

# RePositioning,

## The juxtaposition

*Habit easily makes us unaware of profound difference between language as a system of signs and language assumed into use by the individual.*

E. Benveniste  
*'The Nature of Pronouns'*

*Strategies of writing and of reading are forms of cultural resistance. Not only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out (and to show that it can be done), to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archeological stratifications on which they are built; but in affirming the historical existence of irreducible contradictions for women in discourse, they also challenge theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address. So well-established that, paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it—to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (but against the grain).*

Teresa De Lauretis

Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema

of image and text in New York artist Barbara Kruger's recent works demonstrates the 'profound difference' of which Benveniste writes. Her work challenges our unawareness of how language forms the way we understand and perceive the world. In her photo-montage pieces photographs are selected from magazines, books and other sources, then reproduced, cropped, collaged, covered with text, enlarged and framed in red. The size of the works is significant; as large as eight by twelve feet, they effect an immediate response. The grainy textures and bold typeface bring attention to the fabrication of the image and provoke questions about the traditional values of fine art and photography and about our ways of perceiving their objects and contexts. Using the techniques acquired from design and layout work in magazine publishing, Kruger addresses how language and cultural imagery function in supporting and reinforcing social structures and systems of power and control.

The text varies from work to work. 'I am your almost nothing' is lost in a sea of hair and hands and one can barely discern image from text, while 'Your comfort is my silence' cuts boldly across a silhouette of a hatted head gesturing to be silent. The pronouns invite and address the reader but in an ambivalent way: by refusing a definitive subject-positioning of either addressor or addressee, the works open up to

multiple readings. The viewer is invited and provoked into the work in a way that demonstrates her/his own significance as a site where the production of meaning occurs. This recognition of the effects of subject-positioning inscribed in any reading suggests that such positions do not actually exist outside of discourse or social constructions.

Sexuality and capital, the power of patriarchy and the economic as determining factors, and the discourses of science, history and art are thus turned into points of attack; women's oppression, economic oppression, the subjection to gendered positioning, as well as the fetishization of works of art and other objects, can be understood as symptoms that must be problematized.

Kruger's work tampers with those signs active within these discourses that parade as 'nature' and 'reality'. By addressing stereotypic imagery and clichéd language, Kruger disrupts our usual relationships and responses to given meanings, and positions the spectator as an integral part of the work. No longer a receptacle of identificatory and programmed response, she/he is forced to re-think the meaning of these familiar images and words. In effect, detached from their usual contexts, assumed meanings become suspect. By inciting the spectator to re-think her/his presence within that 'social reality' she effects a disturbance in those constructions that work at keeping us all in our 'proper' places.

# No RePose

You invest in the

a conversation with Barbara Kruger

**Monika Gagnon:** Could you tell me how you came to do your photo-montages?

**Barbara Kruger:** When I first entered the art-world I was producing paintings. I chiselled out a career for myself and was quite successful from 1969 to 1974: I showed at the Whitney and I had a gallery here in New York, but I had stopped painting because I was becoming alienated from my own production. I was writing at the same time and this became far more pleasurable for me. When writing I was on the tip of a very particular decision-making process, whereas it took me ten weeks to do each painting and it was all manual labour. Painting was an excellent career for the woman down the block, but not for me. As I proceeded, I realized a preference for combining my writing with photographs. I had studied photography with Diane Arbus and had always been aware of how images work.

I then left New York because I had no money and took a series of visiting artist jobs in California, Ohio and Illinois that lasted about five years. It was when I was at Berkeley in 1976 that I took the photographs that are in *Picture/Readings*. At Berkeley I read a lot (Barthes, Benjamin, etc.) and went to the movies all the time.

Right before I left New York I was part of AMCC (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change) which was composed of artists, writers and Art Language people who had become disenchanted with the art-world. It was a group that met every week for about two and a half years. For a woman it was an impossible context: we were totally absent in terms of speech—it was a situation that disallowed difference completely.

About five months ago, Artist's Space had their tenth annual show and they invited many artists who had exhibited there to show both old and new work. I exhibited a huge painting from 1974—an irregularly-shaped acrylic—and then made a small photo-work of a picture of a woman painting that said, 'YOU PRODUCE AN INFINITE SERIES OF ORIGINALS' and I hung it right next to the painting. Most people didn't know that I used to paint and I thought it was

Monika Gagnon





**Put your money where your mouth is**

important to show it because after all, I wasn't born with a pair of scissors and a photograph in my hands. I wanted to show how artists choose a way of working from an assortment of sanctioned modes.

In Laura Mulvey's article 'Kruger and Burgin' in *Creative Camera*, she talks about your and Burgin's work being at a juncture between aesthetics and politics. She also writes that both your works demonstrate that production at this juncture need no longer be as difficult or didactic as it was during the 1970s. Although one needs a theoretical background to read some of your work, a lot of it is quite accessible. Was this a conscious decision that you made?

People say that I came out of conceptualism, but by the time that conceptual work had peaked, I had only just caught sight of it since I was working in magazines and was totally intimidated by the art-world. When I did see conceptual work, it seemed like a pataphysical grammarian mania; this language that I didn't understand, it wasn't accessible to me at all. But now that I have learned the language, I appreciate and support this work. After doing the *Picture/Readings* photo-text work, I did the work with the black and white images which have one word over them: 'perfect', 'natural', which I showed at PS 1 in Long Island City. I think I'd reached a point where my relationship to the art-world had become very problematic. My need to be critical had become such that I really needed to be more explicit in how my language was being used with these images. That's when I started doing the work that's evolving now—late 1979/1980. It was also a time when I stopped

working for a while, curated some shows and wrote more criticism. My work is mainly informed, not only formally, but intellectually, by my job as a magazine designer for eleven years. The original paste-up stuff which is later blown up is exactly the same as the pages of *Mademoiselle*. As a designer, the type I used was mock-type, ABCD, and when I did layout it didn't say anything. I see my enterprise now to make meaningful precisely what those words did not say, to displace those dominant depictions. That's really the basis of my work.

In England, work on representation is dealt with much more critically than it is here. American work (my own included) is not textually informed in the same way. I have an interest in theory and I'm not defensive about it the way most American artists are. I think it's just some ridiculous Stanley Kowalski complex, this noble savage trip.

In Abigail Solomon-Godeau's 'Playing in the Fields of the Image', she concludes her piece by calling your work that of the artist as 'operator, producer, scriptor and pasticheur'. The 'I' in your text, although frequently engendered and emotional, manages to maintain an anonymous and collectivized character. Why, considering the distinct subjectivity of a lot of feminist work, does your 'I' remain so impersonal?

The reading of the work has to do with the construction of the subject. If I say that I'm interested in ruining some representations, it obviously doesn't mean that I'm only addressing women; or that the 'YOU' is always a man, either. It does mean, however, that there is an allowance for an Other, for different readings. The collectivity which you ask about has to do with the 'WE' which I'm using a lot more in my work. In the show that I did here in New York this year, all the work in the front room of the gallery was addressing some aspect of the economic. Interestingly, many people loved the back room about 'seeing' and 'looking', but somehow, the front room became a bit too much for them. It was important for me to show that it was possible to do critical work about financial expenditure in the midst of a dense market set-up. It was important to acknowledge and address this. Many viewers think that work is either about looking, sexuality or money. But I want to address a broad field, which is inclusive of all these issues and doesn't engage in repressive categorization.

What do you mean by saying it's difficult to do critical work in the midst of a dense market set-up?

Economic context determines production. In New York work becomes spectacular, taking on powerful accoutrements: huge scale, expensive production procedures, etc. In this way, it enters the market and the discourse. My work is for sale! And that's how I and a number of other women working have and will become present in an arena that we've been absent from; we're entering that particular discourse.

Cindy Sherman is getting a lot of exposure with her book; it's all over New York!

And the more places the book is the better as far as I'm concerned. I don't have any romantic ideas about the artist being pure. That's ridiculous, especially for artists who are working within forms that make broad distribution possible.

Doesn't it tame the work in a way? For instance, when a piece like 'YOU INVEST IN THE DIVINITY OF THE MASTERPIECE' gets appropriated by the very structure of the museum you're criticizing?

Let me tell you a story about that piece. The only time that I go to the Museum of Modern Art is to see the movies. One day I went to see this Werner Schroeder movie and I was standing waiting for the elevator for a long time. Right by the elevator, written on the wall, it said, 'masterpieces from the collection' and I thought, God, that's really calling a spade a spade. So I did 'YOU INVEST IN THE DIVINITY OF THE MASTERPIECE' and was very pleased that the Modern bought it! If I had the money at the time and if I'd known that MoMA was going to buy it, I would have made it a much larger work—it's 48 inches by 72 inches, it definitely should be much bigger. MoMA is exactly where the work should be, where it is the most effective in interrupting conventional art-viewing procedures.

The role of the critic is one which contributes to the exposure and legitimacy of certain artists and their work. You write as a film critic; what is your sense of this task and why are you writing about film as opposed to your own field?

I think that television and film are the way that images constitute social life. I'm more interested in the way that those pictures work than I am in categories of painting and sculpture. It doesn't mean that I don't think that critical work can be done in painting. I think it can, but I'm not particularly interested in writing about it. I like to write for certain films that I support. I write for *ArtForum* which is the only largely distributed art magazine that covers modern films at all.

I read a lot of newspapers and I watch the news every night because it enables me to understand how, for instance, the American electorate has become the dumbest electorate in the world; how the spectacle itself turns people into lobotomized, totally unthinking beings...how Ronald Reagan can be president! In short, how images work. Now I feel I can address this more effectively through how a film works than through a painting. And I'm not going to sit around every month writing about art and saying, 'I hate it! I hate it!' That's not the kind of criticism I want to write. In actual fact, I don't write criticism, I write reviews. It's basically journalism, which is a very neglected form. It can be incredibly powerful, but it's too often full of mindless, adjectival tirades. I guess reviewers have to be that way because they have a weekly deadline to become enthusiasts about everything.

Edward Said has addressed the power of journalism—how it is an area where one can effect political 'interference' at a more secular stratum than, say, university literary studies.

I would agree and add that the American public 'sees' what they 'know'. Even reading has become a peripheralized activity. All the more need for critical, transgressive work on the image.

Your work in poster form seems to be a move away from the tradition of 'framing' a work, keeping the work manageable and contained. Yet in the gallery pieces, you've framed the works in very bright red which makes a very strong overture. Could you comment on your use of the frame?

It's a matter of degree, of course, but everything that is offered up to the spectator and is retinally perceived has to have some notion of a semblance of beauty, of whether it works or doesn't work—Walter Benjamin talks about that. I wasn't going to hang the work up with pushpins because I'd been through the alternative space circuit and been invisible for long enough. The question was, how was I going to become visible? I had spent so much time and effort and pleasure in picking and cropping the photographs which had a lot to do with how things look. The frame was a device that allowed the work to enter the market in a particular way. I could have used plexiglass, but it wasn't the same semblance of beauty, it wasn't as powerful. If I was going to mix that ingratiation of wishful thinking with the criticality of knowing better, I had to somehow engage these two issues in the work. I wasn't going to make work that people weren't going to look at, what good is that? I felt that it was an ingratiating device that made it a package and it was also an entrance, a franchise. I wanted the work to be shown in places where the most people would see it, so that it would enter the discourse in the most visible way, where it would be the most effective, because if I couldn't be in these places I wouldn't show in galleries. I would just do the posters, which would get covered up in two minutes, I would borrow some money to do the billboard, do the movie and write criticism. Luckily, the gallery did work out the way I wanted it to, but I wasn't looking for a gallery. When I found a gallery it was when I had decided to stop looking. Consciously, I was getting tired of artists complaining about waiting to be 'done to' by a dealer or 'done to' by a critic. I realized that you have to understand some of that power and use that knowledge to displace that dominance.

That's how it works in film, too. You don't walk into the office of some barracuda at Fox or MGM in Hollywood and talk ideology. The failures and divisiveness of the left are all too often the result of its investment in its own ineffectivity. I'm sick of work that is all effect and no cause (grandiose mythic painting, Spielbergian polytechnics). But *I know* that it's important for work to be both effective and critical. To go back to American politics: the difference between the

Republicans' commercials and the Democrats', for example, is that the Democrats do not understand how to make negativity generative, which is what I'm trying to do in my work. There are ways of being negative which encourage thought, encourage criticality, encourage change. It's not some negative, cynical, self-righteous preaching that says 'this is the right way', but work that engages people. I think that is really important, and I certainly hope that my work conflates negations with moments of movement.



**I am your**

**reservoir of poses**

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