

Barbara Kruger's Commentary on Capitalism: Art Amongst Skate Culture

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Some of artist Barbara Kruger's best work has been when her graphic design, bold, text-focused work has collaborated with skate culture and modern branding. Her ongoing commentary on capitalism within a consumeristic culture has reflected on the morals of the plastic society we live in. Her work leads into concepts discussed in class such as the textualization of art, as well as mechanical reproduction, and simulation. Kruger's work amongst skate culture has led to her highest successes, but it has also led to feuds with large companies such as Supreme. With design choices teetering on the edge of plagiarism, a look into Kruger's response both verbally and artistically shows dominance in her ability to create original, text-based work. This has fuelled more of Kruger's corporate greed commentary throughout her work. With similar stylistic choices reflecting the works of artists such as Banksy, Andy Warhol, and Shepard Fairey, Kruger utilizes traits of advertising and graphic design to speak to the public eye. Kruger has been producing work since the late 1970s, but her work is seeing its greatest success in the past few years.

Kruger is so engaging as she dabbles with crossing pop art, street art, and graphic art in one. She has Banksy-like qualities in her graphic-styled art, and she reflects a level of "street credit" as she makes her appearance in skateboard culture. In 2017 she presented a piece called *Untitled (Skate)* at Coleman Skatepark in Manhattan, featuring large bold text, "Whose hopes? Whose fears? Whose justice." She also collaborated with Volcom in 2017, a brand centred around skate



(Figure 1) Barbara Kruger, *Don't Be A Jerk* Skateboard Deck, 2017. Silkscreen on Maple Wood, 31 × 8 × 3/4 in.

culture, creating some of her most successful work. Kruger's series of work from this collaboration, titles *The Drop*, (figure 1), is so bold and unapologetically raw, but it calls for deeper contemplation. It is successful for capturing the attention of the viewer because of the bold text used, it is like a punch that catches you off guard. Once the vibrant colours and bold, short-worded phrases catch your attention, her work offers more to contemplate. The pieces from *The Drop* were essentially Kruger's response to the struggles of authenticity and plagiarism amongst the art community, but also a bold statement on greed, wealth, and capitalism in our society. At a glance, her work looks to be very similar as the design decisions made by skate company Supreme, and that is because it is.

Authenticity. Is anything authentic anymore? With millions of virtual images and ideas flying around social media everyday, it would be hard to know if an idea is truly original, if



(Figure 2) Barbara Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*, 1987, screenprint on vinyl, 125 x 125 cm, photo.

someone has not already done something similar, or if your work is too closely inspired by others. Sometimes appropriation of design, however, is a struggle for even highly successful artists such as Barbara Kruger. The work done by the popular skate brand “Supreme” is closely linked to Krugers work, with little difference between them visually. Kruger is known for her bold text against black and white images, with red boxes, as

shown in figure 2. They are very simple images in themselves, but praised for their witty criticism of capitalism. Krugers commentary of a profit-driven society is what makes the work stand out as art, and not as just another clothing brand, literally profiting off of capitalism. Artist

James Jebbia, who founded Supreme (figure 3) in 1994, admitted that Kruger had influence on the logo design. However, Kruger spoke up in 2013 when Supreme successfully sued another clothing line, Married to the MOB, speaking to the selfishness of the society we live in: “What a ridiculous clusterfuck of totally uncool jokers. I make my work about this kind of sadly foolish farce.



(Figure 3) James Jebbia, *Supreme* Logo, 1994.

I’m waiting for all of them to sue me for copyright infringement.”<sup>1</sup> After this remark in 2013, her work from *The Drop* made a bold comeback to Supremes selfishness in 2017. This work featured merchandise such as hoodies, beanies, and even skateboards featuring phrases such as “don’t be a jerk,” and “Want it, buy it, forget it,” speaking to the fact that the problem with Supreme is the problem of our entire system.

Kruger’s *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)* utilizes the reworking of the famous catchphrase originally by Rene Descartes, “I think therefore I am.” The meaning behind this is that if one is able to think and self reflect then they exist. Kruger takes the phrase and turns it into “I shop therefore I am,” indicating that people are no longer defined by what they think, but rather by what they possess. In a consumerist culture, people are exposed to more goods and availability of products than ever before. Online shopping is defining an entire generation. This is what Kruger would call a plastic society. Focusing on what you have rather than who you are creates a society of shallow people with materialistic values. Again, Kruger’s use of bold, meaningful text creates an appealing design that catches the viewer’s attention, and leads them begin hatching the Russian doll of meaning behind her work. Kruger says her work consists of

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<sup>1</sup> Yotka, Steff. “Was Barbara Kruger's The Drop a Success?” *Vogue*, December 8, 2017.

questions that we don't ask but should.<sup>2</sup> While red captures the viewers attention, the subject matter provokes deeper contemplation. In one instance, Kruger used her work to inspire people to go to a pro-abortion march, making her artwork function as an advertisement (figure 4), a conversation starter, a thought provoker. Her works possess the ability to function as advertisements because of their graphic nature and bold delivery. They stand out and are appealing to viewers.



(Figure 4) Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, 1989 photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 112 x 112 in.

Text and image together became a new way of communicating ideas in the 1960s. Kruger would have been influenced by the way photography grabbed hold in the 1960s and flourished as a medium, as it had not been fully explored before. Ronald Barthes describes that through ordering, placement, and repetition, images can become like sentences- they can function as an arrangement of words. Well, Kruger's use of bold images plus the addition of words, gives her work more

meaning than possibly what an image alone could represent. Images have a powerful way of creating cultural codes amongst viewers. Photos that seem bland and meaningless have the power to hold important social meanings, especially with the addition of memorable text. The image and text work together. Liz Kotz expands on this idea and proposes that the text allows the viewer to be present in the work- to be immersed in it. Kruger's text almost has a way of placing

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<sup>2</sup> Forster, Ian. *Barbara Kruger: Part of the Discourse | Art21 "Extended Play"*. YouTube. 2017.

the viewer inside her work, “*Your Body is a battleground*,” and this battle suddenly includes you, the viewer.

Barbara Kruger’s work holds some of the same characteristics as other well-known artists such as Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Shepard Fairey. Like Warhol, Kruger studied graphic design and this proves to be a heavy influence in both of their work. An inevitable connection to graphic design is advertising, studying trends in consumerism and what people respond to aesthetically. It is unavoidable to closely study the capitalistic society we live in because graphic design and advertising needs to be up to date with society, it requires relevance and trendiness. Warhol



(Figure 5) Barabara Kruger, *Untitled (Skate)*, 2017, installation at Coleman Skate Park, Manhattan.

studies the products amongst a capitalist society whereas Kruger focuses on text, both of them reflecting the vibrant graphics of pop art culture. The simplicity of Kruger’s work evokes the idea of mass production, like the prints by Andy Warhol. There is no evidence of the artist’s hand in her work, as if it is industrially produced, laid on a track and mass produced like a newspaper. This kind of delivery heightens the impact of the messages in her work. Nothing is organic, she





(Figure 6) Shepard Fairey, *Obey Giant*, 2002, 61 x 45.5 cm

is artistically advertising concepts and questions in which she feels we, as a society, need to be asking. Like Banksy, her work connects to street art and speaks to a different kind of community. With street art comes many themes such as the middle class, rebellion, and freedom of speech. In her book, *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances*, she expresses her interest in changing the system, of letting go of outdated ideals, criteria, and values. She asks, “are these values and standards dollops of divine rule that have wafted down to earth? Or are they simply the

pleasures and preferences of those who archivize, hierarchize, and capitalize.”<sup>3</sup> Skate culture combines these ideas of rebellion against an outdated system with art and expression, which is something that Kruger explored through her collaboration with skate companies. Shepard Fairey, another claimed street artist, created a symbol with the word OBEY (figure 6), consisting of bold letters, similar to Kruger’s work. His logo design took off and it became the inspiration for one of the most famous logos in clothing brands, OBEY. What made this one word so engaging and successful is that it makes the viewer stop and think, it does not tell them to buy something or become a part of this consumerist society, but it does make you think about what it means to be. Who are we obeying and why? Fairey eventually explained that the image of André the Giant’s head held no relevant meaning within the piece, but his unsettling appearance mixed with bold,

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<sup>3</sup> Kruger, Barbara. *Remote Control: Power, Cultures and the World of Appearances*. Cambridge, Mass. u.a.: MIT Press, 1994.

forceful text was there to provoke thought and frustration.<sup>4</sup> Kruger's work is similar for it makes you stop and really analyze what the statements mean. These are recognizable words but somehow the meaning of them is unclear; they require deeper analysis. These artists all share the desire to go against the grain of society- to rebel and pave a new path. As Fairey simply states, "don't just sit there and let people who have some sort of political or financial agenda set things up the way they want them, because if you want to throw a wrench in their spokes, it's really easy."<sup>5</sup> Like Fairey, Banksy, Warhol, and countless other contemporary artists, Kruger continues to use her art for political activism and to voice her opinion amongst a consumerism-driven society.

Kruger's artwork continues to be relevant throughout today's pandemic as she speaks to political propaganda surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in her work *Untitled (A corpse is not a customer)*. This artwork was featured in the New York Times's "[Art in Isolation: An Ongoing Visual Diary in Our Uncertain Times](#),"<sup>6</sup> which you can click to view. This work makes a political jab to the corporate industries that consume our everyday lives. While giant, multibillion dollar chain stores are consumed by the worry of profit, Kruger points out that people are dying, there are greater worries in humanity right now other than a fat store raking in more wealth. After all, a corpse is not a customer. This work, containing only words, relates to her 2017 *Untitled (Skate)* (figure 7) installation by completely stripping the art of its previously utilized imagery. It is like the environment for the work is imagery in itself, its setting plays a role in the delivery of the

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<sup>4</sup> Tucker, Jennifer. "Obey Giant [Shepard Fairey]." Sartle, September 14, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Fairey, Shepard. "ANDRE THE GIANT IS WATCHING YOU." Obey Giant, April 16, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The New York Times Opinion. "Art in Isolation." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 25, 2020.



message. In an interview in 1991, Kruger proposed that if “architecture is a slab of meat, then so-called public art is a piece of garnish laying next to it. It has a kind of decorate function.”<sup>7</sup> Thinking of architecture as a canvas or



(Figure 7) Barabara Kruger, *Untitled (Skate)*, 2017, installation at Coleman Skate Park, Manhattan.

vessel for public art is very different than having a piece stand alone as a separate identity to the environment. Kruger utilizes the rebellious culture surrounding skateboarding to add meaning to her text. *Skate*, much like her other works, comments on the ignorance of society amongst consumerist culture. “Kruger’s work uses the visual language of advertising to critique the very message it emulates.”<sup>8</sup> By choosing a skatepark for the canvas in which her work exists, she added important commentary and aura to an already effective message.

Barbara Kruger’s work has become increasingly popular within the past few years, with many factors attributing to her success. Her decision to make her art a public installation in *Untitled (Skate)* was effective in that it allowed the general public to read the messages and become part of the commentary. Getting people thinking is the most effective way of advertising. In this case, Kruger is advertising an idea- a social movement. Person versus industry, society versus capitalism. It is admirable how Kruger’s work is so engaged with the public, with its

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, W. J. T., and Barbara Kruger. “An Interview with Barbara Kruger.” *Critical Inquiry*. The University of Chicago , 1991.

<sup>8</sup> “Part of the Discourse, Barbara Kruger.” *Art21*, January 24, 2018.

natural habitat lying amongst society in the forms of billboards, posters, and banners.

Skateboarding over her political statements makes her work relatable and real, it does not fall behind the clean glass of a high-end gallery exhibit. By standing up so boldly against Supreme, a company that is dominating the fashion industry, viewers are lead to believe that Kruger is on the side of the “people,” whomever that may be. Her graphic-inspired work provokes ideas surrounding text and imagery as well as ideas of mass reproduction and capitalism within a consumerist society, similar to the ideas explored by artists such as Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Shepard Fairey. At seventy-six years of age, Barbara Kruger proves that her work still packs a punch, and she is not done yet.

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