

“Seeing Red: Subversion, Appropriation, and the Feminist Gaze in Barbara Kruger’s Art”

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Abstract: This article offers a case study of Barbara Kruger’s visual rhetoric to show how her signature fusion of found photography and sensational, headline-styled typography constructs a persuasive visual language that both inhabits and destabilizes dominant ideologies. Drawing on feminist rhetorical theory and cultural studies including Campbell (1998); Moi (1997); Balsamo (1996); Milkie (2002); and Dubriwny (2005), the analysis situates Kruger’s art as a subversive engagement with the visual grammars of advertising and mass media. Through close readings of *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989) and *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981), the article demonstrates how Kruger leverages collage to collapse binaries (subject/object, passive/active, high/low), expose the commodification of bodies, and reconfigure spectatorship via a feminist gaze. Ultimately, this study proposes collage as feminist iconography with durable subversive potential, offering a model for rhetorical invention within and against the visual regimes of consumer capitalism.

Keywords: [Subversion](#), [collage](#), [art](#), [resistance](#), [gaze](#)

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Introduction

What’s black and white and red all over? Barbara Kruger’s signature artistic fusion of image and text ranging in scale from designs on matchbook to supersized billboards. In this case study, I explore how Barbara Kruger’s visual language serves to create dilemmas for audiences regarding identity, consumerism, and gender. Visual language refers to the system of signs, symbols, images, and design elements that communicate meaning and persuade through visual means - with or without words. It has its own grammar (composition, color, contrast, typography, spatial arrangement) and appeals that shape how audiences interpret and respond. For example, in Kruger’s art, the red, white, and black color scheme and bold Futura typeface form a recognizable visual language of critique and confrontation. Born in 1945, Kruger put together a resume not from formal art education, but of work experience in graphic design, teaching, and creating.¹ Over the course of her career, her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at global museums and galleries.² One of the most influential artists creating feminist art in contemporary visual culture, Kruger utilizes photography and text to comment on the production of disempowerment in American society. Kruger’s choice to engage with photographs that she did not take seems to offer a sustainable model of artistry with subversive potential. Utilizing photography, that which claims to hold reality or truth, continues to manifest itself as an ethics of seeing, as Susan Sontag (1977) asserted. However, Kruger’s images never stand alone. Each work of art reframes the photograph with a new message born from the entanglement between text and image.

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- 1 During her brief stints studying at Syracuse University and Parsons School of Design, Kruger made connections that led her to her position in design at Condé Nast Publications. In the 1960s, she contributed ad design and writing to publications including *Mademoiselle*, *House and Garden*, *Artforum*, and others (Martin). In the 1970s, she taught at University of California, Berkeley and is currently an Emerita Distinguished Professor of New Genres at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture. In 2021, she was honored as one of Time magazine’s “100 Most Influential People.”
 - 2 The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Palazzo Belle Papesse, Centro Arle Contemporanea, Siena, Italy; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Mary Boone Gallery, New York (Marshall, 2009).

While the images in Kruger's art come from found photography and are presented in their low-resolution and black and white form, the text in her work draws visually from sensational news headlines or advertising slogans. This choice capitalizes on viewers' prior experience with the visual rhetoric of headlines to invite a perception of urgency or immediacy. In a sense, the visual rhetoric of the text simulates the kairotic energy that traditional media outlets utilize to skew our perceptions of current events. For example, headlines typically choose the most sensational phrases to create interest in potential readers, stylizing them in alarmist capital letters and bold text. Think *The New York Times*' "NIXON RESIGNS." Now referred to as "clickbait," these strategies are meant to drive sales and circulation. Kruger, however, uses these strategies to prompt reflection in her viewers. Kruger (2000) commented on this intention, stating that "basically, in order for these images and words to do their work they have to catch the eye of the spectator" (p. 438). Kruger elucidated the exigence of her tactics, stating that "what the media have done today is make a thing meaningless through its accessibility. And what I'm interested in is taking that accessibility and making meaning. I'm interested in dealing with complexity" (p. 448). In this sense, she sought to inject the genres that are deployed as shallow mongers of consumer capitalism with social, political, and cultural criticism.

This case study unfolds through a discussion of the ways in which Kruger appropriates tools of the patriarchy—such as violent language, photography, and the gaze—in order to undermine visual and discursive rhetorics of commodification. I employ the traditional economic definition of commodification, where commodification is the process by which goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information, people, and/or animals are constructed as objects with monetary value. Because Kruger's work illuminates how bodies are commodified in society, I supplement an economic understanding of commodification with communications scholar Anne Balsamo's (1996) assertion that "the natural body is technologically transformed into a sign of culture" (p. 280). In other words, visual culture emphasizes the marked³ elements of bodies that are, in turn, presented as cultural signs that carry history, assumptions, valuations—also known as baggage. This baggage is read as an identity and in this reading "identities become signs and signs become commodities" (p. 280). In Kruger's work, the focus on mass media and popular culture functions to inform her viewers of the propaganda enacted by mass media itself. In what follows, I examine how Kruger's appropriation constitutes the visual language in her art and present her deployment of collage as a rhetorical move that reflects the subversive potentiality of feminist iconography.

Theoretical Framework: Subversion, Feminist Epistemologies, and Resistance

This review explores the concept of subversion in the spirit of Judith Butler as a visual-discursive space from which political transformation can arise. Subversion opens up a space for questioning and contesting the regulatory norms that govern bodies, identities, and desires. In "Inventing Women: From Amaterasu to Virginia Woolf, Women's Studies in Communication," Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) claimed that subversion is a central principle of rhetorical invention for feminist rhetoric (p. 112). Supporting her claim, she

3 In binary oppositions, the first category is understood to be unmarked (hence the "norm") and the second category as marked, hence other. The markedness signifies the ability to identify the difference that carries that mark. In the binary male/female, for instance, the category male is unmarked, thus dominant and the category of female is marked, or not the norm. These categories of marked and unmarked are most noticeable when the norm is departed from.

asserted that “the roots of change” rely on “processes that undermine or call...into question...the myths that justify women’s subordination and the ideological barriers that [delay] social change” (p. 112). Toril Moi (1997) mused on the subversive potentiality of appropriation, stating, “there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense ‘contaminated’ by patriarchal ideology” (p. 105). Rather than the hegemonic connotation of cultural appropriation that results in the erasure of marginalized cultures, Moi urged feminists to appropriate or creatively transform resources within patriarchy, including language (p. 105).

Barbara Kruger both critiques and works from within a matrix of constraining systems, including cisheteropatriarchy, consumer capitalism, and white supremacy. Rhetoric scholars, such as Kohrs Campbell (1998), maintained that one must work from within the constraining system if one is interested in instigating change. Thus, the silver lining is that she has a plethora of content from which to enact this kind of productive appropriation. This type of appropriation serves as a means of critiquing the mass reproduction of images and the social interests served by the industrialization of mass culture. For example, Kruger creates and distributes her work on materials goods like tote bags, postcards, and T-shirts. In so doing, she blurs the boundaries between criticism and commercialism, high art and low (or popular) culture, and exclusivity and accessibility. Kruger stated, “I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are, what we want to be and what we become” (Marshall, 2009). Remixing seemingly innocuous images from mid-20th century popular culture or print-media sources with confrontational first- and second-person statements, Kruger creates a visual-discursive remedy, a counter-rhetoric, a striking billboard for consciousness raising through her art.

In the context of visual culture, the available resources are abundant and speak to us constantly through the images we consume. For example, images of the 50s housewife, sexualized images of women in advertising campaigns, and representations of “happy” women on social media represent potential sites of visual complicity in patriarchy that a scholarly feminist interrogation can illuminate. This move is especially important in the face of symbolic annihilation, or the portrayal of women in “narrow, demeaning, trivializing, or distorted ways” (Milkie, 2002, p. 841). According to Melissa A. Milkie’s (2002) study on femininity and gatekeeping, symbolic annihilation is a central way women’s disadvantage is created and maintained through cultural beliefs and stereotypes presented in magazines, television, and film, among other media forms. Valuing subversive texts by and for women and feminists has the potential to inform the everyday negotiation of self-expression, eroding the grip of normative femininity and inviting micro and macro instances of feminist rhetorical invention.

Kruger’s interventions encourage viewers to question the messages they encounter daily and reflect on the broader implications of power and control in contemporary society. However, her work is not solely oppositional; it also plays with the language and aesthetics commonly employed by governmental and commercial entities. By assimilating to these techniques, she enters into a dialogue with the dominant forms of communication and mass media. In this way, her art can simultaneously disrupt and assimilate within the same systems. A feminist politics is one in which complicity functions subversively, a destabilizing contesta-

tion of meaning.

Collage as Subversive Iconography

Kruger's complementary (contradictory?) use of prose alongside imagery in a visual text enables a fruitful opportunity for subversion. Campbell (1998) wrote that inventing women "assumed roles that gave them access to the argumentation reserved for males" (p. 121). The examples in this study reflect women's participation in public discourse as generative spaces for world-(re)making—where women invent themselves as rhetors, subjects, and authorities through the rhetoric of subversion. When Kruger assumes the role of rhetor through collage, she engages in a world-(re)making activity. Through this she is able to examine that which is already constructed, normalized, and taken-for-granted.

For example, Ron Rosenbaum (2012) for *Smithsonian Magazine* wrote on the importance of Kruger's involvement with words as a conceptual artist. He considered,

The more words wash over us, the less we understand them. And the less we are able to recognize which ones are influencing us—manipulating us subtly, invisibly, insidiously. Barbara Kruger rematerializes words, so that we can read them closely, deeply.

This statement points to the inundating nature of the digital age, where we are constantly faced with news, opinions, imagery, and updates that desensitize us. In an era of overstimulation and overexposure, Kruger's pieces offer a declarative and domineering perspective that is consistent in her oeuvre from the 80s to the present day. It is important to note that the term "domineering" is not used negatively in this context. Rather, it reflects Kruger's deliberate and impactful artistic approach, where she takes a commanding stance to challenge and confront societal norms, power structures, and cultural narratives. Her work aims to disrupt complacency and encourage viewers to critically reflect on their own roles within the dominant systems she critiques. In this section, I explore how Kruger utilizes collage, particularly combining image and text, to undermine visual and discursive rhetorics of commodification in a visual medium.

The arrangement of visual elements within a collage contribute to Kruger's rhetorical impact, capturing attention, directing focus, and conveying meaning. "I think what I'm trying to do is create moments of recognition," Kruger explained, "To try to detonate some kind of feeling or understanding of lived experience" (Marshall, 2009). Through the process of appropriation and recontextualization, Kruger creates intertextual relationships that refer to or comment on the original sources. Rosenbaum wrote that her early collage pieces were "formal verbal defacements of glossy magazine pages, glamorous graffiti" (Rosenbaum, 2012). This statement rightly aligns Kruger with the defiant and reorienting nature of graffiti but contextualizes her activism in feminine forms.

The choice of materials, images, and symbols within a collage can reflect and critique prevailing ideologies, challenge dominant narratives, or engage with specific social, political, or artistic movements. The rhetorical impact of a collage is shaped by its cultural and historical context and the audience's reception within that context. Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art commissioned a collage from Kruger as recently as November 2022 entitled *Untitled (Hope/Fear)* (2022) (see Figure 1). In it, she remixes her most famous

image *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989) into a three-part installation that reminds visitors that the threats of war, reality of inequity, and pressure to capitulate in hegemony are running rampant as ever. Kruger originally composed it as a poster for the April 1989 March for Women’s Lives in Washington, DC to protest new laws limiting women’s access to health care. As her most recognizable piece, it has played an important role in designating the iconic status of her artistry.



Figure 1: *Untitled (Hope/Fear)*, 2022, by Barbara Kruger.

In the stand-alone *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, she constructs the viewer as an implicit player in the militant policing of bodies in patriarchy (see Figure 2). In the context of the anti-abortion movement for which it was originally composed, the image could be interpreted as a critique of the fact that women’s rights to their own bodies are second to inherently misogynist political interests and ideological motivations. Nevertheless, the picture could be interpreted in other ways and in a wider context than is the pro-choice movement. The viewer may understand themselves to be a player who imposes expectations on other bodies; who uses their own body for battle or defense; whose use of their own body is governed by outside forces. Generally, interpretation of this artwork revolves around the themes of agency, control, and the societal battles fought over women’s bodies. The use of the word “battleground” implies a struggle or conflict, suggesting that women’s bodies are sites of ongoing power struggles, both at an individual and a collective level.



Figure 2: *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*, 1989, by Barbara Kruger.

The image of the woman’s face, divided and juxtaposed with the text, represents the fragmentation and

objectification of women's bodies in society. The artwork challenges the traditional objectification and control over women's bodies, inviting viewers to reflect on the societal pressures and expectations placed upon women. The bold and assertive text asserts the ownership and agency of women over their bodies, turning the notion of the body as a passive object on its head. By presenting the body as a battleground, Kruger draws attention to the ongoing fights for bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and freedom from patriarchal control.

The use of the word "your" in the text is significant, as it addresses the viewer directly and implicates them in the discourse. It invites self-reflection and encourages viewers to consider their own complicity or involvement in the battles fought over women's bodies. Overall, *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* is a powerful and provocative artwork that challenges the objectification and control of women's bodies. It calls for awareness, activism, and resistance against oppressive societal structures and invites viewers to critically examine their roles in the ongoing struggles for bodily autonomy and gender equality.

The original image in *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* is an editorial shot of a conventionally attractive woman, with coiffed hair and neutral makeup, with the corners of her mouth upturned ever so lightly. Standing alone, the viewer might appreciate the image as representative of a real woman, real womanhood, or aspirational beauty. However, Kruger offers the artificiality of the photograph on a silver platter by presenting half of the image in its negative form—the version of itself before it has been developed. Rosenbaum (2012) described the text on Battleground as an "agitprop aphorism" that "features a woman's face made into a grotesque-looking mask by slicing it in half and rendering one side as a negative." The choice immediately underscores the composite nature of photography, eschewing elements of (T)ruth from the documentary image form. Kruger's spliced image interrupts the viewer's conditioned response to photography as a conduit of truth. Neither the text nor the image would be, could be read the same way without the other. Thus, Kruger appropriates photography's appropriation of reality for the purpose of critiquing its system of production.

Working in a visual medium, Kruger rests her criticisms and confrontations to the status quo on the viewer's ability to see and perceive. In so doing, she challenges a number of binaries to demonstrate how collapsible they are as structures of meaning. Three of the binaries that she responds to include subject vs. object, passive vs. active, and high vs. low. As a result, Kruger constitutes a feminist gaze in the visual language of her oeuvre. Kruger's feminist gaze challenges the dominant male gaze by confronting and subverting its objectifying and controlling nature. Read as an accusation, text such as "your body is a battleground" and "your gaze hits the side of my face" gesture toward the effects of subjugation. It does so by framing viewers as consumers, abusers, and victims and confounding who is speaking within the piece and forces viewers to ask themselves which role they occupy in relation to the art. For example, *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)* (1981) can be interpreted as a response to the gaze (see Figure 3). This piece offers a dialectic exploration of subversive rhetorical iconicity.

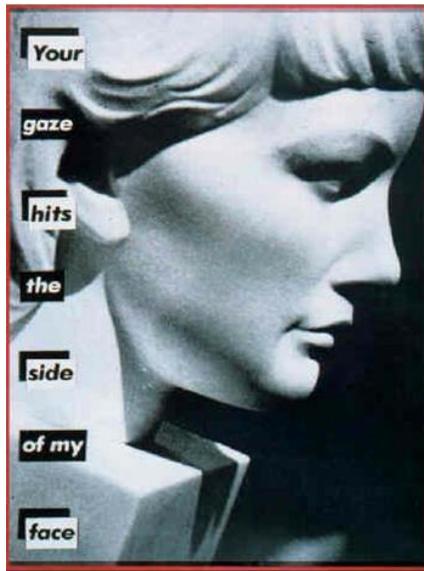


Figure 3: *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)*, 1981, by Barbara Kruger.

The image is a profile of a stone bust with the words “your gaze hits the side of my face” vertically imposed down the left-hand side of the image. The use of a classical statue, which often embodies idealized notions of beauty and perfection, draws attention to the historical construction of beauty standards and how they have been perpetuated and imposed upon individuals, particularly women. In a medusa-esque fashion, the sculpture calls out the spectator and interrupts their gaze, making them conscious of their own looking. By directly addressing the viewer with the text, Kruger shifts the power dynamics inherent in the male gaze. The abstraction of the gaze refers to the desire and pleasures of the dominant subjectivity and has historically produced consciousness through visibility, both consequently male. Individuals who wield the male gaze are typically white and heterosexual, mostly economically advantaged men who have wielded social and political power. As a result, these are the same men who have dominated the arts, literature, the media, business, and scholarship. In other words, this particular kind of gaze is cast from a position of power. By responding to (critiquing) the male gaze, Kruger speaks back to the way in which women have historically been portrayed and objectified in art and media, often for the pleasure of male viewers.

The juxtaposition of the statue and the text brings attention to the power dynamics inherent in the act of looking and being looked at. The text in the artwork asserts the woman’s presence and demands recognition. It challenges the viewer to acknowledge her individuality, agency, and subjectivity beyond being a passive object of the male gaze. By giving voice to the woman⁴ within the artwork, Kruger challenges the erasure and objectification of women that can occur under the male gaze. Instead of being the passive object of the viewer’s gaze, the subject of the artwork asserts her presence and challenges the viewer’s position of power. The directness of the address disrupts the assumption that the male gaze can freely objectify and control women. With the overlay of the text on the woman’s face, Kruger interrupts the viewer’s gaze, obstructing a complete and unobstructed view of the subject. This disruption emphasizes the subject’s agency and challenges the objectifying nature of the male gaze. Thus, she calls attention to the act of looking itself and prompts viewers to question their own assumptions and the power dynamics at play.

⁴ I refer to the image as she/her because the piece is commonly referred to as “stone woman.”

Both *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* and *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face)* are useful for discussing Kruger's engagement with the opposition between passivity and activity. In both *Untitled* pieces, the female figures challenge dominant constructions of feminine visibility within the constraints of conventional beauty subject in one and inanimate sculpture in the other. Both images interrupt the passive vs. active binary within their constraints by utilizing confrontational text. Again, the use of personal pronouns used to frame an accusation creates a direct relationship between the viewer and the subject of the image. Kruger subverts traditional expectations by presenting passive or traditionally submissive figures in positions of power and agency by layering assertive text over potentially innocuous feminine symbols. She disrupts the notion that these categories are mutually exclusive, demonstrating that individuals can embody aspects of both passivity and activity simultaneously or at different times. By blurring these boundaries with collage, she challenges simplistic categorizations and encourages a more nuanced understanding of human agency and engagement. Through her artwork, she challenges the assumption that passivity equates to weakness or inferiority, while questioning the notion that activity always signifies strength or superiority.

The use of multiple modes enhances the rhetorical potential of collage, allowing Kruger to convey messages through a combination of visual, linguistic, and aesthetic means. "Panning for iconic words and images like a miner looking for gold in a fast-running stream," wrote Rosenbaum (2012), romanticizing Kruger's process, she "extract[s] the nuggets and giv[es] them a setting and a polish so they can serve as our mirror." The resulting "mirror" as Rosenbaum puts it, benefits from a rhetoric of subversion. Tasha N. Dubriwny (2005) reframed Kenneth Burke's concept of "perspective by incongruity" for social justice by likening it to the literary figure of oxymoron. She described it as "a yoking together [of] items that seem contradictory (or at least incongruous) within the context of the established orientation" (p. 398). The function of this rhetorical dissonance in Kruger's work is not only to confront assumptions that perpetuate dominant ideologies, but to radicalize the viewer—or at least leave them with more information about their own experiences. The juxtaposition of disparate elements within a collage can create unexpected connections and generate new meanings. Through the use of symbolism and metaphor, Kruger communicates complex ideas, challenges established narratives, and makes sociopolitical commentary.

Conclusion

Barbara Kruger's visual rhetoric stages a relentless confrontation with the forces that seek to define, commodify, and control identity. Through her strategic appropriation of found photographs, sensationalist typographic forms, and the techniques of advertising and mass media, she crafts a visual language that both inhabits and destabilizes dominant ideological systems. Situating images in a new context, framed by a striking phrase or pointed statement and a red border, she reforms the meaning of both and unifies them as a new entity. The result is an apparent representation of the insidiousness of patriarchal standards and dynamics that travel through visual culture. Kruger's use of bold statements and provocative imagery invites viewers to critically engage with the underlying power structures and cultural narratives that shape our society, often highlighting the ways patriarchal systems and consumerist culture marginalize and oppress certain groups or individuals.

By questioning these systems, she prompts viewers to reflect on their own roles within the larger social context. Her work exposes how bodies become signs, signs become commodities, and gazes become instruments of power—while simultaneously offering viewers tools to question and resist those very processes. By collapsing binaries such as subject/object, passive/active, and high/low, Kruger demonstrates how meaning itself is constructed, mutable, and open to subversion. Ultimately, her art invites viewers not merely to see but to recognize their own complicity and agency within structures of power. In transforming the familiar into the confrontational and the ordinary into the critical, Kruger shows how feminist rhetorical invention can reimagine visual culture as a site of resistance, making visible the ideological battles that shape our lived experiences and urging us to imagine new possibilities for agency, identity, and social change.

Biography

Rachel E. Molko is a first-generation Venezuelan and Jewish feminist rhetorician. At the time of researching and writing this case study, she was Assistant Director of Northeastern University's Writing Program where she earned her doctorate. Rachel's research explores feminist rhetorical theory and feminine visuality in contemporary popular culture. She is currently a Lecturer in Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication Program. Outside of work, she enjoys watching *Jeopardy!* with her husband, practicing hot vinyasa, and spending time with her cat.

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