

Barbara Kruger

MIT Press and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1999

Texts by Katherine Dieckmann, Rosalyn Deutsche, Ann Goldstein (curator), Steven Heller, Gary Indiana, Carol Squiers and Lynne Tillman

My favourite Barbara Kruger line is a Jenny Holzer *Truism*: Lack of charisma can be fatal. These two, Kruger and Holzer, are inescapably lumped together, and both artists must be dead sick of it. I wonder if they ever considered just giving in, pretending they actually are one and the same artist, joined at the hip of 80s text-based feminist art. But that would never work; in person, they could never pass for dead-ringers. Holzer, with her affluent background, her handsome, Midwestern looks and countryside reserve, is a real contrast to Kruger. Brilliantly funny, urbane, looking a bit like Erica Jong and conserving her New Jersey working-class accent, Barbara Kruger is a very likeable success story. A talented, opinionated artist, Kruger's influence in art and graphics really is incalculable, and the impression is that, even after all this time, she has remained true to herself.

To judge from her interviews, Kruger may also be a bit sick of being Barbara Kruger. 'I decline the role of moral regulator', she insists. (1) Over the years she has occasionally been forced to waste her energies defending herself especially from critics who judged her staggering success as a betrayal to her politics. Re-reading reviews from the 1980s and 90s, the peak of her success, one sees how often she was attacked. Kruger, in turn, has insisted that she is just another work-a-day artist, and a self-taught curator, editor, activist, writer, and lecturer with a few strong, personal convictions – not a spokesperson for a generation, gender and politik. Although her work was embraced by the art world and lavished with theory ('I was a theorist's play-thing', Kruger could title a pulp-fiction autobiography), she has nevertheless been regularly accused of preachiness; of hypocrisy; of being as slick and propagandistic as the advertising media she 'deconstructs'. Why, her detractors demanded, was she represented by that bastion of machismo, the Mary Boone Gallery? Why is the viewer involuntarily implicated in the 'you' and the 'we' of her potent one-liners? Don't her highly recognisable art-commodities trade on the same brand-identity strategy as the consumer culture she denounces? And on and on. It all made me think that, in effect, as a woman, Kruger really was subjected to more vicious criticism than her far more objectionable and uninnovative male colleagues, artists like David Salle and Eric Fischl (where are they now?).

*Barbara Kruger*, the catalogue for the artist's American retrospective, suffers from what feels like the resulting girls' lockerroom-style protectiveness around Kruger and her art. The catalogue explains that the included essays reflect 'the longstanding and close involvement that each [author] has had with Barbara Kruger's work'; the overall effect, unfortunately, feels safe, incestuous. All the writers, save for Heller (a Brit) are American, and belong roughly to Kruger's generation. Most essays trod more or less the same ground: early life in New Jersey; art school with actually-not-that-influential teacher Diane Arbus; her early success as the twenty-two year-old head designer at Conde Nast's *Mademoiselle*; the cross-disciplinary nature of Kruger's talents; her feminist and political sway. This background is followed by a celebratory analysis of her

singular, 'final-solution' kind of art: the closely cropped, rephotographed, black-and-white archive pictures; the Futura Extra-Bold Ital; the concise, bold use of language; the red frames. With the exception of Heller's essay, which begins by positioning Kruger's work within the broader history of twentieth-century graphic design, the essays are solid, but unadventurous (although, mercifully, they do steer clear of 1980s jargon-theory about, say, 'pronomial shifters'). Kruger's work maintains impact and topicality with whole new generations of artists and critics; if only the editors had dared bring an unexpected, updated, un-American perspective to the work.

For example, what exactly was the nostalgia for 1940-50s cornball Americana running through US post-punk counter-culture, not just in Barbara Kruger's archive photos but, for example, in the vintage styling of David Byrne, the films of David Lynch and John Waters? What is Kruger's working process: does she write her lines first, and then find 'the right picture', or do the pictures she chooses so well 'inspire' the words? Do her works signal the culminating end of the cut-and-paste graphic designer, marking the very moment in history when manually-skilled ('artistic') lay-out technique was forever lost to PhotoShop and the click of a mouse? How does her work connect with the earliest political collage (i.e., John Heartfield), or wartime posters with bold imagery overlaid with concise, recriminating lines --- 'Loose Lips Sink Ships!' -- very Kruger-esque in their delivery? Or, finally, how about a simple, unpoliticized, formal reading of the work, analysing old-fashioned ideas like symmetry/asymmetry, centre/edge, figure/ground, all compositional devices that Kruger commands like a virtuoso. OK, I admit it's not altogether fair to list what is missing from a book; but really, so much more could have been discussed.

The catalogue has been beautifully designed by Lorraine Wild, who succeeds in giving pace and variety to work which, when gathered together, can otherwise suffer from saminess. The choice of images, although more comprehensive than ever before, again isn't completely satisfying. We do not get to see the artist's *Mademoiselle* spreads, genuine Krugers with shocking, girly copy like "A Splash of Colour!" or 'A New You!', rather than, say, the more familiar 'Your body is a battleground'. Omitting the Condé Nast work (although some fabulously dated, 1968-72 bookcover designs by Kruger are a great addition to the book) is a disappointment and slightly contradictory, as if tacitly acknowledging the 'high/low' distinction in her output that the book seems bent on overcoming. Also missing are a few more installation shots to complement the innumerable single-plate-per-page reproductions which, like all Kruger publications, reduce her large works to genuine book lay-outs. For everyone familiar with the famous postcard 'I shop therefore I am', it is truly a shock to discover that, actually, it is an artwork bigger than you are, measuring almost three metres square. Unfortunately the real scale in Kruger's art is only betrayed in her not-so-successful, screaming roomsize installations, when she falls victim, alas, to gigantism (tripping into the same trap as Serra, Long, Oldenburg, *et al.*). Worse still is the in-progress, Land Art-ish, aerial-view text, the gargantuan PICTURE THIS spread across the lawns of the North Carolina Museum of Art, which bodes badly for future Krugers.

In the end, however, mostly what is missing here is Kruger's own writing. Presumably the decision not to include her own fabulous texts was to avoid confusion and competition with her previous publications *Remote Control* (1993) and *Love for Sale* (1996). The result, however, is that if you're looking for the definitive Kruger

monograph, this still isn't it. Only in the few instances when you can finally hear her humour ('[Thanks to feminism] women could be as mediocre as mediocre men and get equal compensation for their suckiness') the publication and, consequently, her work feels complete.

My second favourite Kruger-ism is by Dorothy Parker, who, when asked to use the word 'horticulture' in a sentence, promptly retorted 'You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think'. Apparently it was the artist's Parker-like wit, noticed as a student by Arbus, which prompted Kruger to turn to writing. Thank you, Dot.

(1) October 1987 *Flash Art* interview with Anders Stephanson.