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Art as social commentary: visual syntax and meaning in Barbara Kruger's collages

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Abstract: Barbara Kruger's urban-inspired visual artworks articulate a critique of the discursive constructions both of the consumer and of consumption itself. A former designer and picture editor in magazines, Kruger resorts to the aesthetic and linguistic techniques of advertising and media to challenge the forms of knowledge of the consumption society. In line with Michel Foucault's theory of discourse as a network of disciplinary knowledges, this paper will read consumption – the discipline –, and the consumer – the subject it produces –, against Kruger's visual techniques in order to examine how the latter call into doubt the disciplining effect of consumption and, in particular, how Kruger's reworking on the notion of the gaze is involved in that process. The analytical grid combines a Foucauldian perspective with the tools of visual discourse analysis proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen.

Keywords: Barbara Kruger, Michel Foucault, visual discourse, the gaze, consumption

Barbara Kruger is a renowned conceptual artist that came to the fore in the 1980s. Her former experience as a magazine designer and picture editor informs all of her work, whereas, thematically speaking, a focus on diverse aspects of contemporary consumption society stands out. Her previous professional life makes her an insider to mass culture in the sense that it provided her with a deep awareness of the articulation between mass media culture and the discourse of advertising. Kruger is very skilled in using the aesthetic techniques and the linguistic strategies of advertising and media while modifying their direction and putting them in the service of a critique of the forms of knowledge, or the regimes of truth, they typically support and contribute to designing. In recent years, Barbara Kruger expanded the space of action of her art by showing her installations in municipal buildings, train stations, parks, buses, and billboards around the world.

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Speaking on art, she defends it a form of commentary and also as a direct interpellation of the viewer. She states that she is deeply concerned with bringing the value of *doubt* back into the agenda. In a recent interview, Kruger defines contemporary societies as essentially conformist – they have made belief an automatic sense: “it seems to me that one of the motors of the destructive forces in the world today is the unreconstructed notion of belief, and that doubt has become a seditious, dangerous, and blasphemous act” (Buchmann, 2008: 142).

Hence also the association of Kruger’s work with the so-called *guerilla* semiotics, a compact of artists who appropriate images from contemporary culture in order to generate resistance against consumption by raising awareness about environmental and individual damage, as well as social inequality as results of consumption practices. Their techniques involve ‘culture jamming’: the reconfiguration of logotypes, fashion statements, and product designs which, by being dislocated, generate new meanings,² exposing the rhetorical and visual strategies by means of which desire and consent are fabricated. In Michel Foucault’s terminology, they evidence how new subjectivities are produced by the discourse of advertising. I am particularly interested in the subjectivity of docile *consumers*³ in this case, and the disciplinary structure that sustains subjectivities.

In the images I shall be examining, Kruger defies established visual regimes dealing with ideas of consumption and the body, so I will be looking into the ways her collages, and the visual technologies she deploys call into doubt the disciplining effect of consumption. My point is to pin down the strategies she uses in maneuvering the technologies of visibility in place to challenge their representations; finally, I call particular attention to her reconstruction of the notion of the gaze, which is central to the critical work her images develop, and how that entails the possibility of a position for the female viewer as a subject. My ultimate goal is to scrutinize how these processes work as strategies to produce meaning: the ways the “visual syntax” of the image articulates with its “semantic dimension” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 45) and how the processes involved add meanings to reality while representing it.

In order to accomplish this analysis, my theoretical grid brings together the following critical lines: historian Michel Foucault’s relational notion of discourse in tandem with his concept of the gaze; Americanist critic Robyn Wiegman’s concept of visual knowledge regimes, and linguistic critics Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s theory of visual grammar. Foucault’s notion of discourse, in stressing the practices within a discourse and the relations produced among different discursive elements (Foucault, 2008 [1972]: 54) is useful in approaching this case-study because it allows me to see the articulation between consumption as a discipline and the consumer as the subject it produces, within the wider discourse of advertising. In addition, Foucault has also stressed how the success of a discourse is measured in terms of subject internalization, that is, the subject disciplines himself, acting according to the rules without the need for visible power structures to force him to (Foucault, 1995 [1975]: 201). A condition for that is however that the subject’s body be made visible, at the same time that the awareness of this external gaze makes the subject visible to himself, that is, objectifies him while “he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (*ibidem*: 203). To Foucault, the power to see – the gaze – is exterior, controlling, and male, and it materializes distinct forms of knowledge. To sum up, the gaze is “faceless” and it “transform[s] the whole social body into a field of perception” (*ibidem*: 214).

² The movement includes groups such as the Adbusters and the Barbie Liberation Organization.

³ Following Foucault’s notion of docile bodies, in *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

Foucault's theory therefore also sustains the examination of the relations between discourse and context, that is, discourse and power –so I intend to see how working knowingly from within a particular discursive formation, Kruger tries to reverse its power effects; for, as Foucault has also explained, being the network of relations that informs society (Foucault, 1990 [1978]: 93), the power that creates and manages discourses and populations is not just repressive but also productive: it ultimately produces both knowledge and subjects, although none of these are fixed constructions. Which means that the negative disciplining effect of power may be not just undergone but also appropriated by the subject and eventually become emancipatory (Foucault 1980 [1972]: 98).

The idea of visual knowledge regimes, which Robyn Wiegman develops along Foucauldian lines is of interest to me because it stresses the coming into place of distinct technologies to deal with the body, as it gradually came to provide a specific material surface for the registration of identities. As new “network[s] of meanings” (Wiegman, 1995: 4) were produced, the body became the privileged framework in which social identities were authenticated. As Wiegman also asserts, no other principle has ever challenged that of vision from modernity up to the present. Only the economies of visibility – “th[os]e modalities through which issues of [for instance] race and gender” are read – have changed, alongside with the technologies supporting them (*ibidem*: 3).

Kress and van Leeuwen's proposal for a grammar applied to images in turn provides me with the tools to analyze some of Kruger's artworks by focusing on the relation between images, meanings, and meaning-making strategies. Their theory emphasizes the deep articulation between the aesthetic and the semiotic and also how different technologies can bring composition techniques to create relations between representation and reference that break the naturalized relations of identity between them. Kruger's collages I shall be looking into are originally large-scale images that combine different semiotic codes; namely, text, image, and graphic elements. They form what Kress and van Leeuwen call composite texts. And, as these critics also suggest, analysis is at its most productive when we consider these various elements in interaction, to see how they affect one another, rather than as isolated parts of the image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 183), as integrated texts (*ibidem*).

My focus will be on the composition of the images. Composition is the process by means of which the interaction between the different elements is achieved and consists of three interrelated systems: information value; salience; and framing. Whereas the information value of the elements relates to their geographic disposition in the image (left, right; center, margin; etc.), salience relates to placement in terms of aspects such as foreground and background, size, or contrasts in tone or color, for instance. Finally, framing suggests relations between the elements in terms of connection or separation (*ibidem*).

Following visual grammar theory, Kruger's collages are analytical:⁴ they are mainly representational (as opposed to interactive), a type of images that usually resorts to a human figure, deemed the ‘carrier’, whose ‘possessive attributes’ (his or her characteristics) the viewer is able to identify. When the carrier looks at the viewer, Kress and van Leuwen term it ‘the gaze’ and it is this element that brings interactivity into the image mainly because this look from the picture onto the viewer is said to establish a connection.⁵

⁴Kress and van Leeuwen oppose this type of images to narrative or classificational images.

⁵They come to emphasize this aspect when in a later study they change the terminology to “demand pictures”.

I believe that Kruger's representational techniques do not quite follow the division Kress and van Leeuwen establish between the representational and the interactive. I believe it is her dealing with the gaze that disturbs the traditional functions of the 'carrier' and his/her possessive attributes as Kress and van Leeuwen establish them. For it is ultimately by means of the gaze that the viewer will be called into doubt and directly involved in the reading of the image. The gaze therefore turns from an objectifying to an agency-laden tool that empowers both the carrier and the viewer, reverting its original disciplining effect.

As a theoretical category, the gaze has been particularly strong in film critique but it expanded into other areas of visual representation. It applies to both the look of those represented (in this case, the carriers), who may or may not be aware of their exposition, and to the viewers, who are, in contrast, always in power of the action of gazing. The question of the gaze has been taken up following critical coordinates from race to class and gender, but at its core has always resided the question of power – who gazes at who/what, from which perspective or location, attached to which institutions. Kruger's work mingles the two dimensions: power, as theorized by Foucault, and gender, in line with later feminist critical endeavors.

This study therefore also dialogues with visual critique engaged in the analysis of the gaze, namely painting and film. From John Berger's (1972) very influential analysis of the ways of looking along the nude tradition in western painting (where "man act and women appear", p.47), followed by Laura Mulvey's (1975) psychoanalytical analysis of women's roles in popular film genres, we were led to believe that not only were different forms of looking engaged in the construction of gender, but also that the gaze was and would always remain male: women were reduced to "an object of vision, a sight" (Berger, 1972: 47). Namely Mulvey's critique, whose influence was paramount among feminist film studies, established that the object of the gaze in film was the feminine body and that gazing inevitably involved subjugation, which meant that women could only be exhibited on screen, not take up the gaze themselves. Underlying Berger and Mulvey's theories was the idea that women's passivity regarding the power to gaze corresponded to their lack of agency in reality.

Yet, I see Kruger's work as coming much more in line with later feminist critiques that interrogated that strict gender-gaze definition. It has been argued that Mulvey's view was too limiting in terms of allowing for a reversal of the 'male' gaze; critics such as E. Ann Kaplan and Mary Ann Doane signalled the essentialist flaws in the psychoanalytical line of theory and argued instead that the notion of the gaze should be associated with a place constructed in and by culture, not with an essence (Doane, 1997: 191). Kaplan also pointed out the limiting options of the feminine-masculine division that would immediately assign a woman in the gazing position to the patriarchal power affiliated to the male gaze, much in line with Berger (Kaplan, 1983: 28). Whereas Doane's contribution was also important in calling for other possible gaze-positions than that of the masculine or the feminine, she also noted that the insistence on Freud's 'repression hypothesis' deprived us of an understanding of power as positive, as Foucault defines it, in its self-fashioning potential (Doane, 1997: 191). It is along these lines that I see Kruger's intervention and her own contribution to the debate: her artworks bind the question of the possibility of a female gaze, or a female subject, to the promises of power as mastery of the self.

“I Shop Therefore I Am”, 1987

(<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>)

In this collage,⁶ I underline salience as the most important compositional aspect. Salience is the element that creates a hierarchy among the image’s constitutive parts by distributing importance differently; in this picture, it works in terms of foreground and background display. Here, the space of the carrier is reduced to a part of the human body – the hand – which, despite being placed in the background, performs the task of a frame that upholds the foreground, the textual statement. Color contrast is evident; black and gray overshadow the background, whereas white and red illuminate the foreground. Framing, as both visual composition process and metaphor, is the key to this image: the connection between the two planes results in a frame-within-the-frame effect. They are interlocked, the human hand working as a scaffold to the textual sign, whereas the latter relates to, or identifies, the human figure absent from the image and meaningfully reduced to the action performed by the hand.

Yet, the hand is not holding just a text; it is holding a sign? a box? a product, maybe? This association is triggered by the use of a typical advertising structure or pose: the hand is putting a product on display – inviting consumption. The form of the textual element calls to mind either the product’s brand or the slogan that sells it, a reading suggested also by the typeface widely used in the media: red Futura Bold against a white backdrop. If we center further on the composition of the textual inscription, we will notice that, despite the fact that the human figure is absent, the text/‘product’ holds an inscription that refers to that human figure registered by the personal pronoun, “I”. The text furthermore puts two syntagmas in a parallel relation, “I shop”/“I am”, while a smaller type connector implicates them in a relation of consequence, “therefore”. Despite the smaller font size, this connector is not less significant, for it actually activates another level of meaning, the original statement of which this is a pun: René de Descartes’s dictum, “*Cogito, ergo sum*”.

The pun therefore introduces a second context that adds to meaning: the replacement of the original verb to “think”, an intellectual process, by the verb to “shop” establishes a contrast between the contexts that raises different implications. However, the essence of being, “I am”, remains unaltered because the connector actually suggests a relation instead of a contrast between thinking and shopping. It follows that what seems to be an underlying contradiction vanishes in face of the visual, slogan like, power of the aphorism which is reinforced by the displaying pose and the dominating semantic field of advertising. That is how shopping, or consumption, emerges as a meaning making activity capable of defining human identity.

The product on display ultimately stays for the absent carrier’s identity. This identity is represented in the montage and interaction between the elements I have just described, and encapsulated in a formula which in turn is dependent on the practice it evokes, shopping. It is not after all accidental that only a part of the human body is visible: the subject is defined solely by the practice suggested by the posed hand. Although for that same reason the classical motive of the gaze is absent, the product-slogan assumes the gaze-function, in its salience: standing out from the image, closer to the viewer, inviting identification, or the sharing of a common perspective over a common condition. To my mind, this process of

⁶ Images of Kruger’s work can be found at The Art History Archive, “Barbara Kruger”. Accessed on 30.03.2015, at <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>.

composition hints at a human gaze reified in the slogan that advertises the subject's problematic identity: buying as a condition to be alive, or identity as the result of the products you consume.

This gaze effect is intensified by the use of the personal pronoun, "I", which clearly suggests the direct identification between the absent subject/carrier and the viewer. Finally, it is important to stress that the reification of the gaze, due to the articulation of composition techniques, does not however cancel out its interpellative power: by standing out and working on a pun, the text rather acquires a visual quality that demands the viewer to doubt the direct equation suggested in the recontextualization of the Cartesian dictum in contemporary consumption society.

“Untitled (You Are Not Yourself)”, 1984, gelatin silver print

(<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>)

In this gelatin silver print,⁷ we do have a carrier, the human figure (or part of it, a face), which is gendered. But meaning is motivated by different strategies than those used in the former collage. It derives from the overall effect of shattering and dispersion, here suggested by a broken mirror that splits the female face into several pieces which appear decentered but are set in a circular structure framed by text, above (the 'ideal') and below (the 'real'), thus creating a symmetry. A hand, on the lower left corner holds, or tries to fit in, one of the pieces. The hole in the mirror, just above the center, hints at an act of aggression that causes the fragmentation not just of the mirror, but of the image reflected, the woman's face and apparently, her identity as well. I'd say that the possessive attributes are not on display but are suggested instead by the meanings derived from the play between visual and linguistic structures: the shattered mirror effect impairs an accurate reading of the woman's face, (whether she is smiling or crying), suggesting that her possessive attribute is precisely ambiguity and fragmentation. The absence of the woman's gaze makes it more difficult both to identify her and to read her expression accurately.

Color is here reduced to black, white, and shades of grey, creating contrast and adding to the gloomy atmosphere the image also suggests. Color also plays with the use of verbal elements: in the very center, in contrasting small size white characters, a verbal 'drop' – 'not' – shows, against a black background. This negating particle works as the mediator, the particle that links the polarized elements (the shattered face and the linguistic frame above and below). It thus brings together the other linguistic elements of the image, "You are" and "yourself", which are set in visual symmetry on top and bottom of the frame, replicating the same effect of shattering applied to the face. Brought together, the linguistic elements – of which personal pronouns stand out again – ruled by the negation install doubt in the viewer: "You are not yourself" applies both to the carrier and the viewer (probably female), suggesting that neither the woman nor the viewer fits the public identity 'woman' as subscribed and 'advertised' by society.

The use of text therefore creates the "imaginary relation" between carrier and viewer that, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, lies with the carrier's gaze that is visibly absent here. These critics argue that "schematic analytical figures", those that do not look at the viewer, rather invite "detached scrutiny" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 90). My view is that Kruger

⁷ Images of Kruger's work can be found at The Art History Archive, "Barbara Kruger". Accessed on 30.03.2015, at <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>.

obviously resorts to other techniques to create the gaze and keep the connection quite close: whereas in the first collage, the slogan-like pun ignited doubt in the viewer, in this second image it is the *disconnection* between the woman's face and the second person pronoun, "you" (instead of 'I' or 'she') that produces a similar effect. This apparent confusion of pronouns, like in the piece I will analyze next, install doubt about both who is speaking and who is gazing. It is my belief that in both images the viewer is hit by a gaze-effect that, even in the absence of a traditional carrier figure, creates the 'imaginary relation' that is the basis for interaction with the image. The image I will analyse next intensifies this effect.

“Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)”, 1989, collage

(<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>)

This poster⁸ style work was originally conceived to intervene in a particular historical and social event. In this case, I stress salience and framing as the key compositional processes. Again, but this time clearly centered, we have a carrier figure that is gendered but reduced to a part of the human body.⁹ The possessive attributes are suggested by the relations established mainly between the visual and the linguistic structures: salience results from color contrast and the dividing line in the very middle of the image. This line and the contrastive color effect it signals evoke the idea of the double inside the self/subject, but also functions in direct relation to the textual element and the word 'battleground' in particular, which brings in the violence inherent to the signification process and represented by the cut introduced by the line.

As in the first collage, the use of color contributes to meaning; red here foregrounds the white characters, again a slogan-like type in Futura-Bold font. As in the previous images, the textual element appears as captions overlaying the images, but in this case it is collaged over the dividing line. Actually, the line, like any border, operates simultaneously as a disconnecting and a connecting tool, keeping ambiguity in place. The connecting effect in turn ensures that the viewer's attention will be shared along both the visual and the linguistic structuring devices. The verbal choice for the personal pronoun 'you' (as in the previous image) establishes a connection to the viewer, in this case, clearly reinforced by the direct and sharp gaze of the carrier.

The gaze effect and the linguistic elements thus clearly claim a position and a voice for the image, refusing objectification. The stare the carrier returns defies the viewer's gaze, because she confronts it, as if she were aware of being seen and that condition empowers her, and this is also why I see this two-directional gaze as more than simply a reflected image. The ultimate effect is, to my mind, projecting the idea of the battleground onto the viewer's body: combined with the text, the syntagm 'your body' implicates her directly—if not appropriating the viewer's gaze, then sharing the carrier's gaze with her. This is therefore the image that comes closest to suggest a mutual gaze between carrier and viewer.

The fact that this poster-like collage was intended to signal a major demonstration in defense of the right to abortion that took place in 1989, in Washington DC (Finger and

⁸ Images of Kruger's work can be found at The Art History Archive, "Barbara Kruger". Accessed on 30.03.2015, at <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>.

⁹ The choice for using parts of the female body in the image follows a typical technique in the visual representation of women that has contributed to the objectification of the female body. Obviously, this is another media technique Kruger appropriates in order to subvert its traditional effect.

Weidemann, 2011: 27) creates a macrotextual level that adds situational meaning to the image, while also bringing the category gender to the forefront. But even without that information, the microtext clearly dramatizes the signification process the body undergoes in contemporary societies, still associated to ideals that objectify it, from beauty to motherhood, or passivity to subjugation, in the case of the normative female body.

Conclusion

My point here has been to examine how Barbara Kruger resorts to representation strategies that invest heavily on a revision of the gaze. Either by shattering the image, cutting it in half or undisclosed some of its parts, Kruger calls into question the possibility of objectification of the human body, an idea that is intensified by the way the carrier figure gazes or evades the gaze, but in any case always striving to implicate the viewer in the gaze effects produced by the visual composition.

The gaze, in Foucault's theory, is the power to perceive and thereby establish particular knowledge regimes; to see is to know and to know is to have the power to decide what, who, and how you see, and to give meaning to what and who you see. Kruger takes up the legacy of the gaze as mastery and authority but reorders it and in so doing creates a position for a female viewer and breaks away with the gaze's disciplining role as well. Kruger's images ultimately assign the viewer the responsibility to doubt, disobey and review the forms of knowledge ascribed to his/her own identity and in the process resignify their bodies according to their own subjectivities. We should keep in mind that, to Foucault, discourse is essentially dispersive (Foucault, 2008 [1972]: 36) meaning that not just the object but also the knower are affected and constituted both by the gaze and by the knowledge it produces.

Kruger's visual strategies for creating doubt provide the public with alternative tools towards a critical independent reasoning able to interrogate and dismantle the mimetic hegemonic discourses; as her artworks evidence, you cannot tackle questions of power and knowledge without reworking the notion of the gaze. I would say that her 1981 collage "Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face" makes a final commentary on Kruger's position.

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