ Over time, theories of the gaze have developed, becoming more intricate. Feminist, Bell Hooks has addressed issues of the gaze in reference to race and sex (Hooks 94–105) and artist, Mary Kelly has analyzed notions of the gaze through psychoanalytic theory (Kelly 72–76).

does not take into account who we are, but instead what we have. This, in a way, causes people to be dormant things rather than actual beings, leaving us with a completely plastic society.

In a video named “Consumption,” artists Michael Ray Charles, Matthew Barney, Andrea Zittel, and Mel Chin collaborate to show and explain work of their own which references a consumer driven society encompassed with mass production. Kruger and tennis star and sports commentator, John McEnroe, created the introduction to this video. McEnroe is shown briefly explaining what the viewer is about to see, while being periodically interrupted by flashes of Kruger’s red and white blocks of text displaying messages such as “Love art, Buy art, and Sell art” and “Feed me, Love me, Buy me, Sell me” (Consumption, 2002). “Kruger’s text addresses the viewer in much the same way advertisers sway a consumer to buy a product” (“Consumption and Contemporary Art”). The text also interrupts McEnroe’s monologue similar to how our lives are constantly interrupted by intrusive advertisements.

Kruger uses photomontage as well as other forms of media to question the viewer with ideas of feminism and the ways in which society treats and often mistreats women. Generally, Kruger’s work is united in that most of it stands for the same set of morals and values. In particular, her piece, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, portrays notions of power, patriarchy, stereotyping, and consumption. This design was originally created in support of a women’s rights march on Washington. In the piece, the face of a woman directly confronts the viewer. The text plays off of ideas that the female body causes disputes over control between men and women. The red framing of the image as well and the bold text give feelings of advertising and commodity. Concepts such as these are dispersed throughout Kruger’s work presenting her political and social views to society.

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