The Interpretation Of Postmodernist Ideas In Barbara Kruger's Art Works

Postmodernism is a far reaching movement which marked a shift from modernism in the mid to late 20th century. This essay will focus on postmodernism's impact on art and cultural theory, however, that is not to say there is not an acknowledgment of its significance in other fields. As a movement, it rejects modernism due to its skepticism towards metanarratives in science and philosophy. By metanarrative, referring to the encompassing of a historical event, scientific phenomena or philosophy with a totalising theory based on a universal belief. Post enlightenment in the western sphere, this dominance helped to drive modernism but with post-war changing economic systems and quickly developing technological breakthroughs, it became increasingly obsolete and outdated. Lyotard's 'The Postmodern Condition' presents the idea of the metanarrative for the first time as well the term postmodernism outside of art criticism. Lyotard also asserts that postmodernism is not stagnant or singular in such the way modernism is, but ever changing and adapting to consider for new developments. He puts it most simply in What is Postmodernism?: "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant'. Lyotard is able to explore the contemporary as he is precisely the person who knows how to see his obscurity, thus why it is so compelling to explore 'The Postmodern Condition'. Such emphasis on the significance of the metanarrative is essential for collating Lyotard's writing to postmodern artists like Barbara Kruger. This is the thread which allows Lyotard to develop his argument and differentiate it from prior theories whilst simultaneously considering the the work of postmodern artist and in particular Kruger's work in its multiplicity of states. Another significant exploration of postmodernism is presented by Jurgen Habermas. He argues that postmodernism is predicated on a reduced and inadequate understanding of philosophical modernism's self-critical potential. However due to the short nature of this essay, I will focus largely on Lyotard's exploration of postmodernism, whilst bringing in examples of contemporary perspectives.

'Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives'. Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge' provides an alternative to totalitarianism, presenting a new way to look at narratives and theorems in a post industrialized western sphere. He asserts that it is better to allow narratives to compete, than to allow a singular narrative to continue to dominate the status quo. "The Postmodern Condition is intended to 'destroy a belief that still underlies (Jurgen) Habermas' research, namely that humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the régularisation of the 'moves' permitted in all language games, and that the legitimacy of any statement resides in' its contribution to that emancipation'. However, a far more contemporary interpretation is not dissimilar in so much that John Storey also believes that humanity as a whole also seeks to differentiate itself from the past in a postmodern sphere.

Barbara Kruger's work uses metanarratives to explore and investigate consumerism, societal values and gender roles in a postmodern society. Craig Owens has said that her work can deconstruct action within art and this can equally be said for her ability for to deconstruct metanarratives within society. These metanarratives are dissected in terms of medium for Kruger as well as subject matter and the space in which they occupy; allowing for differentials to come into play regarding interpretation dependent on social context. For the purpose of this

essay I will solely be focusing on the work of Kruger and other artists post 1980 in order to contextualise Lyotard’s writing fairly in so much that it reflects the climate of cultural theory post Haberman’s ‘The Unfinished Project’.

Kruger tries to make work about how we are to one another, it's imperative for her work to explore how a postmodern society behaves. Formally working on design at Conde Nast Publications, she incorporated conceptual collage to create slogans about consumer culture using her feminist critique. The duality in which Kruger’s work aligns with Lyotard’s is due to its deconstruction of societal values and narratives. This is demonstrated in one, its subject - often through the use of personal pronouns. And two through its curation, medium or display. Exploring the latter is foremost, so that the context in which the work is displayed is understood by the reader of this essay, before the subject is explained.

The presentation of Barbara Kruger's work holds just as much aesthetic and conceptual value in the creation as in the the subject matter. Central to the understanding of ‘The Postmodern Condition’ Lyotard poses an “incredulity towards metanarratives”. What differentiates this book in exploring postmodernism is its ability to allow new presentations of the past and present. Untitled (I SHOP THEREFORE I AM) exits not just as a screen print but can also exist as a paper bag. It morphs, adapts and allows competition with former editions or models of itself. Whatsmore, this piece allows for the possibility of technological innovation in an increasing computerized society and economy. Another foundation upon which ‘The Postmodern Condition is built. Kruger herself has said her work has the ability to exist in a gallery space, a publication, a billboard and now most significantly it can now hold life in perpetuity online. Equally a parallel can be drawn with the work of Bruce Nauman. His piece Double Poke in the Eye II utilizes neon signage, reappropriated it and allows it exist in a new contemporary form. Kruger’s work encomposes postmodernism at its most simple form - rejecting the possibility of skepticism and embracing the future. Her work may be of the present but can newly mobilize the past - as can Nauman's.

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s fifth chapter of the ‘The Postmodern Condition’: The Nature of the Social Bond : The Postmodern Perspective starts to explore how the complex systems of human and social interaction allow for the mechanisation of society to function - emphasising that the self does not amount to much alone. Lyotard asserts that we are part of a vast and complex ever changing system, both economic and socially. Andreas Gursky equally acknowledges this with his piece Ruckblick (Review). His consideration for the political and economic state of Germany is presented in this piece. Whatsmore, by being forced to look at the rear of each Chancellor, paired with the window like overlay, we are forced to accept our role as both an individual and a viewer.

In accepting this, we come to realise that we are in fact part of something bigger, something more complex and largely systematic. We are acknowledging that we may not be the only viewer. That mass media, technology and a shift in cultural thought has an impact on us. This acceptance and realisation of change is fundamental to postmodernism and demonstrates an acknowledgement of the significance of the contemporary.