

**BARBARA  
KRUGER:  
JUST A  
GRAPHIC  
DESIGNER?**

**GINA ANDRACCHIO  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
WINTER 2011**

## BARBARA KRUGER : Just a Graphic Designer?

Gina Andracchio | Savannah College of Art & Design | Contemporary Art | Winter 2011

There is no doubt about it: Barbara Kruger is a true legend—a postmodern celebrity through and through. With such an iconic style, if you do not know of her off-hand, chances are you have seen her work. Her signature approach to and execution of visual communication has made her one of the most influential postmodernists of our time. Barbara Kruger’s distinctive technique of mixing appropriated imagery, bold text, and startling messages has been applied to a number of mediums—ranging from public to gallery art. Her appropriated imagery welcomes us in to the work, where we are met with her harshly contrasting, easily accessible messages of social, cultural, or political propositions.

Since an emerging artist in the 1970s, Kruger has maintained her position as a prominent figure in today’s contemporary art culture. It is said that, “Kruger has been interpreted in three contexts: political aesthetics, feminism and postmodern investigations of the ‘the gaze’, and identity and power.”<sup>i</sup> (*See Image 1*) And as our world is changing exponentially, mostly due to the rapid onset of technology, artists have had to adapt faster than ever. Kruger is an ideal example of an experienced artist who has adapted styles and techniques over time to fit the ever-changing needs of herself and her audience. Considering her extensive career, some make a case that the art world is “over her”; however, it is evident that her vocations, methodologies, style, and influence continue to be pertinent in contemporary art today.<sup>ii</sup> One common critique is that she is simply a graphic designer, but there are a plethora of labels that critics, peers, and audience members have slapped on her—from activist to fine artist, propagandist, feminist, and

commercial designer, to name a few. I argue that giving a title to her work is irrelevant. Kruger is a communicator of messages, and her intentional choices of media and medium help effectively get her voice across to the viewer.

When it comes to talking about herself, Kruger is rather humble and prefers that people focus on her work. In 1945 Barbara Kruger was born in southern Newark, New Jersey, as the only child of her mother and father. She graduated high school in 1964, and followed up her education by enrolling at Syracuse University as an art major. After the death of her father, who worked at Shell Oil as a chemical technician, Kruger left Syracuse, only to return to her educational agenda a year later by becoming a student at the famous Parsons School of Design. It was at Parsons that she met a number of artists and educators in the art community—two of the most influential were two of her professors, photographer Diane Arbus and Marvin Isreal, a graphic designer and former art director of *Harper's Bazaar*. She only studied at Parsons for a little over a year, and upon graduation, Kruger got a small job at an advertising agency. Through some lucky connections, she eventually obtained a position working for Condé Nast Publications as a designer for *Mademoiselle* magazine and quickly climbed the corporate ladder. By the age of twenty-two, in 1967, Kruger was head designer of the magazine, and worked there for four more years. While working full-time, Kruger started to make art in 1969, and after leaving *Mademoiselle*, she worked as a freelance designer and moved to a studio in New York—which she still owns and uses. During this time, she made a series of large-scale crocheted pieces for gallery display. “These challenged separations between art and craft, thereby probing relationships between creativity and gender.”<sup>iii</sup> Although she was intimidated by the male-dominant art world, Kruger’s work was modestly displayed in New York galleries. As her career began to develop and she found her place among women artists fighting the battle against

misogyny, it is clear to me that her upbringing has had an impact on the kinds of issues she raises. Describing Diane Arbus as, “the first woman role model [I] had who didn’t wash the [kitchen] floor twenty times a day.” Oddly enough, her mother did fit the stereotypical role of the ‘female secretary’ in a legal office.<sup>iv</sup>

Her name started to gain recognition when she was invited to one of the biggest events of her career—the 1973 Whitney Biennial Exhibition—which jumpstarted a chain reaction of exhibiting all over the United States, and eventually the world. Her early work, though, was nothing like it is today. Although she’s stayed consistent with large-scale objects, her pieces then were typically collages made of crocheting, pieces of ribbon, paint, glitter, etc. By 1975, her work shifted towards being more abstract, however a year later she stopped making art altogether and, as Ann Goldstein stated, spent the next “four years in a number of activities that contributed to the construction of her methodology and identity as an artist.”<sup>v</sup> When asked about her career in the magazine industry in an interview, Kruger explains, “When I first started there, [at the magazine], it was a job. I didn’t know if I wanted to be an artist... I didn’t know anything. I had no college degree. I was drawn to art as a way to objectify the world, which is a large part of what artists have to do in order to function at all.”<sup>vi</sup> Through proactive searching for an occupation, Kruger found herself at University of California, Berkeley where she took the first of a number of visiting-artist jobs. During this time, Kruger continued writing poetry, started going to film screenings, and began taking her own photographs. She always preferred taking pictures of architecture to people. It was at Berkeley that Kruger also began reading books on theory and criticism, taking particular fondness in the writings of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, “and their respective analyses of technically reproduced art and semiotics,”<sup>vii</sup> which inspired her to start writing for the publication *Artforum* on film, television, and music. In fact, in Walter

Benjamin's article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he states that by being able to reproduce photographs easily, they no longer become original and "based on ritual, but they become based on another practice—politics." Perhaps Kruger read this and became inspired to analyze and create politically charged art, because she is fully aware of the politics in her art. In a review of her work, "... the task of the work (or at least one of the tasks) is a political displacement of the traditional/dominant mode of representation, a task she accomplishes through reappropriation."<sup>viii</sup>

Kruger is a prolific writer to this day, and it should be noted that, this interest in theory is what helps support the evidence that Kruger is an exemplary postmodern, conceptual artist and not just *any old graphic designer*. During the 1970s, Kruger had already gained a fair amount of recognition, and her new works were featuring the integration of image and text. These transitional works first included photographs she took herself, and then switched to photographs of original, black-and-white, mass media images from the 1940s and 1950s. She admits that she respects photography as an art form, but has no interest in it as a career, so the appropriated images seemed to fit her better. The images were accompanied with the iconic Futura typeface that was used for years to come. As if all that wasn't enough, Kruger launched a curating practice during the early 1980s.<sup>ix</sup> Kruger also started expanding her practice by looking towards public projects like billboards, posters, bus cards, train stations, and most importantly, social campaigns and issue-based art in the 1980s. "Perhaps the most well-known graphic designer to take up social activist themes in the 1980s was Barbara Kruger," Stephen Eskilson exclaims.

One of her most iconic images is *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (See Image 2), and is most well known as being adapted by pro-life protesting group. The image was displayed all over Capitol Hill in the form on postcards and posters for a march in Washington D.C., in

1989. After the march the image lent itself to postcards, posters, billboards, signage, and other campaign materials.<sup>x</sup> Embodying Kruger's iconic style, the viewer is met with the gaze of a beautiful woman, whose face is split in half, creating a positive and negative dichotomy. In my opinion, this juxtaposition is a perfect metaphor for a number of things: opposing forces in general; the battle a woman fights inside and outside of herself; the contrast between the scale of domestic violence and its privacy; perception and reality; and whatever else it could mean to the viewer.

Due to the simple formal qualities of the piece, the viewer doesn't have to worry about accessing the information, or being too distracted by what's going on visually. The rest of the composition is framed vertically, with a clear central axis. The words, "Your Body is A Battleground" are centered on the artwork, surrounded by red blocks, and set in Kruger's signature Futura Bold Oblique—a clear, easily accessible font. The text jumps right at you, does all the talking in the image, and distinguishes itself as separate from the black-and-white photograph. Kruger started using the font in 1979, and by now most designers today cannot use it without being reminiscent of the *Kruger style*. When asked why she chose this typeface, Kruger explains, "I used to use it a lot at the magazine, definitely Helvetica, Franklin Gothic and sans serifs a lot too, but there was also Century Schoolbook and Bodoni. *Mademoiselle* was a young woman's magazine, and it had a young, trendy, artsy reputation... so sans serif type equated with the kind of modernism that seemed to go hand in hand with that demographic."<sup>xi</sup> Paul Renner designed Futura in 1927 for use in the commercial arts, and it is known as a geometric, classically proportioned typeface, with international appeal.<sup>xii</sup>

In gallery settings, this piece would be framed with a simple red lacquer frame. As Hans Bertens points out, "The red frames that surround her works are meant to signal their status as

commodities; they are, in effect, a packaging device.”<sup>xiii</sup> Sometimes Kruger lays text upon the frames, but most times they are blank. (*See Image 3*) Kruger states that she frames the pieces because it is appropriate. “Signed, sealed, and delivered,”<sup>xiv</sup> she says. It is also interesting to note that by taking ephemeral pieces and putting frames around them, then taking them into and out of gallery settings, Kruger makes the audience question their messages and validity.

In *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, at 112 inches by 112 inches, the viewer would meet the gaze at eye level and be followed by it—call it the *Mona Lisa Effect*. The gaze is all around, filling up a three-dimensional space and pulling the viewer in.<sup>xv</sup> The photograph itself is not only reversed, but there’s a definite noise to it—a bitmap graininess that Kruger’s technique of re-photographing photographs from the mass media achieves.<sup>xvi</sup> This grain in the image can be seen in many of Kruger’s photographs, but not all.

“The locus of power (the power domination, of control, of definition), the ruling ‘you’ against which Kruger’s work is directed, is never explicitly identified: it must be inferred by the viewer.”<sup>xvii</sup> The use of “you,” “me,” “I,” or “we” commonly used in Kruger’s pieces is evidence of *direct address*, a term Kruger uses for describing her tendency to talk directly to the viewer. “This ‘direct address’ has transformed exhibition spaces,” says Rosalyn Deutsche<sup>xviii</sup>. By using tactics employed by common advertising, and tapping into her own commercial design and theoretical backgrounds, she forces the audience to look within themselves and respond to the piece internally. Although there is plenty of evidence to support direct address, the critic Masako Kamimura argues that, “Kruger’s address is not ambiguous, but unquestionably feminist.” In supporting his argument, Kamimura states, Kruger’s gender-address is crucially important because it is the key device that incorporates the spectator into her work but also because it is an essential part of the ideological discourse of her art.” With the aim that Kruger’s works

especially invite female spectatorship, the claim is made that male spectators often don't understand her work. Also taking into consideration the spectator, Ann Goldstein points out, "The diversity of Kruger's practice is underscored by her consistent interest in public address and her shift toward a more intense direct address of the spectator. In focusing on stereotypes, clichés, and categories as manifestations of power and control, her work has consistently positioned itself within the world, actively engaging and confronting the spectator." With an image such as *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, this claim made by Kamimura could hold true, since Kruger is most obviously 'engaging and confronting the spectator.' But, who better to ask than Kruger herself: "My work is about the female voice, it's expected that the male voice would try to silence the female voice when it becomes vocal and it becomes seen pictures."<sup>xix</sup> Kruger made that statement in 1988, after the premiere of her exhibit "We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture." The title suggests that the "we" in this case are women, and "nature" refers to the cycles of women's roles in society, while "culture," of course, is a male-dominated one.<sup>xx</sup> Although Kruger's earliest works had the biggest infusion of feminism, today, Kruger tries to reach a wider audience of consumers of popular culture by making art about the relationships people share between one another—regardless of gender.

Since Barbara Kruger takes the images from an array of sources, the texture of the final image will depend on the original. Reminiscent of the comic-like images of Roy Lichtenstein, most often this noise adds to the violence depicted in Kruger's art and is necessary information pointing to the successful use of appropriation. Through appropriation, Kruger takes images used in mass media and turns them against themselves, while using her background in commercial design to deploy the images correctly and intelligently. She even appropriates her own images—you will often see her famous photos and text swapped within her own work. (*See Image 4*) As

Carol Squiers writes, “Her image sources ran the gamut from news photos to photo manual reproductions to psychological testing drawings... She manipulates, modulates, and recodes the address of obscure and sometimes hilarious images, playing received wisdom, treachy clichés, and militant critique against visuals whose original function is often puzzling at best.”<sup>xxi</sup> And Kruger comments on her technique by saying, “I am working with representations, with pictures, pictures we have all grown up with in some ways, pictures that have dictated our desires.”<sup>xxii</sup> Kruger continuously addresses this notion of the stereotype in her work.

Although she is constantly collecting images from diverse sources and putting them in a different context, she is consistent and intentional with the pieces she chooses. It seems that there is a steady *human element* in all of the shots. Whether it is a hand, face, eye, or entire body, luring us in, most of Kruger’s work contains this human connection. This could be partially due to the fact that a lot of advertising is based on these same notions, or perhaps because there needs to be a balance between the text and stark colors of her compositions. She has to be selective about the images chosen in order to uphold her reputation and keep her work coherent and recognizable. And, as mentioned, she tends to use images in multiple text combinations, making the image choice even more crucial.

Critics have dissected the use of color by Kruger. Her pictorial style, consisting of black-and-white images and red mixed with the text, is coherent with early *Life* magazines (*See Image 5*), Nazi propaganda, and the Russian constructivists. The color red, being associated with fear, danger, blood, and hostility is most commonly used in her works. Other than red, she did a brief investigation with the black, white, and green color scheme in some installations in the late 1980s, however, rarely does she experiment with a diverse color palette. (*See Image 6*) By employing the most common of design type/image relationships, known as separation, Kruger

mimics commercial art and takes advantage of the ease of access. Perhaps, by creating this dichotomy between the image and text, she is also making it clear that the image is not hers, but the text is. Or maybe it is to contrast that the image is old, was used for something else, but the text is new—in the now. Perhaps she just likes this formal style and decided to use it in all of her work. Kruger manipulates the images intentionally, so there is most definitely a reason behind her doing this. “Kruger creates a new hierarchy and a non-synchronous relation between the “male-view” images and a woman’s texts,” is the observation of one critic, which supports the claim that Kruger’s work can be highly complex.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Steven Heller, a well known graphic design critic and author, points out, “... Kruger had to quash certain art historical taboos regarding the unholy union between fine and applied art. Commercial art, which includes graphic design, is signs and symbols, layouts and formats, typefaces and typographies conveyed through styles and mannerisms as entertainment and information.”<sup>xxiv</sup> It is tough to pinpoint where Kruger really started in the art world—she was employed as a graphic designer while making works for gallery display, although she was never formally trained in graphic design. Later, she made works that were labeled “graphic design” and stuck them in a gallery setting. She took the normal “rules” of graphic or commercial design and applied them in the fine art, *avant-garde* world. It was this crossing over from fine to commercial art, and back again, that ultimately made her marketable as a graphic designer in the art world. While her early exhibits featured large-scale pieces to be hung on the wall, she later started working with the interior architecture of buildings and spaces.

So, what is graphic design? Most understand it to be visual communication through the employment of images and text. An ignorant commentator could say that all graphic designers do is sit behind a computer, but what people fail to understand is that the profession

communicates messages into our culture and should not be stereotypically assigned to one medium. Steven Heller defined graphic design well, but to call Kruger *just* a graphic designer seems juvenile. Graphic design has been a study for longer than some care to acknowledge. In discussing some of the earliest graphic design movements, Steven Heller observes, “In just one era, the early twentieth-century modern movements, Russian Constructivism, Italian Futurism, Dutch de Stijl, and German Dada were in large part characterized by the anarchic type and layout of manifestos in various esoteric and commercial media. Graphic designers were artists who led rather than followed existing ideas of rightness.”<sup>xxv</sup> While comparing formal aspects between Kruger’s works and El Lissitzky’s, it is clear to see this Russian constructivism link. (*See Image 7*) Essentially, what all these early trailblazers have in common with Kruger is that they are calling for action—for the viewer to challenge the way they act or *get up and do something*. The main difference, however, is that Kruger wants us to construct that “deeper meaning” that became the tone for postmodern art, versus early designers who were, for the sake of argument, more concerned with production and the aesthetic quality of a piece. While these early graphic designers looked towards technology to create this new type of propaganda art<sup>xxvi</sup>, it soon became mainstream—once again *avant-garde* turned conventional—much like the work of Kruger when comparing it from the 1970s to today.

As Kruger started entering the commercial art field, she became more and more critical of the confines and definitions of artistic practices and strived to work outside of graphic design’s literal frame. In the 1980s, the two major positions were Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Conceptualism.<sup>xxvii</sup> The Neo-Conceptualists largely responded to the works of Walter Benjamin, and engaged in the making of simulacra, by acknowledging that in this hyper-reality they could “enslave” the audience.<sup>xxviii</sup> It is really this “deeper meaning” that trumps form in Kruger’s art,

yet it is her iconic style that has skyrocketed her towards easy recognition and popularity. During this time the 1980s postmodernism was in its infancy. It is evident that, through her own explorations and practices, Kruger was a leader at the forefront of postmodernist, contemporary art. By setting the bar and challenging her colleagues, a wave of Neo-Conceptualists joined the party.

Enjoying similar recognition and concepts as Kruger, artists such as Mary Kelly, Sherry Levine, the Guerilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, and Cindy Sherman are often tied together as groundbreaking, postmodernist, feminist, conceptual artists.<sup>xxxix</sup> Often employing one-liners to convince their audience to question social or internal rituals, these women are known for creating theoretically and philosophically charged art.<sup>xxx</sup> British artist Mary Kelly's works "are constructed around feminist/theoretical discussions on sexuality, representation, ideology, and subjectivity."<sup>xxxi</sup> Sherry Levine is known for using appropriated imagery. The Guerilla Girls anonymously publish stark public, issue-based art. Jenny Holzer is renowned for her LED displays, installations, and public art. Cindy Sherman's work dabbled in feminism, mass cultural values, often included mixed media, and blurred the lines between "high" to "low" art, much like Kruger's.<sup>xxxii</sup> (*See Image 8*) "Kruger's concern with the relationship between violence and the will to perfection intensified in the early 1980s, as her work became informed by, and contributed to, feminist ideas about politics of vision," comments Rosalyn Deutsche.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Recalling an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Kruger was deeply influenced by the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz in 1969, who made "powerful, large-scale, woven hangings and textile works were central to integrating the so-called 'craft' traditions with 'fine art,' and were central to issues of feminism among women artists who asserted this so-called 'women's work' into art history."<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ironically, Kruger was also making large-scale

crochet pieces at the same time. It is understood that Diane Arbus was another great influence on Kruger and quite possibly her first female artist role model.

Responding to women artists and art historians in the early 1970s speaking against underrepresentation, gender roles were a big topic in the 1980s.<sup>xxxv</sup> Even before then, a peculiar thing was happening in Germany at the Bauhaus school. Women artists, although encouraged to study there, were often ushered towards fiber arts (rather than say, architecture) and other stereotypical studies.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Also during this time, “feminist theoreticians [in France] elaborated new critical approaches to the artwork and its function within an aesthetic and social context.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> The women in Kruger’s artistic circle decided to tackle these social issues, and for that, women artists all over the world should be thankful.

But, before I dive too deep in the feminist pool, I would like to maintain the view that although I am grateful that these women were pioneers for the fight against sexual discrimination, by speaking out and raising these issues, women have felt more encouraged to join the art realm. The issue of underrepresentation of women versus men in the workforce is still a problem that most are willing to stand against today—for equality among all—but I am not, however, making the claim that Kruger is not a graphic designer because she is considered more of a feminist. I just think it is an important perspective to consider when analyzing the Kruger’s work. So where does Kruger stand, you may ask? “Her bottom line has always been that an expansive political agenda for women means being free to look good while thinking hard, to not be forced into positions that divide body from brain.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Kruger’s works are not always infused with a feminist agenda, and critics do not do her work justice by looking at it from that perspective only. She also takes aim at politics and

consumers, releasing her “passion for current events and appreciation for popular culture,” saying herself, “I’m interested in how identities are constructed, how stereotypes are formed, how narratives sort of congeal and become history... especially now in global culture that is simultaneously hungry for spectacle, yet seemingly shock-proof.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Kruger uses the idea of the stereotype to intimidate the viewer into submission. Craig Owens suggests that, “To become effective, stereotypes must circulate endlessly, relentlessly throughout society.”<sup>xl</sup> As Kruger points out, “The stereotype, in fact, confers on the individual dream of a double postulation: dream of identity/dream of otherness.”<sup>xli</sup> By the displaying of public art, in signs, posters, billboards, etc., Kruger utilizes this stereotypical approach successfully by aiming at consumers. The images she appropriates add another layer of the stereotype. Since their source is from mass media, as has been explained, they typically project the body of an ideal woman, or an object in its idealized state, thus creating the simulacra. (*See Image 9*)

It seems that Kruger does not restrict herself to one type of medium, size, or material. Through her explorations, she has continued to expand her practice since her emergence onto the art scene. So why is she relentlessly labeled a graphic designer? While in school, Kruger took interest in architecture, saying “... architecture is one of the predominant orderings of social space,”<sup>xlii</sup> but it wasn’t until much later that she began to create installations and collaborated with architects for public works. Her architectural works range from a series of five floor-mosaics for the Fisher College of Business at the Ohio State University (*See Image 10*), to the aid in designing a pier for the Seattle Waterfront project. She even joined forces with Smith-Miller and Hawkinson architects, as well as landscape architect Nicholas Quennell to produce a permanent outdoor installation entitled *Imperfect Utopia*, in 1987 at the North Carolina Museum of Art outdoor theater in Raleigh. As seen from the sky, the piece reads ‘Picture This’ (in Futura

Bold Oblique, of course) and is accompanied with a wall and an entire surrounding featuring thoughtful quotes from famous people. (*See Image 11*) One example, a tile on the wall, reads: “Give your brain as much attention as you do your hair and you’ll be a thousand times better off,” from Malcolm X. Characteristic of Kruger’s style, the quotes are reflexive. Bertens observes, “... the understanding of postmodern spatiality and how it is being transformed by the forces of global commodity and capitalism.”<sup>xliii</sup> This idea of *space* surrounding the artwork is a postmodern idea that Kruger actively engages in. Rosalyn Deutsche notes, “In both form and thematic content, Kruger’s message animated the space and disrupted its fixity.”<sup>xliv</sup> She brings issues that society usually frowns upon or ignores, blows it up, and makes you face it. As a major part of her practice, Kruger continues exploring architectural surfaces and spaces through installations and public art today, stating, “... Working on large-scale installations demands a level of complexity and engagement that is hard [for me] to resist... a way to effectively activate a space.”<sup>xlv</sup> One may notice after studying her installations that it is hard to imagine a space within them that *is not* actively engaged.

Barbara Kruger is known for her large-scale gallery prints and display art that she has mostly stayed true to since the beginning of her career. While working as a designer and art director for the magazine industry, Kruger worked on the small-scale. However, most of what she is known for, and a characteristic of her work is that it is large and abrasive. It should be taken into consideration that because Kruger is a largely influential designer, her huge pieces have made an impact on the graphic design profession—forcing practitioners and receivers of visual communications to think outside the box, or *think big*. When one considers scale and the simulacra associated with Kruger’s work, one must consider how the human body’s senses perceive the work. Considering the fact that, through the text and image composition, Kruger is

creating and ushering you into the simulacra, she is successful at it because by pushing the large scale, she literally puts the audience right into this falsified universe. Another tactic Kruger deploys is paying attention to every space within a space (a gallery or park space, for example), and inserts information into crevices. It is common for her to write her messages on the floor, ceiling, and awkward angles on walls. By forcing the audience to look up, down, and all around them in order to decode a message, they are putting themselves into her environment and ultimately surrendering their brains to the mind of Barbara Kruger. (*See Image 12*)

Unlike paint on a canvas, Kruger's works are usually digitally conceived and printed on paper, vinyl, or whatever the project calls for. The only sense of texture is found in her commonly grainy photographs. Other than that, there is no need or desire to reach out and feel or touch anything. The works are flat. You are met with the piece as it is, and since your senses have been bombarded by Kruger's messages, you may have a feeling of uneasiness or insecurity. Due to the fact that the majority of her installations are covered from wall to wall with text, as one tries to decode the messages, the feeling of coldness or isolation (in order to reflect upon one's actions) is what Kruger strives for. "A lot of people get freaked out by this work, uptight around it, defensive, hostile, threatened, as if it were a person telling them things, which it is, of course, but then a certain number of people never get the joke, and don't want to get the joke."<sup>xlvi</sup> Although Kruger wants everyone to "get the joke," it is evident that her practice is successful.

When Kruger first started making image and text combinations, or typical "graphic design" layouts, the text was typically painted on the surface. Flatness gave way to the onset of technology when Kruger started using Letraset—a technique of dry-transferring the vinyl text onto the surface of the print.<sup>xlvii</sup> This was a time-consuming process, but so was hand lettering and silk-screening—the only other methods available at the time for large-format pieces.

Another draw back to silk-screening is that it was extremely expensive, especially for a struggling artist. These pieces produced with the more primitive types of technology available before the dawn of the digital age, and are labeled Kruger's "transitional works," because eventually everything was output digitally. On a positive note, digital output has benefitted Kruger financially.

In order to prove that Kruger is not only a graphic designer, one should compare her work to that of a successful artists who embraces the title graphic designer—April Greiman. Born in 1948, Kruger and Greiman are not so far apart in age. Both of these women engaged in the art of graphic design before the dawn of the computer, which revolutionized the field. Unlike Kruger, Grieman received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Kansas City Art Institute and attended graduate school at the infamous Allgemeine Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, Switzerland.<sup>xlviii</sup> Also contrastingly, Greiman completely embraced the new medium, and is known for creating some of the first graphic design artwork on the Macintosh computer. (*See Image 12*) In contrast, Greiman has never really stuck to one consistent style or medium, and as the onset of technology deepened, Greiman looked to a new way of exploring her art through technology and later coined the term "transmedia." Work produced among the women is commonly conceptual *and* large-scale. Commenting on her work and the use of the computer and technology as tools, Greiman says, "I find that with the ease of the current tools, it is easy to perpetuate what I call the look of meaning. I am all for true meaning, where it can be excavated or found." Arguing that anyone can make something look pretty, aesthetically, Greiman's work tends to be more typography-based than Kruger's—but then again, she is not trying to confront the audience with one-liners. Greiman is also known for her work in photography, and often creates works using her own images.

Barbara Kruger's name and works have received international recognition and success. Her first international show was the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, in 1983, entitled "We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture," and was coupled with the work of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>xlix</sup> Many of her pieces are produced in multiple languages and displayed all over the world—from a train station platform in Strasburg, France, to billboards, bus stop signs, and other propaganda in Germany, Australia, and many other countries. (*See Image 13*) Within the matter of a few months, in 2010 alone, Kruger produced an installation at the Stedelijk Museum, and video installation in Berlin. She has received major international success, although it is commonly known that consumerism in America is, perhaps, more of a problem than in the rest of the world, certainly more so than in developing or third-world countries.

After gaining international success and a hugely successful career, what could possibly be next for the Barbara Kruger? She has had clients ranging from the Gap (where she designed a number of t-shirts), to the band Rage Against the Machine (for whom she designed multiple t-shirts and a concert tour backdrop, as well as helped with the music video "Bulls on Parade") (*See Image 14*), and has even worked on a video project for MTV in support of the "Silence the Violence" campaign in 1993.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned, with the onset of technology, tools and techniques of the "graphic designer" or "hybrid artist" such as Kruger are constantly changing. Although she has worked minimally with LEDs, film, digital media, and Jumbotron in Times Square (*See Image 15*), Kruger really has not explored the digital medium too extensively. When asked in an interview what medium or type of project she is looking to engage in, Kruger answered that she had been working with film and video to "bring up the scale of my work a little. I'm doing a 3,000-square-foot piece for a new student center being built at the University of California, San Diego, using

large images and LEDs running a Reuters news feed. I'm also doing some video projects, one in Beverly Hills on two sides of a large, vacant Robinsons-May building that can be seen from afar."<sup>li</sup> The interview was conducted in 2008. Will she venture into screen-based media? Unless there's a huge screen, working on small scale seems to be out of Kruger's character. With her interest in architecture, could she possibly be involved in designing architectural projections or optical-art installations? Is that what her recent project in Beverly Hills is?

Known for publishing a countless number of books and articles, Kruger remains an active writer, professor, lecturer, and artist. There's no telling what kind of social issue or medium Kruger will investigate next. Because of the issues she embarks upon and the forms she explores, Kruger's work will continue to be relevant as long as the problems she raises are unresolved—mostly consumerism and gender inequality—issues that, sadly, guarantee artists and critics like Kruger a job. As far as Barbara Kruger the artist, and master of the *Kruger Style*, she will continue to be studied in the fields of graphic design, issue-based art, and contemporary theory books, for years to come.

When asked what kind of “ism” her work fits into—being labeled herself a social advocate; political activist; hybrid, intermediate, or cross-over artist etc.—Kruger is strongly opposed to labeling. Jerry Saltz is with Kruger on this, stating, “Pardon me, but what the fuck does it matter? Kruger cut through the bullshit. She completely nailed the potential of her art, and made it absolutely clear that she was at war with hypocrisy. She was critical but not negative, opened up a wide aesthetic swath, and created something so forceful and indelible it could be called the Kruger Effect.”<sup>lii</sup> What's certain is that Kruger's messages resonate in the eyes of her viewers. Acknowledging that the art world is changing for the better, she mentions, “The

containments of categories has loosened, allowing for a kind of grazing: a mixing and matching of activities and mediums.”<sup>liii</sup>

In conclusion, it is crazy to think that within one lifetime we have created more categories for art than we had in the entire pre-contemporary world. The same is true of technology—we have had more inventions, gadgets, and screens produced within the last twenty years than ever before. The relentless onset of technology has had a beneficial, yet troubling effect on the field of graphic design. Unlike painting, the tools and techniques of graphic design are continuously morphing and expanding. We can’t label Barbara Kruger a graphic designer, because we hardly *truly* know what graphic design means. Sure, defenders like Steven Heller can give some long-winded definition of what graphic communication is just to silence critics, but the truth is that the essence of graphic design is no more than visual communication. And if you look at it from that perspective, then what is *not* graphic design? As music is mere melodic communication, what can *not* be categorized as song?

To put it bluntly, my argument is that graphic design is currently going through a true identity crisis. The crisis lies in the debate over the prevalence of technology or screen-based media and a lack of conceptual criticism and art making in today’s world. After all, any young artist, or citizen, for that matter, can grab a hold of a computer and a copy of Adobe’s Creative Suite and call himself or herself a graphic designer. A similar crisis is being observed in the worlds of film and photography, thanks to the availability of YouTube, Picasso, and other self-publishing websites, as well as the easier access to materials such as digital cameras and camcorders. Similarly, anyone who can get a computer and create a blog is an instant journalist. Kruger was observing this trend in categorizing and hierarchy within society, and wrote about these issues in her books and articles like *Remote Control*—one of Kruger’s earliest, sarcastic

books. Warning of the issues of media and our engagement with it, perhaps this is why Kruger is cautious when using technology in her art.

Yes, she has opposed the idea of labeling herself as one type of artist, but she must just *burn* when she is referred to as a graphic designer because of this identity crisis associated with the label to those of us who are constantly stereotyped in the field. In fact, except for a hand-full of graphic designers studying theology and a few art historians and critics here and there, the discussion about graphic design as an art form has largely been avoided. One of the main reasons Kruger is invaluable to the practice of “graphic design” is because she took the art into a gallery setting. Ephemeral objects that were only seen on the street, or for public view, were forced under a critical microscope once present in museums. In response to this crisis, artists like Kruger were producing art that made us question labels, while Katherine McCoy strove to reform graphic design education, and yet simultaneously, artists like April Grieman & Zuzana Licko embraced digital media. With the introduction of the computer into the arts in the 1980s, the *avant-garde* needed a label for this new medium and somewhere along the lines “graphic design” started to be used to apply to the type of art produced. Today, we look at the computer with hesitation—knowing of its limits and restrictions, which were not so evident early on, when the possibilities that the computer brought to the artistic imagination were endless.

## Bibliography

- Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art : Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.
- Deutsche, Rosalyn, 1999. "Breaking Ground: Barbara Kruger's Spatial Practice." *Barbara Kruger* : 76-84. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.
- Eskilson, Stephen F. *Graphic Design: A New History*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Goldstein, Ann. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Goldstein, Ann. "Barbara Kruger, Gal of the People." *Barbara Kruger* : 168-172. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Gomez-Palacio, Byrony & Armin Vit. *Women of Design*. Ohio. HOW Books, an F+W Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.
- Heller, Steven. *The Graphic Design Reader*. New York: Allworth Press, 2002.
- Hunter, Sam, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler. *Modern Art*. China: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004.
- Indiana, Gary. "The World at Home." *Barbara Kruger* : 8-12. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- Kocur, Zoya & Simon Leung. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.
- Kuspit, Donald. "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s." *American Art*, Vol. 5, No. ½ (Winter – Spring, 1991), 132-141.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Movements in Art Since 1945. New Edition*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001.

Meggs, Philip B. *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.

Owens, Craig. "The Medusa Effect or, The Spectacular Ruse." *Barbara Kruger : We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* : 5-11. London: Expression Printers Ltd., 1983.

Saltz, Jerry. *Seeing Out Loud. The Village Voice Art Columns: Fall 1998-Winter 2003*. Massachusetts: The Figures, 2003.

Squiers, Carol. "Who Laughts Last?" *Barbara Kruger* : 140-148. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

Tillman, Lynne. "Interview With Barbara Kruger." *Barbara Kruger* : 188-196. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

---

<sup>i</sup> Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art : Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art : Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art : Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

<sup>v</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

<sup>vi</sup> Gomez-Palacio, Byrony & Armin Vit. *Women of Design*. Ohio. HOW Books, an F+W Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.

<sup>vii</sup> Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.

<sup>viii</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.

<sup>ix</sup> Costello, Diarmuid, & Jonathon Vickery. *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Berg, 2007.

<sup>x</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

- 
- <sup>xi</sup> Gomez-Palacio, Byrony & Armin Vit. *Women of Design*. Ohio. HOW Books, an F+W Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.
- <sup>xii</sup> Meggs, Philip B. *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xv</sup> Kocur, Zoya & Simon Leung. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn, 1999. "Breaking Ground: Barbara Kruger's Spatial Practice." *Barbara Kruger* : 76-84. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xix</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>xx</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Squiers, Carol, 1999. "Who Laughts Last?" *Barbara Kruger* : 140-148. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Heller, Steven. *The Graphic Design Reader*. New York: Allworth Press, 2002.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Heller, Steven. *The Graphic Design Reader*. New York: Allworth Press, 2002.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Meggs, Philip B. *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006.

- 
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Kuspit, Donald. "The Appropriation of Marginal Art in the 1980s." *American Art*, Vol. 5, No. ½ (Winter – Spring, 1991), 132-141.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Hunter, Sam, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler. *Modern Art*. China: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Kocur, Zoya & Simon Leung. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn, 1999. "Breaking Ground: Barbara Kruger's Spatial Practice." *Barbara Kruger* : 76-84. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Movements in Art Since 1945. New Edition*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Eskilson, Stephen F. *Graphic Design: A New History*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Movements in Art Since 1945. New Edition*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Barbara Kruger, Gal of the People." *Barbara Kruger* : 168-172. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xl</sup> Owens, Craig. "The Medusa Effect or, The Spectacular Ruse." *Barbara Kruger : We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* : 5-11. London: Expression Printers Ltd., 1983.
- <sup>xli</sup> Owens, Craig. "The Medusa Effect or, The Spectacular Ruse." *Barbara Kruger : We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* : 5-11. London: Expression Printers Ltd., 1983.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Tillman, Lynne. "Interview With Barbara Kruger." *Barbara Kruger* : 188-196. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

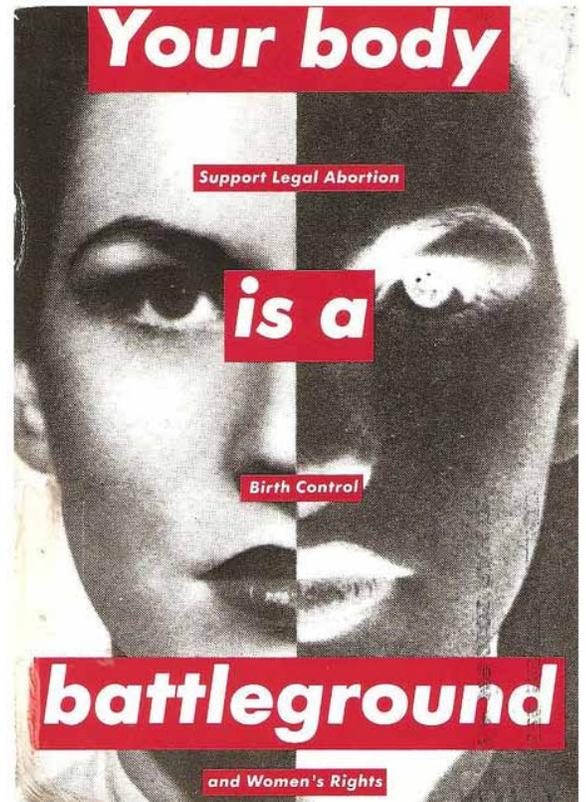
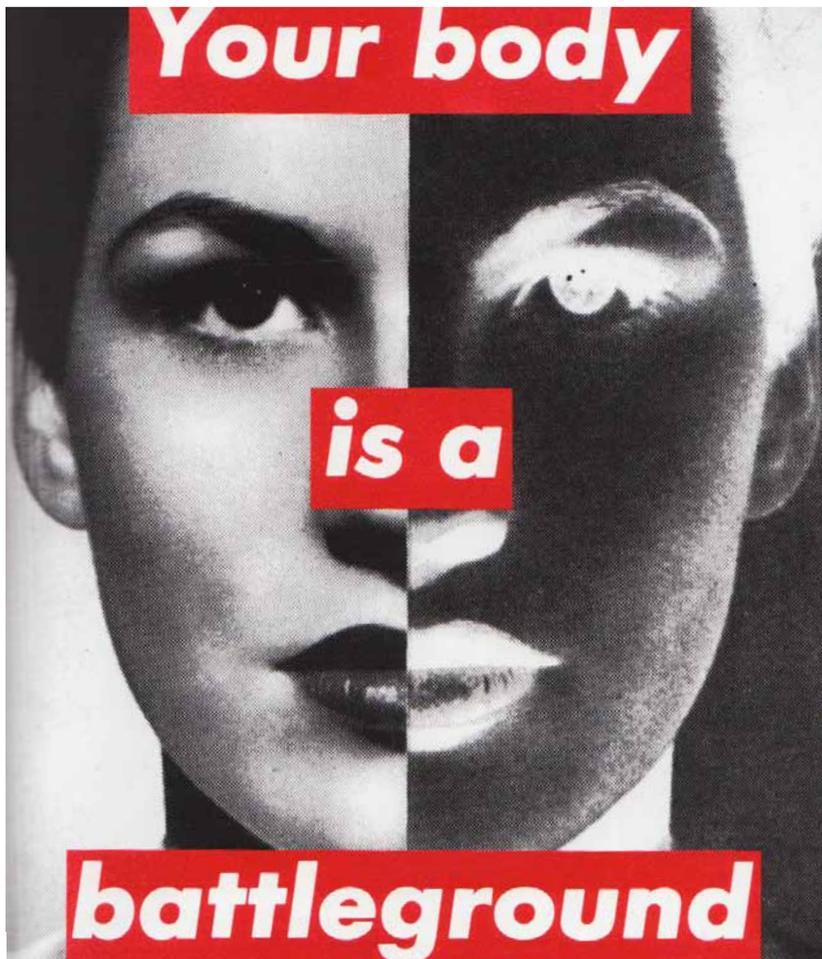
- 
- <sup>xliii</sup> Bertens, Hans & Joseph Natoli. *Postmodernism : The Key Figures*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Deutsche, Rosalyn, 1999. "Breaking Ground: Barbara Kruger's Spatial Practice." *Barbara Kruger* : 76-84. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xlv</sup> Tillman, Lynne. "Interview With Barbara Kruger." *Barbara Kruger* : 188-196. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Indiana, Gary. "The World at Home." *Barbara Kruger* : 8-12. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Goldstein, Ann, 1999. "Bring in the World." *Barbara Kruger* : 24-36. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Gomez-Palacio, Byrony & Armin Vit. *Women of Design*. Ohio. HOW Books, an F+W Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.  
*All the information about Greiman in that paragraph is taken from this book. Both Kruger & Greiman are featured in it.*
- <sup>xlix</sup> Kamimura, Masako. "Review: Barbara Kruger: The Art of Representation." *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 1987), 40-43.
- <sup>1</sup> Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.  
*This information taken from her list of accomplishments in the back of the book.*
- <sup>li</sup> Gomez-Palacio, Byrony & Armin Vit. *Women of Design*. Ohio. HOW Books, an F+W Publications, Inc., 2008. Print.
- <sup>lii</sup> Saltz, Jerry. *Seeing Out Loud. The Village Voice Art Columns: Fall 1998-Winter 2003*. Massachusetts: The Figures, 2003.
- <sup>liii</sup> Tillman, Lynne. "Interview With Barbara Kruger." *Barbara Kruger* : 188-196. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

**Image 1**



***Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)  
Barbara Kruger, 1981.***

Image 2



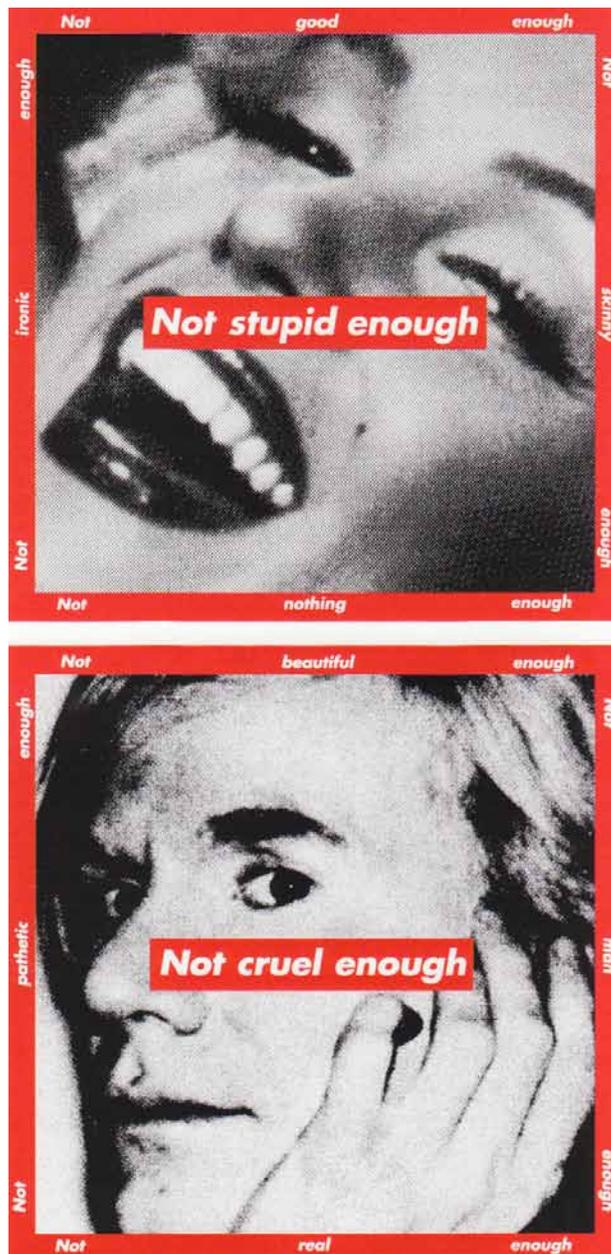
**Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)**  
(in various mediums.)  
Barbara Kruger, 1989.



Scanned From:

Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.

### Image 3



**Untitled (Not Stupid Enough)**

**Untitled (Not Cruel Enough)**

**Barbara Kruger, 1997.**

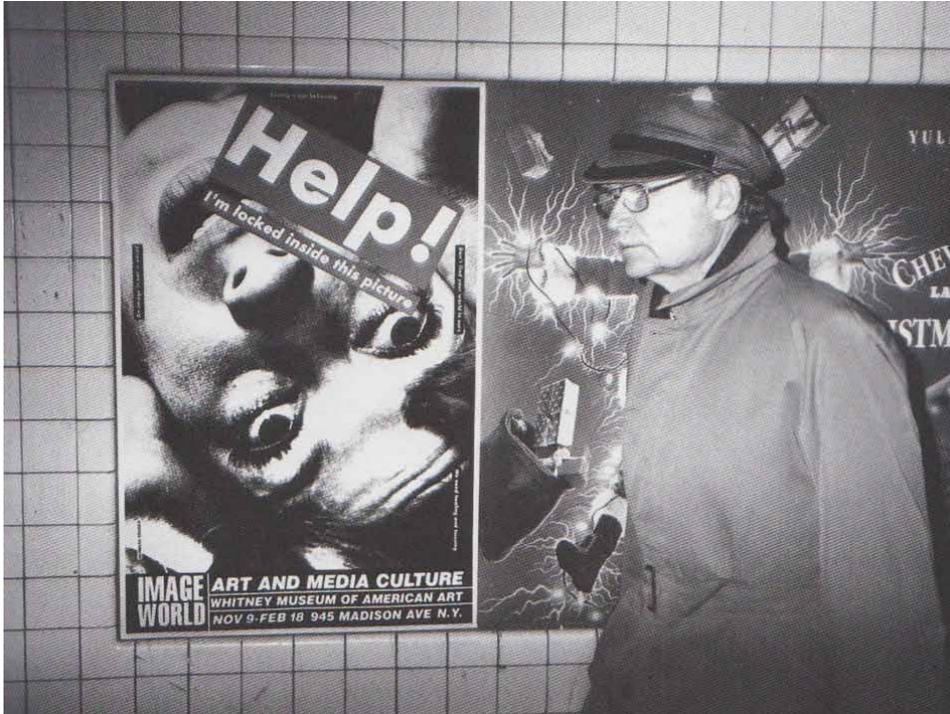
**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

**Image 4**



**Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)  
Billboard in Columbus, Ohio.  
Barbara Kruger, 1990.**

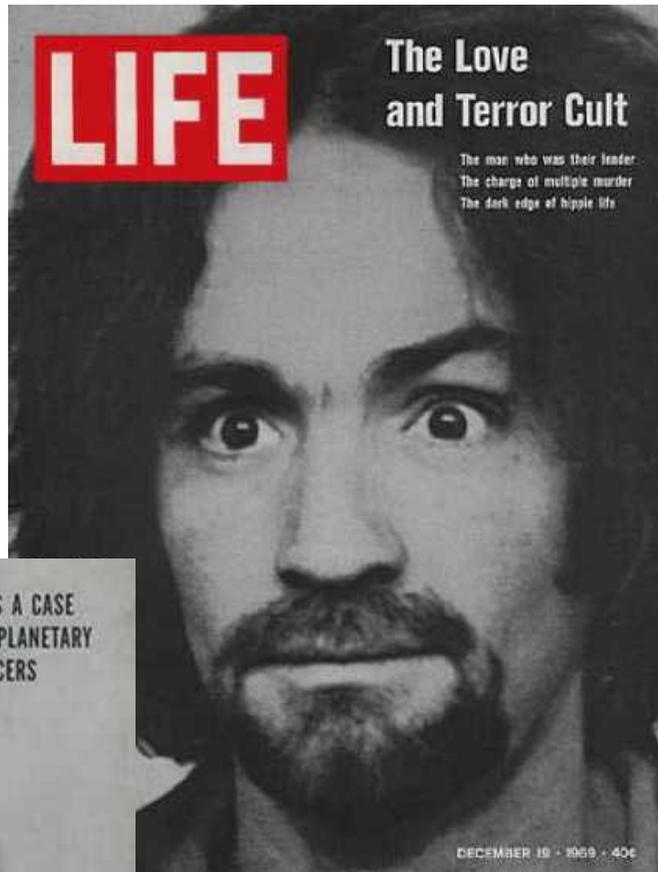


**Help! I'm Locked Inside  
This Poster  
Barbara Kruger, 1990.**

**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. Barbara Kruger. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

**Image 5**



**Various covers of Life magazine  
Taken from Google Images  
Accessed March 5, 2011**

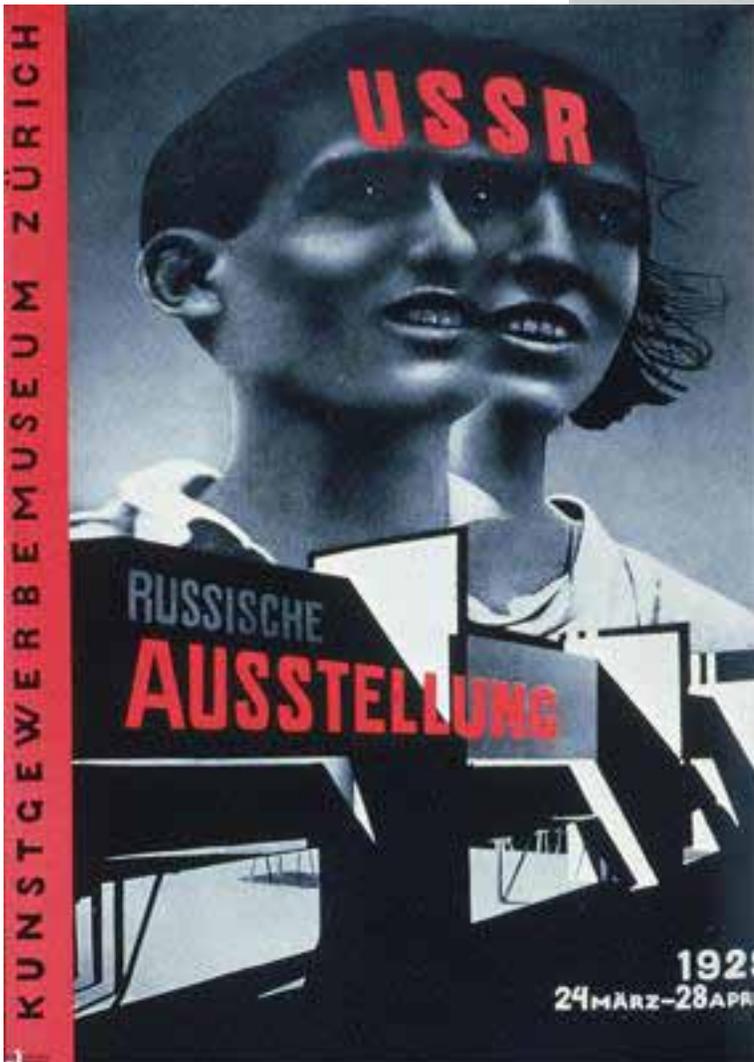
**Image 6**



**Shots from an installation  
by Barbara Kruger**

**Image 7**

**El Lissitzky**



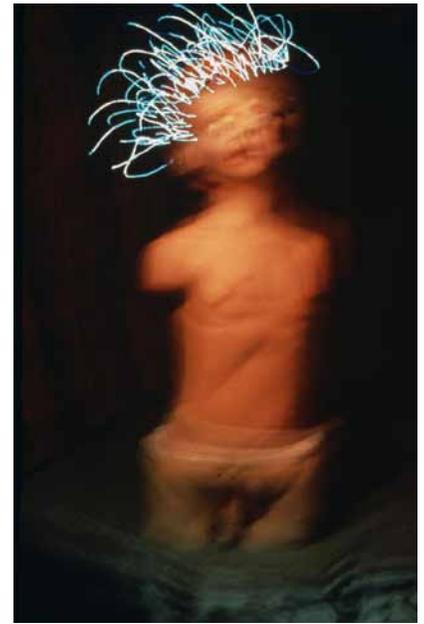
**Top Poster:  
Beat the Whites with the Red Flag,  
1919**

**Left:  
Poster for Russian Exhibition,  
1929**

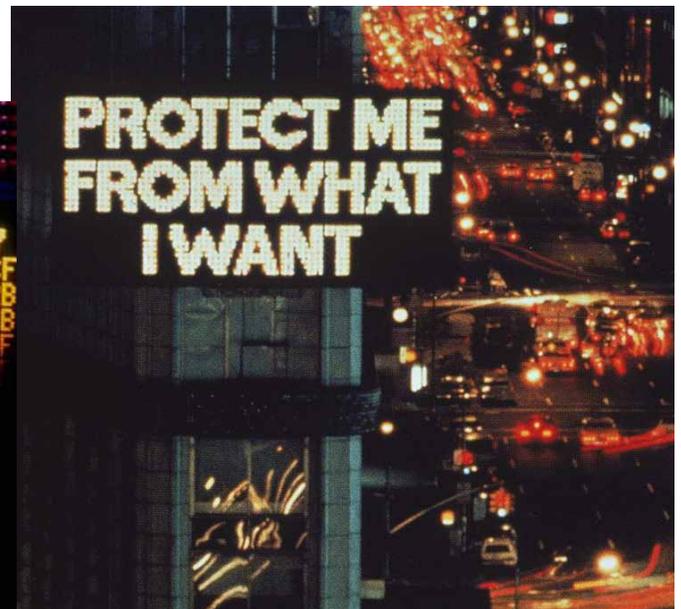
**Image 8**

**Photographs by Cindy Sherman**

**simple flier by Guerilla Girls**



**LED signs by Jenny Holzer**

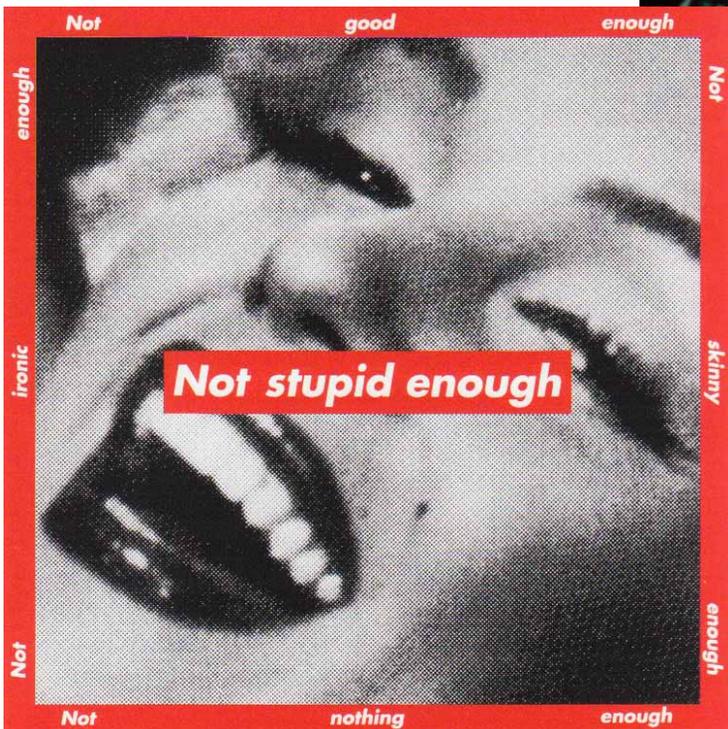
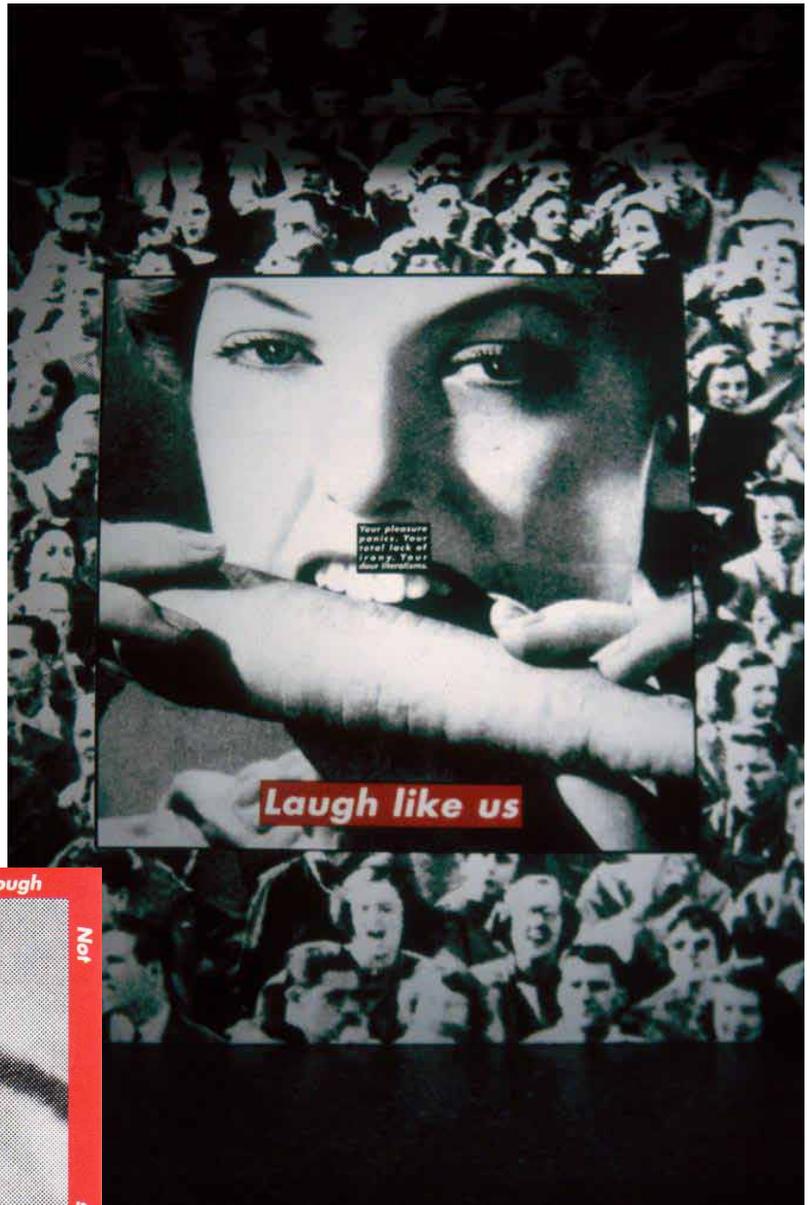


**Image 9**

**Left: *Untitled (Not Stupid Enough)*  
Barbara Kruger, 1997.**

**Right: Exhibit at Mary Boone  
Gallery, 1994**

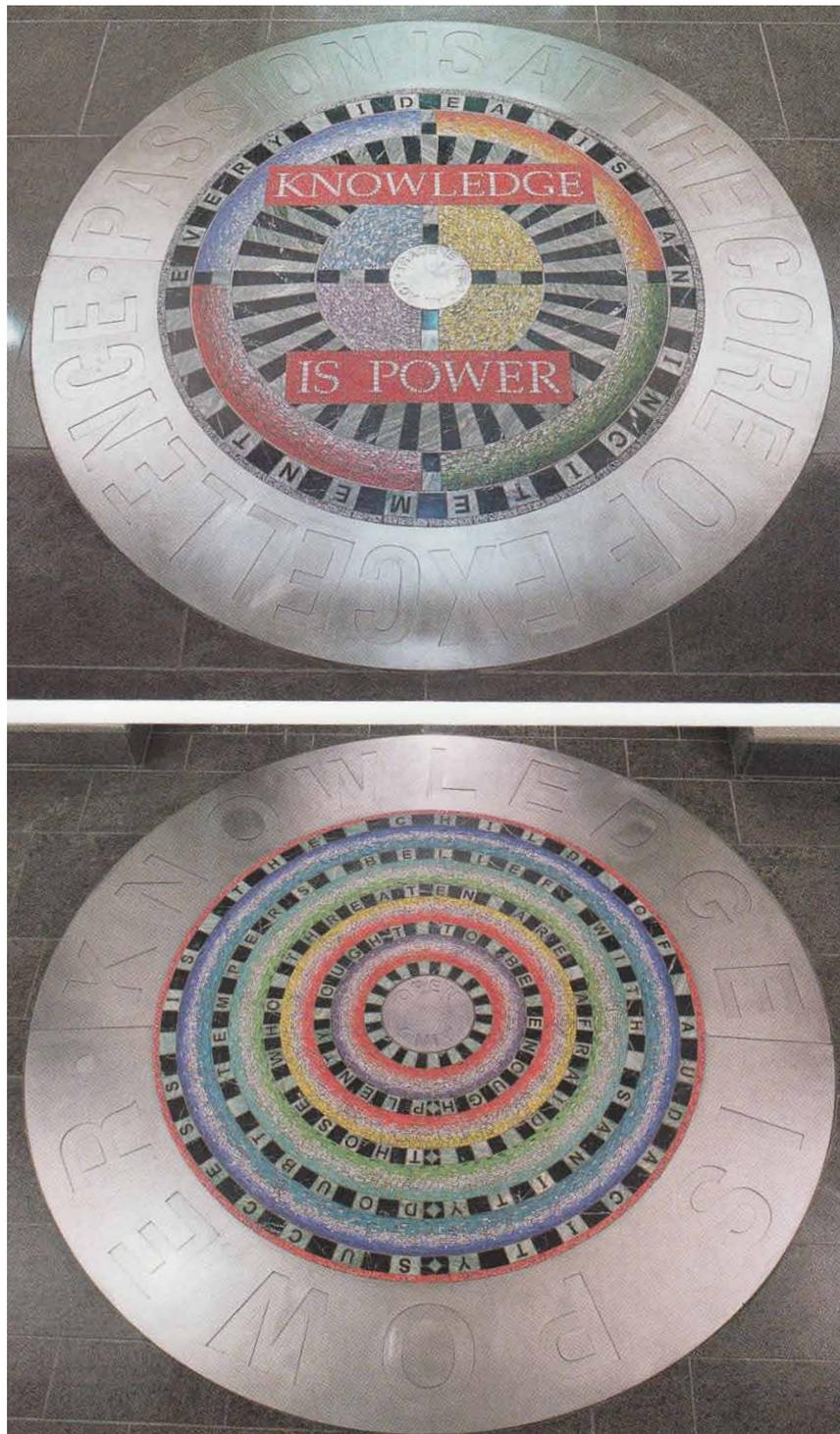
**Source: <http://library.artstor.org/library/welcome.html#3|search|1|barbara20Kruger|Multiple20Collection20Search|||type3D3126kw3Dbarbara20Kruger26id3Dall26name3D>**



**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

**Image 10**

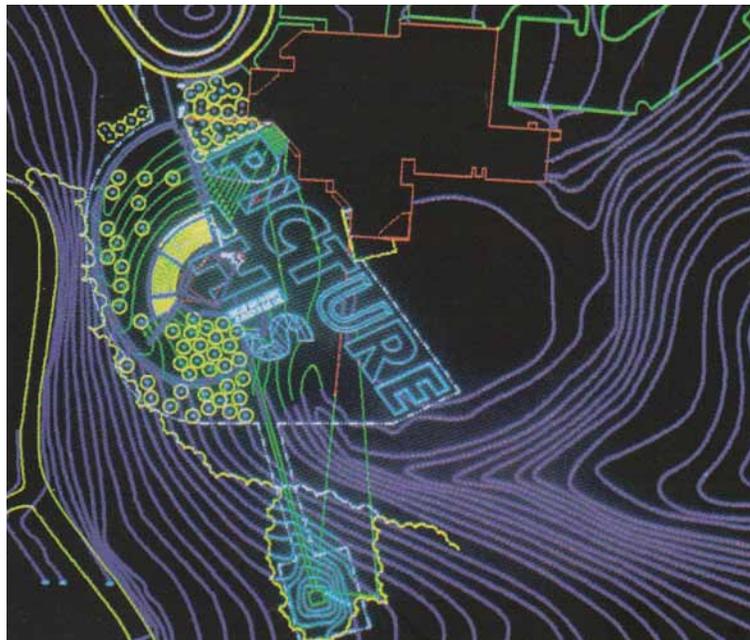


**Floor mosaics project for the Ohio State University's Fischer College of Business  
Barbara Kruger, 1998.**

**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. Barbara Kruger. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

**Image 11**

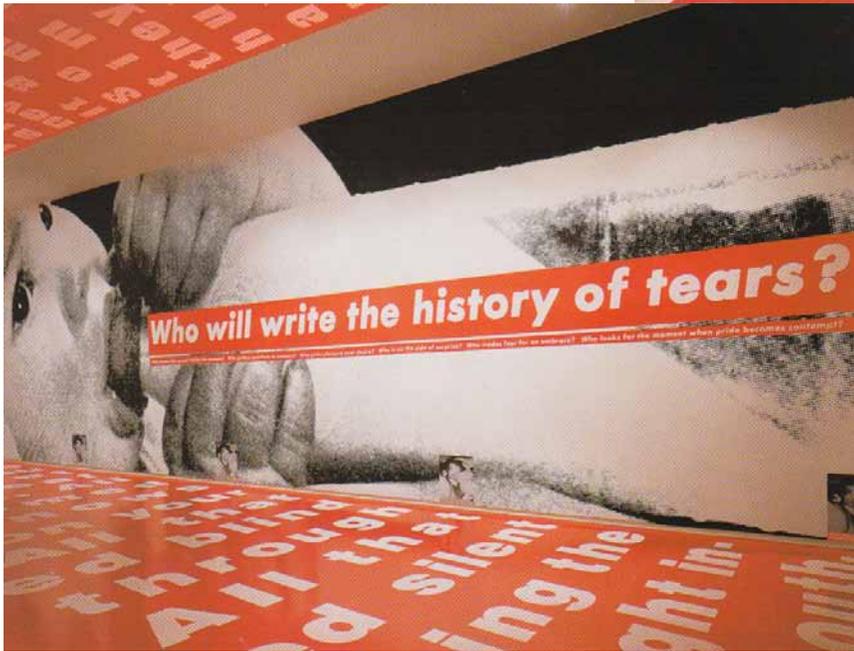
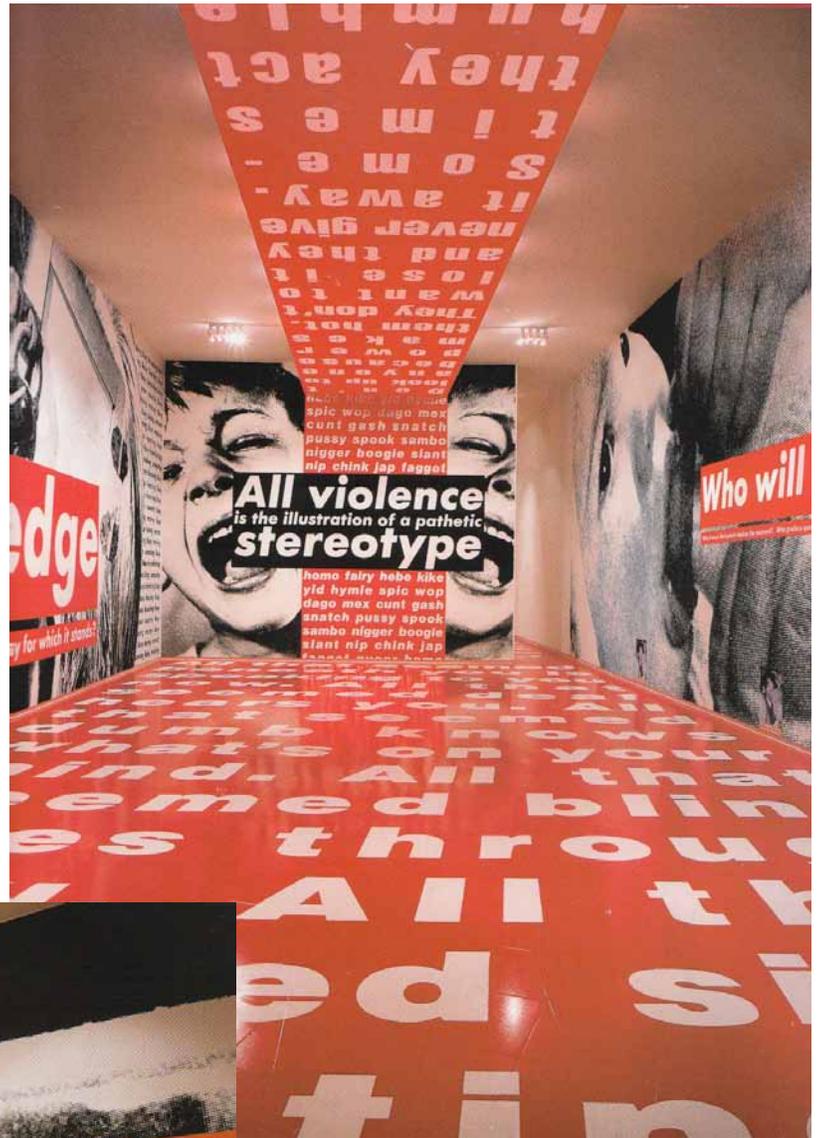


**Collaboration project for North  
Carolina Museum of Art  
Barbara Kruger, 1987-96**

**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

Image 12



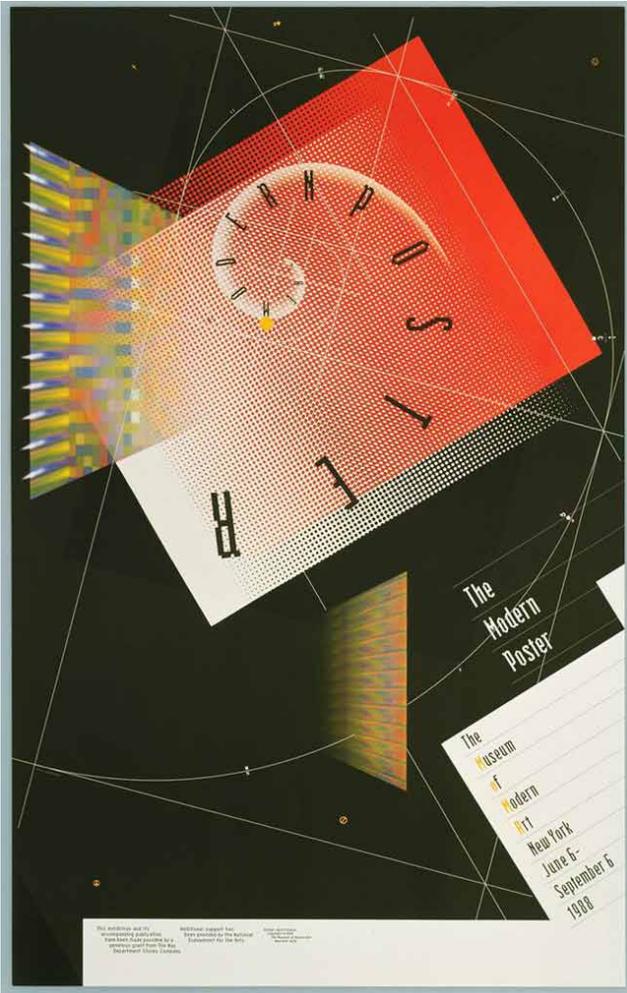
**"Barbara Kruger" exhibit  
at the Mary Boone  
Gallery, 1991**

Scanned From:

Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.

## Image 13

### Works by April Greiman

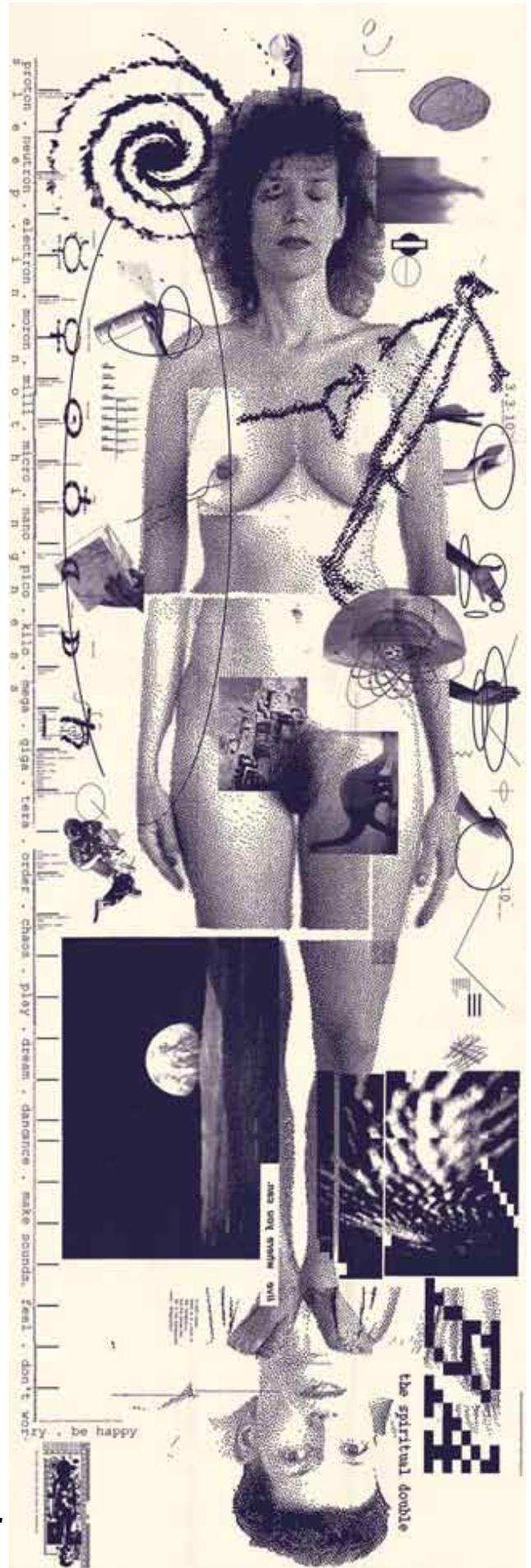


**Left: The Modern Poster**

**Source: <http://library.artstor.org/library/welcome.html#3|search|1|april20greiman|Multiple20Collection20Search|||type3D3126kw3Dapril20greiman26id3Dall26name3D>**

**Right: Image for Design Quarterly**

**Source: <http://www.idsgn.org/posts/design-discussions-april-greiman-on-technology/>**



**Image 14**



**Barbara Kruger  
Examples of International Art**

**Top:  
Permanent installation for Le  
Tram de Strasbourg, France,  
1994**

**Right:  
"Barbara Kruger" exhibit,  
Cologne, Germany, 1990**



**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**

**Image 15**



***Backdrop design for Rage Against the Machine Tour  
Barbara Kruger, 1997***

**Scanned From:**

**Emerson, Stephanie, ed. *Barbara Kruger*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.**