

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
Barbara Kruger Offers a Dark Mirror for Our Meme-Driven Age
Megan O'Grady
19 October 2020

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The artist's compelling and predictive use of aphorisms has blurred the lines between political slogans, poetry and the language of advertising, offering a dark mirror for our meme-driven age.

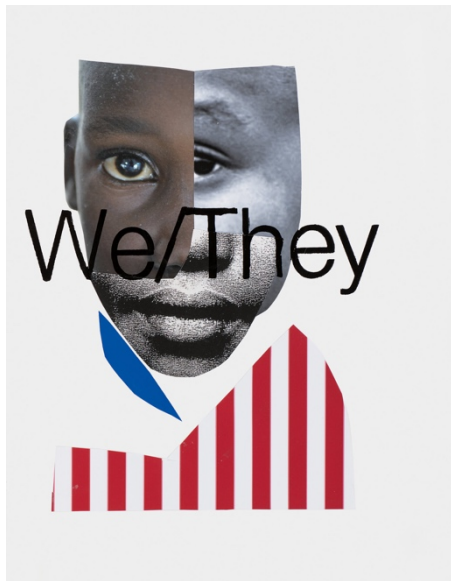


Image: "A Consequence of History," a 2020 collage-and-text work by Deborah Roberts made exclusively for T and inspired by the art of Barbara Kruger. Both artists use found imagery in their work — though Roberts generally does not combine her images with text, as she does here in tribute to Kruger's style. They also both attended Syracuse University, at different times. In an interview, Roberts said that in Kruger's art, "There's no room to not understand what she's talking about." © Deborah Roberts, courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Perhaps we've all had it, the Barbara Kruger moment. Maybe it was a postcard from a museum gift shop in your dorm room in the late 1980s, pinned to the wall above your stack of cassettes. "You are not yourself," it read, accompanying an image of a woman's fragmented reflection, the mirror shattered by a bullet or fist. Originally a signifier of cool, its message reverberated for years. Maybe, decades later, you cut one of her op-ed illustrations from the newspaper — "You

Want It You Buy It You Forget It" — which spoke to your dawning suspicion that you had become just another cog in the capitalist machine. Many of us in New York had the MetroCards she designed in 2017, printed with questions that stung a little every time we used it, crossing into Manhattan on the Q train: "Who is healed? Who is housed? Who is silent? Who speaks?" Perhaps you even attended a Rage Against the Machine concert with Kruger's stage backdrop — it was the 1996 "Evil Empire" tour — or owned one of her T-shirts, like my friend Ben, who, in high school, had the one with a vintage image depicting a housewifely figure holding a magnifying glass, her eye comically enlarged behind the lens. "It's a small world but not if you have to clean it," it read. "Barbara was right," Ben told me. "I never did have to clean anything."

Barbara was always right. (There's a T-shirt for that, too: It reads "Barbara Kruger was right," and was issued in 2018 in limited edition by the comedian Hasan Minhaj to mock the streetwear company Supreme, which pilfered its branding from Kruger.) In the 1980s, Kruger became famous for juxtaposing aphoristic declarations with found imagery culled from magazines and textbooks: In her 1981 "Untitled (Your Comfort Is My Silence)," an anonymous man in a fedora raises a finger to his lips in warning; her 1986 "Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)" features a Norman Rockwell-esque illustration of a young girl cooing over a little boy's bicep. The text, superimposed across the appropriated black-and-white pictures in her now-iconic white sans serif font (usually Futura Bold Oblique) in a red box, seemed to externalize things we'd long internalized, things like misogyny, consumerism and our relationship with authority and desire: Imagine Don Draper's grasp of American psychopathology delivered with the pithy asperity of Emily Dickinson.

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Image: A second collage by Roberts, also made for T and titled "A Consequence of History." In an interview, Roberts described Kruger as "a champion of women's rights and women's bodies and taking control of your life," and she wanted to take that idea and apply it to a Black child "trying to find his own voice and to not see that as a threat." © Deborah Roberts, courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

You tended to contemplate these things after the fact more than you really beheld them in the moment: Kruger's work is nearly always direct in address and billboard-speed in receptivity. Resolutely anti-hierarchical, the artist's provocations have appeared on coffee mugs and city buses; they've covered the walls of a Lower East Side skate park and the exterior of a department store in Frankfurt, thus ensuring that even people who might never have entered a museum or gallery would have access to them: medium, message, place. She's currently designing face coverings for a number of arts nonprofits,

and her journalistic social critique has found its way into newspaper op-ed pages as recently as last April ("A Corpse Is Not a Customer," read a recent piece for The New York Times). Increasingly, Kruger dispenses with images entirely, allowing the context itself to work its magic, as she did with "Untitled (Greedy Schmuck)," a black panel with the titular words printed in large white letters, which confronted visitors to the Art Basel Miami Beach fair in 2012. Thus, the seed of the message was planted, making you wonder, as it took root and bloomed, where you landed. Were you the schmuck, or merely another composite witness to the status quo, clever enough to be in on the joke but too comfortable and complacent to do anything about it?



Image: Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)" (1987). Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

WHILE I CAN'T really remember a world without her work, I always think first of what is probably Kruger's most famous image: "Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)," a photograph of a woman's face, polarized and bisected into positive and negative. Kruger initially created the

piece as a street poster in 1989 to promote the women's march on Washington, which was spurred by anti-abortion legislation undermining Roe v. Wade. She plastered New York City with the posters in the middle of the night, with help from her students in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. In 1990, Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts commissioned a billboard-size variation of it. Within 12 hours, the adjacent billboard was occupied by an anti-abortion group's image of an eight-week-old fetus.

It's impossible to know now where I first saw it, but certainly I knew the work long before I encountered it at the Broad museum, in Los Angeles, a nine-foot-tall silk screen on vinyl that dominated the room. I felt an unsettling slippage while looking at it, a kind of falling-through-the-looking-glass sensation. It was 2015, and I was pregnant at the time with my daughter, though it might as well have been 1989, back when Kruger's art was a kind of ballast for the post-Reagan era, a message from the other side. The artist often describes her work as a form of commentary, but that doesn't really convey the intimacy and power of her direct address, which I often experienced, as a teen in the early 1990s, like a note from a gutsy friend ("Thank God you're here," I thought). It

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was that voice that would eventually supplant the dominant voices I grew up with, of father, newscaster, priest and politician, and you didn't have to have read Foucault or gone to art school to understand it. A year after that moment in the Broad, a proud misogynist was elected president — Kruger made a New York magazine cover for the occasion, the word “loser” slapped across a grotesque close-up of Trump's visage, a work of protest; two years after that, another man accused of sexual assault was appointed to the Supreme Court, and a new era of paternalistic dude-bro politics began. My body is still a battleground, as is my daughter's, born in a country in which birth control is still not seen as basic health care, in which access to abortion is more constrained than it was 30 years ago.

What year is it again? It's 2020, allegedly, but all the clocks seem to be running backward. In the space of half a year, we've experienced a public health crisis, an unemployment crisis and an overdue conversation about racial injustice. We're revisiting not only 1989 but also 1918, 1929 and 1968. Statues have toppled; institutions are being remade in real time. There have been arguments that all art is an act of protest, that the very gesture of making art at all has always been inherently political. But at a time when Black Lives Matter activists peacefully demonstrating against racial inequality are tear-gassed to clear the way for a presidential photo op, it's clear we're living in a more politicized moment than in recent memory. The greatest art that has dealt explicitly with topical matters — like Peter Saul's paintings from the late 1960s protesting the Vietnam War, or Philip Guston's “Poor Richard” drawings that skewered Richard Nixon — tends to emerge out of the national mood at a given time. But Kruger's work has endured while remaining remarkably consistent in its approach, in part because she's always understood that so long as we have a political system that rewards and protects corrupt autocrats, we're doomed to repeat the injustices of the past.

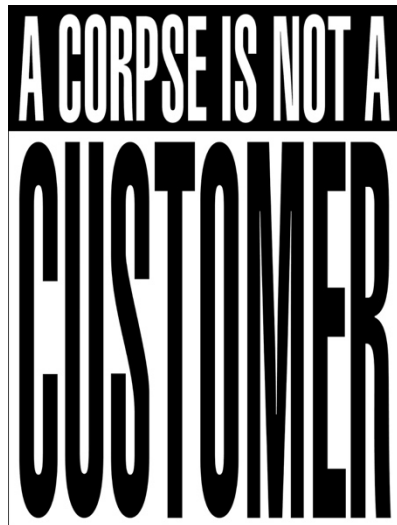


Image: Kruger's “Untitled (A Corpse Is Not a Customer),” which was published in The New York Times on April 30, 2020, in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Courtesy of the artist

It seems obvious, then, that Kruger is having yet another moment in our new era of protest. In June, large-scale works that she had made in Los Angeles a few months earlier became the backdrop for the protests that ensued there following the brutal killing of a Black man, George Floyd, under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer. On CNN, you could see protesters who had defied curfew lined up and handcuffed against a wall on Sunset Boulevard emblazoned with Kruger's words, “Who buys the con?”

Over the last 20 years, Kruger's oeuvre has grown to include immersive gallery shows that wrap entire rooms in text wallpaper or conduct visitors through elaborate multichannel video installations, but her technique — direct address — and themes have remained constant. If a handful of critics suggested that, by the early aughts, the work's relevance had begun to wane, as though by merely contending with subjects like identity and cultural authority she had somehow outmoded herself, that way of thinking seems impossibly smug these days. To be confronted by her uncanny durability is to be appalled by the gulfs in power and wealth that only seem to have deepened, and, perhaps, to ponder a certain recursiveness of history in our American experiment. In revisiting and recasting individual works over the years — she's currently creating an animated LED-screen version of “Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)” — Kruger refutes the periodized way we tend to view an artist's corpus, the museum retrospectives organized by decade; her work seems to answer to something enduring in our way of being, transcending time and space.

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Image: Kruger's "Untitled (Questions)" (1990/2018), on view at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Elon Schoenholz

Take "Untitled (Questions)," which covered the exterior of the Mary Boone Gallery in New York in 1991, at the time of the gulf war. Resembling a large flag, it's one of her most recognizable works. "Look for the moment when pride becomes contempt," it says in white on a blue background, where the stars would be. A series of questions (white letters on red) form the flag's stripes: "Who is free to choose?" "Who is beyond the law?" "Who is healed?" Kruger originated the work the year before for a three-story-high mural that was painted on the south facade of what is now known as the Geffen Contemporary at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art; there, it became the backdrop of one of the most famous images of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Taken by the photojournalist Gary Leonard, it depicts a trio of gun-toting National Guardsmen in the foreground. In 2018, Kruger reprised it (this time on the north facade of the building) in time for the midterm elections, and it remains there now, no less resonant.

How is it that a conceptual artist with roots in analog graphic design — "paste-ups" of paper and glue — has fared so well in the digital era? It seems that everything and nothing has changed since the 1990s. Kruger has always appealed to those of us who enjoy the way that certain chunks of language seem to spin out spontaneously into the cultural ether; her cut-to-the-chase brevity prefigured an era of television-news chyrons and 280-character tweets. Today, we communicate in headlines and wry snippets of email rather than narratives; in Instagram captions rather than character arcs. No sooner does an image appear — Ivanka and her can of beans; the Midwestern couple on their front lawn, brandishing guns at civil rights marchers — than it is repurposed and, all too often, defanged.

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Kruger was creating viral memes — units of transmission that enter the cultural slipstream — long before the internet existed, turning the visual onslaught into weapons that expose and undo the mechanisms of that domination. Her words have a way of becoming catchphrases, most obviously, "I shop therefore I am," Kruger's 1987 riff on Descartes, or "intricate rituals," which, for a time, was a popular euphemism on Tumblr for gay activity, drawn from her 1980 work, "Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals Which Allow You to Touch the Skin of Other Men)." In subverting the vernacular, Kruger became part of the vernacular. By usurping the visual language of branding, she inadvertently became a brand. It's a template that has been followed by the digital-age generations armed with a smartphone. We've caught up to her speed — "I've always had a short attention span," she says — if not necessarily her critical thinking skills.

Over time, her voice and aesthetic have remained consistent, ethically oriented, radically accessible, her dictums turning, more and more often, into open-ended, urgent-feeling questions. When I tell her, in an interview this past spring, how prophetic her early work feels now, she demurs. "I try to do work about how we are to one another," she tells me. "If you think of historical circumstances and events that have formed these centuries, they're full of both contempt and adoration and subjugation and torturous misuse and abuse of humans, and also incredible love and affection and generosity. I don't know, it's a broad sort of scope."

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Image: “Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground),” which Kruger originally made in support of abortion rights for the women’s march on Washington in 1989, has become one of the artist’s most iconic works. Courtesy of the artist and the Broad Art Foundation

It would be impossible to write about Kruger without pushing back against the conventions of journalistic profiles, the way we expect famous artists to perform the role of the public intellectual, supplying the answers to their own questions. We expect a contrary voice to the status quo, untouched by market and politics — despite the fact that art has always been very much about power and money. “Nothing exists outside the market. Nothing,” Kruger tells me. While art has a purported

investment in illuminating us to ourselves, its truths can be easily undermined by the disingenuousness of the successful artist who pretends to be above all of that.

Kruger, who has taught at the University of California, Los Angeles, since 2006 and serves on various art boards, guards her privacy and works without assistants, though she’s not a recluse in a mystique-buffing way like Banksy. We did not discuss details of her personal life, but not because she was cagey. It’s more that biography and personal history are not part of her practice. The “I” and “you” and other pronouns that appear in so much of her work could be anyone. When I first saw her name in my inbox — it was 2018, and she was responding to a story I had written on women Minimalists and land artists — it gave me a jolt: She has so successfully avoided becoming the face of her work, I had never considered her personhood. How unexpected and wonderful, then, to find that the voice I had known for so long came attached to an actual woman with an email account. We exchanged messages and, about a year later, I proposed this story. But when it came time to schedule the interview, she grew reticent. She was busy preparing a show in Korea at the time, but I suspected that she also wasn’t thrilled by the prospect of putting her story in another writer’s hands, given the risk of having her work facetiously interpreted against her biography, as in bad therapy.



Image: Kruger’s “Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)” (1981). Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

Then there was the problem of the customary photo portrait, of asking an artist who has spent decades dismantling clichés of visual representation to sit for one. Her 1981 work “Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)” features a female bust carved of stone, as though the subject has been rendered immobile by being seen. Laura Mulvey’s landmark 1975 essay on the male gaze, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” is a clear reference. In 1985, Kruger made “Untitled (We Are Astonishingly Lifelike/Help! I’m Locked Inside This Picture),” in which a woman peers out behind a frame she’s holding, a party to her own reductive framing. A lenticular photograph, the plea for help appears when you view it from a different angle. Photos of Kruger do exist, including an especially striking one from 1984 by Jeannette Montgomery Barron, in which the artist is photographed wearing

slouchy socks, the wariness on her face a compelling contrast to the “relaxed” setting.

But as it turned out, there was another, even more fundamental problem: the very structural terms of my story, destined as it was for this magazine’s Greats issue. The clue was in her original message to me, which thanked

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me for my reading of the hierarchies and stereotypes of the time, which, she wrote, were “so rampant then (and now).” In 1988, Kruger organized an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called “Picturing ‘Greatness,’” which was, on the face of it, a collection of portraits of famous artists, all of them white and most of them male: Man Ray’s photographs of Picasso and Cocteau; Edward Steichen’s of Rodin and Brancusi. In her wall text, Kruger noted the formulaic nature of these portraits: The artist exudes “a kind of well-tailored gentility,” or else he is depicted as “a star-crossed Houdini with a beret on, a kooky middleman between God and public.” (Kruger is updating the exhibition for a forthcoming survey of her work — the biggest show of her career — next April at the Art Institute of Chicago, using the museum’s photo archive. The exhibition will move to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in October 2021.)



Image: Limited-edition MetroCards designed by Kruger and featuring her work “Untitled (Whose Hopes, Whose Fears, Whose Values, Whose Justice)” (2017) were distributed in vending machines in four New York City subway stations as a part of her Performa Commission, for the Performa 17 Biennial in New York. Barbara Kruger, MTA Card, 2017, a Performa Commission, for Performa 17 Biennial. Photo courtesy of the artist and Performa Biennial

Given her astute critique of the ways in which we tendentiously elevate certain figures at the expense of others, would it not seem antithetical to appear in an article that anoints her with this kind of distinction? We don’t need another hero. And yet, I would like to make the case that there’s another, less exclusionary way to talk about greatness, and to point out that our cultural heroes needn’t be myth-scaled; we do, in fact, need more people like Christine Blasey Ford, who testified before a Senate committee about her alleged sexual assault at the hands of the soon-to-be-confirmed Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, or Darnella Frazier, the 17-year-old who filmed the killing of George Floyd as police officers threatened her — women who have set the bar higher for all of us. And so it seems to me exactly the right moment to be recognizing an artist who, in her career of nearly five decades, has been asking us to think more deeply about how power works in cultural terms, about the bias and flimsy hyperbole of so many of our notions of history and authority.

“Oh, but how lucky am I?” says Kruger, when I do reach her by phone, this past May, at her home in Hollywood. “This kind of disavowal on a certain level could easily collapse into kind of disingenuous humbleness. But this is not false humility. I am effing lucky that you and I are having this phone conversation. This could just as easily never have happened. You couldn’t have known my name. This is all so much about the tragic arbitrariness of life, of circumstance.” She’s pleased to be recognized, she makes clear; it’s just that she simply doesn’t believe the hype. “I always said that no work of art — whether it’s a movie, a building, a painting, a novel, whatever — is as major and brilliant or as damaged and minor as it’s written to be.” Her 2008 “Untitled (Shafted),” an installation in an elevator at LACMA, pokes fun at the language of art criticism by stringing together fatuous descriptors. This work, too, she’s expanded: Inspired by a text she wrote in the early 1980s, it has been shown in various forms over the years as “Untitled (The Work Is About),” and she now plans to project it as a scroll at the Art Institute. “The work is about the frame and the confines of articulated space,” it begins.

If Kruger writes very much like she makes art, she makes art very much as she is. The voice on the line is one I felt I already knew: flinty, salutary, empathetic to her interlocutor at this strange time we all find ourselves in. Like so many people associated with an institution of learning, she’s been stuck in endless Zoom meetings — “with the camera off,” she adds dryly. “I think that a lot of these meetings are just a desperate structuring device to distract us from our own finality.” I hear the anxiety in her voice, and I share it. “When I think back to a few months ago, sitting in a restaurant with friends or just doing everyday things like shopping or doing errands that no matter how damaged and tragic the world was at that point, it seems like a kind of shimmering, glowing, fever

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dream compared to what we're living through now," Kruger says. The numbers of new Covid-19 cases were spiking again in Los Angeles, and travel felt like too much of a risk, though she'd been thinking longingly of her little cottage in Springs, on Long Island, N.Y., where she likes to spend her summers reading and working. She bought it in 1989, the first property anyone in her family ever owned. "It saved my life. It was like the Fresh Air Fund for me." It's on stilts, on the water, with rubber hoses for plumbing. "I miss it so, and I don't know if it will exist for another year."



Image: "Untitled (You Want It, You Buy It, You Forget It)," published as a full-page Op-Ed in The Times in 2012. Courtesy of the artist

While Kruger is sceptical of superlatives, it seems safe to say that few artists in history have been so widely imitated, her easily borrowed white-sans-serif-font-on-a-red-box look proliferating through the culture without attribution. (I assume that the hirsute gentleman I spotted on the beach yesterday in a black tank top, the word "Savage" emblazoned on it in white Futura on red, has never heard of Kruger.) In 2011, she made a wall piece, "Untitled (That's the Way We Do It)," collaging hundreds of Kruger look-alikes that she found on the internet. At this point, even her appropriators have been appropriated, much to her amusement. In 2013, the streetwear company Supreme, which has admitted lifting its logo directly from Kruger in order to sell limited-edition hoodies, sued the designer of another streetwear company, Leah McSweeney of Married to the Mob, over her T-shirt design: the appropriators, in essence, suing for appropriation. (Supreme is now a billion-dollar company partly owned by the Carlyle Group, a private-equity firm once associated with defense contractors.) Kruger, asked for comment at the time by Complex magazine, responded by email: "What a ridiculous [expletive] of totally uncool jokers," she wrote, memorably. "I make my work about this kind of sadly foolish farce. I'm waiting for all of them to sue me for copyright infringement." The whole episode inspired Kruger, as part of her work for the 2017 Performa biennial, to stage her first and only performance, "Untitled (The Drop)": a pop-up shop of limited-edition Kruger merchandise parodying a "drop" from Supreme, including skate decks that read "Don't be a jerk." (McSweeney, currently a character on "The Real Housewives of New York," has one of them displayed in her apartment, says Kruger, who watches the show.) By completing the queasy circle of creative thievery and commodification, Kruger found a way to acknowledge it on its own terms and let it go.

Kruger, who has the omnivorousness of the autodidact she is, is as happy discussing "Vanderpump Rules" or "90 Day Fiancé" — "this is a balm, OK?" — as she is Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes. As a film and television critic for Artforum in the 1980s, she would occasionally break out Barthes for inspiration; her 1993 book of collected criticism, "Remote Control: Power, Cultures and the World of Appearances," contains her classic, still vivid essay, "Arts and Leisures," which links the distinctions we make between high and low culture to other, far more damaging binaries. Along with her gameness, this lack of snobbery or affect is one of Kruger's appealing qualities, one that's essential to her larger project: breaking down categorical thinking and the unrelenting power of stereotypes that divide us. Her fascination with reality television seems largely phenomenological, an extension of her critical writing: As a deeply private person, contemporary standards of self-exposure fascinate and repel her. "I think of what reality television is, the brutal anthropology of this crash of narcissism and voyeurism. Can we exist without having a camera pointed at us?" she asks me. This is also a theme in her video installations, including "The Globe Shrinks" (2010) and a new piece that will be included in the Art Institute show, "Untitled (No Comment)," both of which are ambitious, multichannel works; the latter, which features animations, screen grabs and text, is largely internet-based, probing digital forms of commentary and self-reflection.

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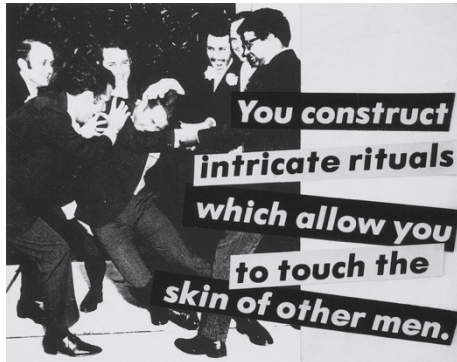


Image: “Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals Which Allow You to Touch the Skin of Other Men)” (1980), of which Kruger once said, “Sports, for instance, is a way that men can be allowed to have physical contact that is disallowed in a homophobic culture.” Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

Her interest in how we construct identity and how we frame and filter meaning for ourselves extends to the news — she watches both MSNBC and Fox; online, in addition to The New York Times, she looks at Reddit, Breitbart and Stormfront, which the Southern

Poverty Law Center identifies as “the first major hate site on the internet” — and to social media, another reflection of our fragmented public consciousness. “I love the comments. They’re just fabulous: ‘Gorgeous,’ ‘Beauty,’ ‘Yass Queen’ and all that. It’s horrifying, but it attests to some of our neediness. It’s sort of an amazing, telling anthropology.” Both of us have found ourselves, of late, drawn to darker, more lurid cultural output, the weird solace of a fictional world that’s “like Demerol,” as she puts it, “compared to our imploding planet.” I take her up on her recommendation of the Hungarian-born author Agota Kristof’s World War II-set novel, “The Notebook,” about a pair of near-feral twin boys, clear-eyed observers of various extremes of human depravity, which has the effect of making my own problems seem freshly manageable. She has recently read Angela Davis’s autobiography, Mehrsa Baradaran’s “The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap” and Mike Davis and Jon Wiener’s “Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties.”

The morning after our first conversation, I send her a link to an article about the 68-year-old writer Jill Nelson, who was arrested and held in a cell for five hours for writing “Trump=Plague” in chalk on a boarded-up storefront, but Kruger has already read it. “Every time I see people on television say, ‘I’m shocked, I’m shocked,’ I say, ‘Your failure of imagination is why we’re where we are today,’ not with the pandemic necessarily but everything. I just think that these are horrifying times.” She nails the way Trump, whom she describes as “the cross between a New York deli owner and a skinhead,” connects to his acolytes. “It’s the way he speaks. It’s a shtick, and he’s sometimes very funny and he’s good at it. He knows how to parse his words using an economy of language.” And she’s all too correct when she says that the failure of the Democrats is, in large part, rhetorical. “It’s heart-breaking. Too much is at stake,” she says.

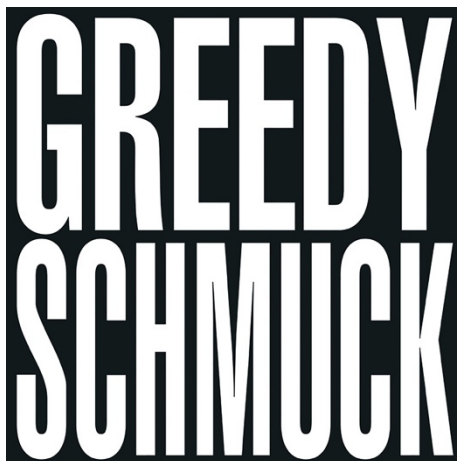


Image: Kruger’s “Untitled (Greedy Schmuck)” (2012). Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

Much of Kruger’s early work began as street posters: She would print hundreds of them at a small commercial printer on Little West 12th and Gansevoort and, in a process known as “sniping,” would plaster them around New York City, on boarded windows and construction sites, a kind of pre-internet bulletin board. (Later, she would hire professional “snipers” who could blanket the entire city overnight.) Anything she posted had a built-in evanescence: Within a few hours, an advertisement or concert promotion might be pasted over it. Before she was established, she remembers calling the transit authority, hoping to get access to a billboard, only to be

asked what she was selling. She also called Planned Parenthood, offering them the use of “Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground),” only to be told that they already had an advertising agency. (Since then, she has donated work to them.) What began as necessity quickly became a strategy, a way to maximize her message outside traditional methods of displaying art.

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"When I first started, there weren't that many women in the gallery space," she recalls. "So, it was interesting when I started showing work. There were actually people who were saying something like, 'How can you sell out and be in a gallery when you're working in the street?' And so, you finally claw your way into visibility within a gallery structure, of which you've been disallowed for generations, and all of a sudden you're, quote, and I use this word in quotes, 'complicit.' It's that sort of binary damnation. There's so much pathology there, you know?"

Kruger takes nothing for granted. She was born in 1945 and grew up the only child in a working-class family in Newark; her mother was a legal secretary, her father a chemical technician. Early on, she had a talent for drawing and thought she might become an illustrator but learned to touch-type just in case (at the time, only women learned to type). In 1964, after she attended Syracuse University for a year — "I felt like a Martian. I did not belong there, class-wise, for sure" — her father died, and she returned home to be with her mother, working as a telephone operator and enrolling at Parsons. There, she studied with Diane Arbus and Marvin Israel, then the art director at Harper's Bazaar. When she was 21, she became a designer at Mademoiselle, the Condé Nast women's fashion magazine, where she stayed for a few years before moving to House & Garden as picture editor. She quickly learned to maximize impact with only a few words. "I realized that I couldn't be a designer," she recalls. "I couldn't make anybody else's vision of perfection, but I also didn't really know what it meant to call myself an artist." She was interested in photography but was troubled by the way it objectified its human subjects. (Even Arbus, who Susan Sontag took to task in "On Photography," famously admitted, "I think it does, a little, hurt to be photographed.") Inspired by Magdalena Abakanowicz's textile wall pieces, Kruger briefly explored the elevation of traditionally feminine crafts to fine art: "I loved weaving and crocheting and all that, but it was like putting my brain to sleep," she recalls. "So it took me a while to come back to the fact that the skills I had developed at Condé Nast as a designer really were the right vehicle for me to visualize my engagement with the world." Like Andy Warhol, who began as a commercial illustrator, Kruger found a rich vein in the consumerist daymare of pop culture, in those glossy pages filled with feminine archetypes used to sell an idea of us to ourselves.



Image: "Untitled (Stripe 2)" (2019), which includes several aphorisms that Kruger has used in the past. Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

In 1976, while she was a visiting artist at the University of California, Berkeley, she discovered critical theory and the filmmaker Chantal Akerman, whose "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles" was screened at the school's Pacific Film Archive that year. The nearly three-and-a-half-hour-long film, made when Akerman was 25, observes the rigidly compartmentalized domestic reality of a bourgeois middle-aged widow who turns tricks out of her apartment. A feminist touchstone, it essentially turns a cold shower on the male gaze. "'Jeanne Dielman' was such an important work," says Kruger. "Its length, its sustained close reading. It was just sort of amazing." Kruger was also writing poetry, which she performed at the New York gallery Artists Space. Yvonne Rainer, the revolutionary dance artist, and Patti Smith, whom she had watched perform at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, were other iconoclasts she witnessed carving out space for themselves; Kruger still remembers the moment she heard Smith's 1975 record "Horses" playing through a dorm window in Berkeley.

In 1977, the critic Douglas Crimp organized a small but highly influential exhibition at Artists Space, "Pictures," which included Sherrie Levine and Robert Longo, artists who were interested in the way visuals mediate reality, and the supposed neutrality of signs and images. In years to come, the so-called Pictures Generation would eventually encompass the work of some of the most famous artists of the day, including Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince: By quoting and appropriating images — not unlike the way recording artists would, a few years later, sample an existing track to create an entirely new one — they put the notion of originality under scrutiny. A single image, reframed, cropped or otherwise recontextualized — think of Levine's reworkings of black-and-

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white art photography, beginning with “After Edward Weston” (1979), for which she appropriated Weston’s portraits of his son, or Prince’s “(Untitled) Cowboy” series from the 1980s, in which the artist repurposed vintage Marlboro ads — could have a fresh meaning, and the resulting works decoded the culture even as they recodified it. In 1981, Kruger’s art, less oblique than that of some of her peers but consonant in its concerns, appeared in a group show at Annina Nosei Gallery in New York titled “Public Address” alongside work by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jenny Holzer. There, she showed appropriated black-and-white imagery overlaid with black Futura text in white boxes; the prints were displayed in red frames. Her 1984 silk screen for the single-image foldout magazine *Aqui* — “We Get Exploded Because They’ve Got Money and God in Their Pockets” — featured the red boxes with white text that would soon become her signature. In 1999, the curator Ann Goldstein, then at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, gave Kruger her first big museum show, cementing her reputation well beyond the art world.



Image: One of five covers for T’s 2020 Greats issue, featuring Kruger’s “Untitled (The Greats)” (2020), an original work made exclusively for the magazine. Original artwork by Barbara Kruger for T Magazine

As much as one might draw a straight line from her graphic design background to her art practice — “Deluded,” reads one 1980 work, in which a woman holds a paper mask over her face while sprawled next to some fashion magazines — there’s also something clearly very punk about its look and stance, which is as anti-authoritarian and unpretentious as the music she was listening to at the time. And so it doesn’t surprise me to learn that she hung out at the Mudd Club, the legendary TriBeCa music and performance venue, an epicentre of New York counterculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s. (Kruger lived a couple blocks away, in a loft on Leonard Street she rented for the next three

decades.) Kruger is hesitant to talk too much about her close friendships, worried that she’ll leave someone out, but she makes clear that, in her generation, she felt that barriers for women in art were being challenged and that, in New York at least, the boys’ club had begun to disband. “It was at that cusp of a time when a few women, white women, could begin to enter a market space,” she explains. “It doesn’t mean we made any money for our artwork, but we did enter. That was very pivotal.”

As I write this story, it occurs to me that most of Kruger’s projects can be read as empathy tests, including one of my favourites, a gender-role-swapping mock-P.S.A. she made for the Public Art Fund, “Untitled (Bus Shelter Posters),” from 1991. Displayed around New York, the series of three posters each featured a different, supposedly pregnant man photographed in deeply serious black and white — a student, a construction worker and a middle-class dad (a fourth, featuring a young George H.W. Bush, appeared on a New York Times Op-Ed page). A large “HELP!” was printed in red and white above a short testimonial describing their respective plights — college to attend, a mortgage to pay — ending with the words: “What should I do?” It’s classic Kruger, deploying a familiar idiom in order to reveal the moulded-over sanctimony at the heart of it. To what extent can we truly imagine ourselves in another person’s shoes, body, circumscribed reality? If art reifies our perception of life, Kruger still makes us wonder to what extent art can really revise life.

Kruger’s work resonates as it does precisely because there are so many things hiding in plain sight that are routinely pointed out to us to no avail.

Empathy can change the world, as Kruger first wrote on a mural in a Strasbourg, France, train station in 1994 — it’s a sentiment perhaps radical enough in its earnestness, but, given the work’s location, suspended above the mass obliviousness of thousands of commuters, it’s a provocation, not a platitude. When I tell her that I can’t help but see her understanding of what it means to be marginalized as a kind of motor to her work, she agrees but hastens to qualify this. “When I grew up, I felt like an outsider to art, but there are degrees of outsidersness

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based on ethnicity and skin colour and class and gender,” she explains. “Invisibility is damaging creatively and materially. To be invisible is to feel that you do not exist.”

Those qualities that always made Kruger stand out from her contemporaries in visual art — her pulsating compassion and her wizardry with words — are what makes her so enduring. If the appropriated images she used seduced us, it was always her words that provided the gut punch. Recently, while I was watching a new animation Kruger has made recreating her 1988 vinyl, “Untitled (Pledge)” — the new version cleverly and movingly reworks the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance by changing key words in it, concluding, “with liberty and justice for all/some/a few/the rich/the poor/the givers/the takers/all” — I understood why, in the overstuffed bookcase of my mind, Kruger has always stood on a shelf not far from those post-war writers like Sontag and Joan Didion, whose scrutiny of American self-belief seemed to act in productive tension with their distrust of its sentimental tendencies.

Maybe we're finally beginning to connect the dots, as Kruger has long asked us to do, between the way we think about our personal lives and the structures that govern our public reality, between the way we see the world and the media onslaught we've created. To understand that spending \$10 on an adaptogenic smoothie might not, after all, redeem us. That domestic violence and police brutality are two sides of the same coin, or that the patrolling of women's bodies is another facet of authoritarianism. And though we are becoming smarter about the visuals and what they signify, they aren't always as obvious as a Confederate-flag towel on a wealthy suburban beach or a Bible tucked in a white Max Mara handbag. At this moment, art history is in the process of being rewritten in universities across America; meanwhile, the names of opioid and carceral system profiteers remain prominent in the galleries of major arts institutions.

Kruger's work resonates as it does precisely because there are so many things hiding in plain sight that are routinely pointed out to us to no avail, like all our commemorative statues of people whose accomplishments depended on the subjugation of others. It's not only that we're not really paying attention (engrossed as we are in our own self-presentation), it's that when we do, we're paying attention to the wrong things. In Kruger's latest exhibitions, the text has grown immense, wallpapering entire galleries — floors, ceilings, walls — engulfing visitors with her sense of urgency. It can feel like she's yelling at you to wake up. A quote from George Orwell's “1984” (“If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — forever”) covered the floor in her 2017 installation “Untitled (Forever)” at Sprüth Magers in Berlin; a version of it appeared in Seoul last year at the Amorepacific Museum of Art. Next spring, she's planning a number of “interventions” to accompany her survey, including a video projection that will cover the two-and-a-half-acre facade of Chicago's Merchandise Mart. It will read: “Whose hopes? Whose fears? Whose values? Whose justice?” The questions Kruger raises were always the questions she was asking herself, the ones that dare us to live a more examined life, filled with complexity and ambivalence: those most un-American of qualities, and the very things that define us now. Barbara Kruger was always right, and she's not happy about it.