

Elisabeth Cooper

Gender Art and Western Culture

AH 401

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Consider a work made by a woman in the postmodern to contemporary period (1960 to the present) to analyze using a methodology of your choice. How does the artist consider, represent, negotiate, disrupt, re-imagine gender, in the work? How do writers utilize the artist's gender identifications to interpret meaning in the work? In other words, are elements of the artist's identity central to critical analysis of their work? If so, is this fairly considered, or does the focus on the artist's identity tend to neglect other features that you feel are more important to understanding the meaning of the work? Be sure to use examples and to argue your position by reading the work in the way that you think is most productive.

Barbara Kruger *Untitled (your body is a battleground)* 1981 Analysis

Barbara Kruger is an American contemporary artist whose work conveys feminist themes through collage of photography and texts. Her works are mostly displayed in large poster prints and installations. Kruger's artwork speaks directly to the viewer, bringing them into the artwork. Many of her works are created to tell the audience a message through text, then let it be interpreted through the image. The piece *Untitled (your body is a battleground)* 1989 speaks to the media and politicians about female reproductive rights, showcasing the emotional process of fighting for the rights to your own body. Kruger's identity as an educated woman with a goal of political activism brings deeper meaning and purpose to the work.

*Untitled (your body is a battleground)* 1989 is an artwork created by Kruger for the 1989 Women's March on Washington<sup>1</sup>. To understand this work it is important to understand the context of Roe v. Wade. In 1973 this supreme court decision secured the rights for females to choose to have an abortion, a landmark decision that conservatives have fought to repeal since its enactment. This artwork was created to be used as a poster at a woman's rights march in 1989, a

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, Suzanne. "One step forward, two steps back: Barbara Kruger talked to Suzanne Moore on her recent visit to London." *Women's Art Magazine*, March-April 1994.

time when conservative politicians created many antiabortion laws limiting female reproductive rights. The goal of this artwork was to support reproductive decisions for female anatomy by using emotional and visual persuasion.

The medium of the piece is a collage and screen print on vinyl and the background is a black and white photograph of a woman facing the camera. The image is cropped and the canvas is a rectangle sized to fit her face. Half of the photograph is a negative exposure and the other half is a positive exposure. Her face shows little to no emotion, with her eyes looking slightly above the camera. The use of a silkscreen gives the image a texture that's similar to stippling. On the left and right sides of the canvas there are vertical stripes of red lined up to the edge. In the same shade of red there are three rectangles with text in the center of the piece, with the top and bottom rectangles aligned to the top and bottom of the piece. The text spells out "Your body is a Battleground" in a white italic futura font.

This artwork is created to address the audience and confront their beliefs on abortion laws in the United States. The woman in the photograph is staring just above the camera, challenging the male gaze and giving her power. As you look at the photograph it looks back at you. This humanizes the artwork and shows the emotional turmoil of a body being a political battleground. The use of positive and negative imaging on either half of her face shows how she is split into two pieces. Her body is divided by two different sides of the battle, pro-choice and anti-abortion. The poster argues that what someone does to their body is not up for debate or arguments, and that women should have access to a safe abortion without having their bodies policed. This poster avoids the question of whether abortion is ethical or not by addressing the harm caused by the patriarchy that gives it control over a woman's body. The use of the word "Your" means that Kruger is speaking directly to the viewer, using emotional persuasion. By talking to the viewer

Kruger challenges their beliefs, and sees how harmful it is for politics to affect human lives.

“She emphasizes the ways in which language manipulates and undermines the assumption of masculine control over language and viewing<sup>2</sup>” In this artwork Kruger is addressing the women at the march, the media, politics, and the patriarchy. Her tone is direct and authoritative, whereas in interviews Kruger tends to avoid discussing the politics of her artwork<sup>3</sup>.

Kruger’s use of language in her work is often vague, leaving the interpretation of the text and photography up to the viewer. The photography and text work with one another to develop the meaning of her artwork.

“So her project, as much as can be gleaned from her writings, is to do away with the "tires militarism" of binary oppositions. Public versus private, political versus nonpolitical, commerce versus culture, art versus pop culture, women artist versus what?

The genius magically free of gender that is our definition of the male artist.<sup>4</sup>”

Kruger’s intentionally vague wording speaks to a wide audience. As a poster, *Untitled (your body is a battleground)* 1989 was intended for the women at the march, but is accessible to any viewer.

In art history Kruger is often defined by her feminist themes, historical context and iconic style. Many of her works use the same format; a photograph with a brief message written in italic futura font with a red square outline. “One of Kruger's favorite topics, the role of women in society.”<sup>5</sup> In the piece *Untitled (your body is a battleground)* 1989 Kruger discusses the role of

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<sup>2</sup>Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. Fifth edition. New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2007. 236

<sup>3</sup> Moore, Suzanne. "One step forward, two steps back: Barbara Kruger talked to Suzanne Moore on her recent visit to London." *Women's Art Magazine*, March-April 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Isken, Suzanne. "Social Issues: Role of Women." *School Arts*, February 2000, 38.  
[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A59210847/AONE?u=chap\\_main&sid=AONE&xid=60e32753](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A59210847/AONE?u=chap_main&sid=AONE&xid=60e32753).

women in the March on Washington. To protect their rights to a safe abortion, many woman went to protest. Kruger's identity as a woman has a large effect on the interpretations of her artwork. Kruger's use of pronouns has a large influence on their interpretation. This leads to a variety of interpretations when analyzing the painting. Context plays a large role in understanding this piece. The statement "your body is a battleground" is directed at the women attending the march, and to inspire women to get involved. This phrase is a call to action, for women to support their rights. Standing alone the phrase "your body is a battleground" can lead to several interpretations, and not all interpretations will be tied to the feminist perspective. "Women either respond to her form of address or indeed those pictures in her work still often appear to be silenced, passive, threatened."<sup>6</sup> In a similar piece by Kruger, *Untitled (your gaze hits my face)* 1981 the Kruger also uses "your" pronouns to speak directly to the viewer<sup>7</sup>. While "my" refers to the image she used of a marble sculpture. This word choice shows that Kruger is referencing the male gaze, and that women in art are only meant to be an object. To humanize the object by having it speak to the viewer demonstrates how Kruger is trying to show how in the art world, women are only meant to be seen as objects rather than human. Proving that Kruger is aware of her audience depending on the context of the piece.

Kruger's identity as a woman is important when it comes to analyzing her work, but it is not critical. The context in which her works are created have a large impact on the meaning, but are also meant to stand alone. Kruger intentionally uses personal pronouns and immediate language to show that she is speaking to whomever is viewing the artwork. She also uses vague phrasing to leave the interpretations of the piece up to the viewer. Kruger has stated that she does

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. Fifth edition. New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2007. 236

not view herself as political or as an activist<sup>8</sup>. This shows that the goal of her work is to develop empathy, and understanding of self rather than to deliver a message. Although Kruger's identity helps to understand the context in which the pieces are created, the works are still able to stand alone. Many of Kruger's works are meant to be left to the interpretation of the viewer. The context of her life, and the political climate in which these works were made help to see what Kruger was feeling at the time. Although Kruger does not define herself as a political artist, as a female working in late 2nd wave feminism, her identity as a woman and an artist became intertwined. Kruger's art stands alone without knowing that she is a female artist, but this context helps the viewer gain a deeper understanding of her message.

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<sup>8</sup> Moore, Suzanne. "One step forward, two steps back: Barbara Kruger talked to Suzanne Moore on her recent visit to London." *Women's Art Magazine*, March-April 1994.