Barbara Kruger: Crossing The Boundaries Of Art Photography

Today, the mass media and the discipline of graphic design, interlink frequently. Due to saturation of the media that people experience daily, it has caused a shift in perceptions of identity, as well as expectations of realism. A warp in society's standards and what is categorised as common place are implemented by this. It is difficult nowadays not to become a product of the mass media due to its phenomenon that has reached great levels of wide spread growth from the 20th century. It is evident that the world is inundated with images; designers possess the power to easily manipulate and draw focus on views and values of society. However, many of them do not recognise or consider the immense impact that they can cause or are capable of. The act of 'detournement', the French term relating to the 'reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble' (Knabb,1959) has become a present tendency of contemporary artists with experimental ideas. Within postmodern art, artists such as Barbara Kruger have focused on the power of the mass media, and use media attempts to in turn critique it.

Barbara Kruger has established herself since the late 1970's, as one of the most influential figures in the contemporary art world and is 'best known for her feminism art, conceptual art and social criticism' (Napikoski, L. 2017). Kruger's earliest work consisted of combined language with mass media imagery culled from books and magazines. She directs a critical eye towards consumerism, political will, desire, and the often-hidden mechanisms of power operating with contemporary society through her work. She never deters from her roots of her well-known design, always working with her signature Futura Bold typeface that continues to portray her declarative statements to society world-wide. Within this essay, the progression of Barbara Kruger's experimental ideas and their execution will be discussed. This will be done by exploring and proving the ways she crosses boundaries within her practise, evaluating how this impacts society, in relation to modern day problems.

Early work

Graphic Design

It is recognised that Kruger's education and work as a graphic designer, picture editor, and art director within many publications gained her the knowledge of the graphic image. Its power which is evident within her work that she is now internationally renowned. In the words of the artist 'My work as a graphic designer morphed into my job as an artist-with big differences on the level of meaning.' Working with photograph-based images, Kruger observed the depiction of power and authority through found mass media images, 'appropriating their iconography and slogans and deconstructing them visually and verbally.' Examples of this are evident such as 'Untitled (You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece) exploits an economy of image and text to articulate and undermine the power-based relations established in such media images.' (Content.acca.melbourne.2019)

Her artwork, unlike many, does not immediately go into museums or on a world tour. Instead it

is valued towards advertisement so that she can achieve a larger audience to communicate the problems in society she chooses to address. It is notable that through the series of her work, she holds a unique graphic style; using the typeface oblique Futura bold or sans serif in capital letters to display her commentary.

Kruger was born in 1945, despite this long-lasting career her work is still so current and appealing to today's younger generation. It helps to continually iterate her messages. The main reason this remains current is due to the chosen typeface it is very recognisable, both direct and democratic giving her work a visual identity. Her work is also made legible 'accompanied by a colour palette of reds, blacks and whites.' Kruger's images are also depicted in black and white that neutralises gender roles imposed on us by social constructs. Her fight for equality and gender neutralisation can be seen as unusual for such a strong feminist in the modern world. The feminist community places woman on a pedestal instead. She holds a lot of respect for hurdling limitations of society by promoting her powerful messages that are precise and striking. Her work shows that this type of media can perpetrate patriarchy and all the pitfalls that go along with it. Kruger has a distinctive visual language that she has developed over the course of her forty-year career.

Language boundary

In addition, overtime 'systematic cultural shifts were affecting the work and lives of artists today.' Barbara Kruger is an artist that has contributed to this shift: she is continuing to step out of common place in society, bringing to light juxtaposing phrases with language that crosses boundaries as it disrupts the expectations in mass media. This is shown within her slogans such as "Money can buy you love" and "I shop therefore I am" (see. Fig 1).

She uses gender neutral pronouns such as 'you', 'we' and the personal pronoun, 'I' within her work. By using gender neutral pronouns, she is almost removing the element of gender as society would define it, as no specification on male or female is made clear, despite the image. This is a tactical communication method because as a viewer it immediately challenges you on the notion of consumption due to the open-ended nature to the statement. The clever use of a simplistic photograph allows the viewer to focus entirely on the statement. She takes the fragmentation approach, allowing her message to be broken down, which forms a structure that depicts a clear statement to her audience creating a shift in their thinking. Kruger's idiom 'I think therefore I am' was driven from Rene Descartes, the French philosopher's theory of 'Cogito ergo sum' or 'I think therefore I am' (Skirry 2019). She has utilised this to frame the idea of material consumption.

Kruger is seen to cross boundaries by promoting questions or ideas that may shock the public and using language to her advantage. Her iconoclastic controversies displayed in the sleek modern graphic typeface modernises her work keeping her a well-known figure in the changing society. Moving from her early work into mid-1990, Kruger continuously working on her experimental ideas, stepping out from traditional exhibitions or advertisement poster, establishing an endearing in your face, very large-scale installation.

Late work

Scale boundary

Within the new millennium, ‘contemporary art has become a global phenomenon with the birth of a contemporary museum culture’ (Kholeif, 2018 p.13). Within the Mary Boone gallery in 1991, Kruger displayed an installation that shaped an environment of images and words casing the walls, floor and the ceiling. In 1994, this brought around a refined exhibition, seamlessly papering the ‘gallery walls, tiling the floor with engraved metal plates, and introducing a booming recorded voice over’ (Gallery,2019) (See Fig 2). As her movement through art developed, she crossed the boundary of traditional artworks hung on gallery walls and transformed the space instead.

She created an interaction with the viewer, as they walk over her work and are submerged within it. Her use of scale is used effectively, as it puts the audience into the centre of her message. The scale of her work can make the viewer feel as though it is screaming the words as they read them due to the font size. This installation is an experience for the audience that will leave an impact due to its new creative and contemporary atmosphere.

‘Power and its politics and hierarchies exist everywhere: in every conversation we have, in every deal we make, in every face we kiss. I try to address this power and how it choreographs the issues of violence and control, of wealth and poverty, of hope and abjection.’ –interview with Barbara Kruger, Amnesty, March 2005 (Tramway,2005).

Kruger’s work is all about skewed representations of reality. She almost enters the viewers mind, changing the way they interpret the message. Christopher Ricks, an Oxford professor, once explained that to ‘recognise value in art: It is “that which continues to repay attention” (Rosembaum,2012). Kruger’s words not only repays but demands our attention as she continues new methods and crosses boundaries in a myriad of ways to achieve this.

Public message boundary

The shift that is being witnessed in the art world ‘began in the 1960s when the Fluxus movement ushered a rise of a live performance culture’ (Kholeif, O pg.14). They believed that museums should not have the power to determine the value of art, or the stereotype that art enthusiasts are the only audience allowed to view the art within. Barbara Kruger holds a similar mindset, therefore, crossing a boundary, moving her work outside of the art world. For instance, her ‘Performa commission, Untitled (Skate), a site-specific installation at Coleman Skatepark in New York City’ (Foster,2018). (See Fig 3)

Having her work on show in a Skate park not only crosses the boundary of scale, but also location, message and audience. Kruger has stepped outside of the museum walls opening up her art to the public that may not commonly be drawn to galleries. She is promoting her message to a new audience, by putting it in front of those who will see it even if they do not want to. Despite her work being text driven, it holds a clear level of power and impact. The quotes on the skatepark panels are direct. Not only in relation to addressing the audience but also the active engagement with public and political proceedings. Kruger relays that they are ‘just ideas in the air and questions that we ask- and questions that we don’t ask but should’ (Foster, 2018). These types of questions are what backs her work so intrepid and striking.

Barbara Kruger not only decided to turn the heads of the public and put her work in front of people who may or may not want to see her work, but has now put her art physically into their

hands. In 2017, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority realised ‘50,000 limited-edition MetroCards with Ms. Kruger’s pointed questions emblazoned on the back’ (Chow, 2017) (see Fig 4).

Once again, the messages were direct, up to date, and relatable to modern society presented in a clean-cut manner. This method is significant, as her work is entering the hands of many, circulating through everyday life promoting her messages, which achieves the impact on a wide spread audience, as she desired. Her work inquires viewers to ‘closely consider how global topics like consumerism and power play a role in their daily lives’ (Moss, 2018). Kruger has managed to achieve this very easily through her unique approaches.

Conclusion

Throughout this investigation, it is evident that Barbara Kruger has excelled throughout her career and become a world success. She has succeeded due to her experimental ideas and ambition to cross boundaries in a way that will impact society. Undoubtably, Kruger stepping out from the traditional art world gaze and moving to open public space was a courageous decision on her behalf. As a postmodern artist she decided that a well needed positive impact must and could be made through art in today’s society that is so damaged by stereotypes, expectations, standards of common place and limitations to reality. Therefore, her development began, as Kruger circulates her work that ‘uses language to broadcast her ideas in a myriad of ways’ (Artnet, 2018). As an artist she could not be confined, continually taking new measures to create an exceptional impact on society through her art. She wanted to open eyes and turn heads which was achieved. Through her installations and public proposals of her work moving into cities and people’s daily lives, made her work impossible not to see. No matter how people interpret it, everyone has a reaction to it. People from every walk of life are almost made to encounter her work due to the bounds she has taken. These bounds will not only cause a different perspective, but also ‘ties her art work to what they’re doing to how they’re expressing themselves’ (Rodriguez, 2017).

The growth in Kruger’s work and ambitions to retain and expand attention on her commentary is admirable and increasingly more successful. It has become evident to the author through this investigation that ‘disciplinary boundaries and regulatory regimes are attempts to control the wilding of creative life…Our job is to jump fences and cross fields’ (Bierut, Dranttel, Heller, 2002 p.165). Crossing boundaries within the art world is vital within the changing society and it is made evident that Barbara Kruger is a fine example of this. The author feels that, within her personal Graphic Design practise, this investigation has been advantageous, changing the way in which she thinks and experiments within her work.