

BARBARA KRUGER

on new forms of activism

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

ALEXIS DAHAN – For the past 30 years, some of your work has publically addressed political threats towards the individual's freedom. How do you pick your battles?

BARBARA KRUGER – I don't feel I'm in a battle. I'm not battling.

ALEXIS DAHAN – So, let's say, how do you pick your subjects or themes?

BARBARA KRUGER – I try to make work about how we are to one another, how we love one another, how we fear one another, how we perhaps hate one another, how we touch one another, how we escape one another, how we desire one another: all that stuff! And to me it's an attempt to create a kind of free-floating anthropology, a sort of cultural and social history. I attempt that. It's like every other process, it's hit and miss. But I think that artists reflect the culture that constructs and contains them, you know, all of us do.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Is there something today that is particularly relevant to your work?

BARBARA KRUGER – Right now I have my computer in front of me, I have a TV in front of me and I'm also looking out the window at a sort of sunny, hazy city. Tomorrow's my last day of teaching at UCLA and I'm getting ready for my show in Oxford. I'm also dealing with getting my car fixed. I'm thinking about Bowe Bergdahl who was captured and released by the Taliban. I'm thinking about his family and home schooling, about the formation of the military, about rural life and marginalization, and about what constitutes "patriotism". I'm thinking about the Republicans, the Tea Party, and the contempt for any form of government. I'm also thinking about the struggles around the autonomy of bodies, whether they're women's or men's. And my own body, whether I feel good today. I'm thinking about sickness and health and wish we could all live forever.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Since your first paste-ups in the early '80s, technology has evolved drastically. Does the technical evolution of your mediums (vinyls, computers, all the digital tools), have affected the content of your work?

BARBARA KRUGER – Well yes and no. It certainly affected the look of my work, because it is made and printed digitally and my videos are also made and edited digitally. And in terms of meaning, things are accelerated now. So-called information (and I say "so-called," because it's crucial to question what all this stuff is: fact, fiction, and all in between. Narrative, gossip, the real, the unreal, the joke, the plea, the plan, the spin and their instant distribution has changed the world in so many ways: many good and productive ways but also many scary ways. One good way is the ability for subcultures to cohere, for the marginalized to feel connected. These threads of connections form new armatures of activism, ideology, belief and doubt. And I think my work addresses that.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Do you feel like your work belongs to today's digital images culture?

BARBARA KRUGER – I didn't grow up going to museums and looking at art. I grew up watching movies and television and my years writing for Artforum focused on television and movies. I've always had a short attention span (which connects me to my students in a lot of ways). No one needs a PhD in conceptual art to understand my work. It works very well online. It reproduces well. It reads quickly, except for my videos, which are time-based. They take more time. But I feel very much a part of this culture in many ways, for good and bad.

ALEXIS DAHAN – You've used many different media: newspapers, magazines, billboards, etc. Are you interested in the new media – the Internet as a public and social space for your work?

BARBARA KRUGER – Of course. You know, people swipe my work all the time, and I love that. I have a very different relationship to copyright than a lot of artists do, because of the methodologies that I've used for years. Three years ago, in Bregenz, I did a work where I went online and found about 550 images made by people who've used the style of my earlier work and I made them into an entire wall piece. I'm interested in how images, rumor, style and innuendo travel online and make histories.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Like a reappropriation of the appropriation.

BARBARA KRUGER – Yeah. Appropriation is a term that critics have used but that I have never used about my work. I've always been critical about conventional notions of copyright. Like when the record industry thought they destroyed Napster. That was just so futile, we all knew that the industry was over. Music, publishing, movies. Huge corporate structures that have either evaporated overnight or morphed into a different kind of dispersal and revenue stream. And that's an interesting thing to me.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Have you ever thought of using the Internet as a space where you would do specific work, as opposed to an actual physical space.

BARBARA KRUGER – I've thought about that for sure. But of course, one of the great things about working online is that you can create lots of configurations and threads that make their meanings, but escape the attention of the so-called "artworld" and I like it that way.

ALEXIS DAHAN – In 1988, in "Picturing 'Greatness'" the exhibition you curated at MoMA, there were a lot of stereotypical portraits of artists and a large text on the wall addressed the mythology of the artist as "a middleman between god and the public." After all your experience and all the work you've done in so many different countries. What do you think is the artist's function? Is it to enlighten and awaken?

BARBARA KRUGER – You know, I think there are as many functions as there are artists. Everyone has their own boat to float. Everybody figures out their own way, their own methods of working. I frequently say that some artists tweak the conventions of culture. I think that making art is creating commentary. It's the ability to objectify, visualize, textualize, or musicalize your experience of the world. Not in an autobiographical way per se, but just by creating commentary about what it might mean to take another breath or live another day.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Is that the Barbara Kruger way?

BARBARA KRUGER – No. One of the ways. You know, I'm sure they'll be others that I might think of, it's just everybody finds their own recipe and that recipe changes with the days and the years as they pass, you know?

ALEXIS DAHAN – In ancient Greece, Socrates was walking around the Agora, spreading doubt and asking questions. You said: "I'm interested in doubt. I'm more interested in questions than answers." It's hard to not make a parallel between your practice and the essence of philosophy. Has art become an extension of philosophy?

BARBARA KRUGER – I don't know the answer to that. I frequently go to artists' lectures at the university and at museums. I prefer being in the audience. Artists create their own realm of interests, vocabularies and concerns. It's part of the anthropology. And to me the art's subculture is a smaller anthropology located inside of larger subcultures. And that's interesting to me, but I can't speak directly about the connection with philosophy. I don't have a deep understanding of the history of that discipline.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Well the fact that your work raises questions and basically contaminates the public space with thoughts and doubts.

BARBARA KRUGER – Doubt to me is compelling and powerful. Doubtlessness is hugely dangerous and scary. It fuels the most repressive regimes, the most punishing belief narratives, the most grandiose ego constructions.

ALEXIS DAHAN – You're also a teacher.

BARBARA KRUGER – I've taught at UCLA for almost a decade. And for artists here in Los Angeles, teaching has always been something that we just do. Mike Kelley was at Art Center. Diana Thater is there now. Stephen Prina and Christopher Williams used to teach at Art Center. Prina is now at Harvard and Williams is head of Photography at the Dusseldorf Academy. But both went to CalArts here in LA. Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden and Nancy Rubens were at UCLA along with John Baldessari who also taught at CalArts. Now my colleagues at UCLA include Mary Kelly, Cathy Opie, Andrea Fraser, Charlie Ray, Rodney MacMillian, Jim Welling, Silke Otto-Knapp, Hirsch Perlman, and Lari Pittmann. Meg Cranston is at Otis. Sam Durant, Tom Lawson and Charles Gaines are at CalArts. Frances Stark, Sharon Lockhart and Shannon Ebner are at USC. And there are so many more.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Why do you teach?

BARBARA KRUGER – I teach at a public university, it's not a fancy expensive private art school. Many of my students are first generation to go to college and first generation to speak English. I think it's great to teach at a public university. It's part of the engagement of my work. It's about a conversation and reciprocity. I find it both engaging and fulfilling. It's not like in many art schools in Europe where you go into a classroom once every three weeks and

say 'Make that green.' UCLA is part of the state of California and the teaching schedule is demanding. Students are undergraduates and graduates it's 3 and 4 days a week with each class being 4 hours long. It's a lot.

ALEXIS DAHAN – You've always mentioned that architecture was your first love. Could you explain this love story?

BARBARA KRUGER – Yeah, I grew up in Newark, New Jersey, which is a very poor city. We had a two-room apartment and my parents and I would always fantasize about living in a house. We'd go and look at these houses that we could never afford and I would draw these developments and dream houses. So architecture was always an interest of mine, because even as a young person, I understood that the walls that contain us are huge determine the feel of our days and nights.

ALEXIS DAHAN – How about today?

BARBARA KRUGER – What's really fulfilling that I get to engage large spaces and do installations in them. Furthermore, being in Los Angeles, which has such a history of Modernism, in both residential and public structures, is tremendously compelling to me. But of course, shelter is a huge issue of contention, especially in large American urban centers, where real estate values tell of the harrowing disappearance of the poor and the middle and working classes from cities. The 1% of the 1% have established their domains leaving no room for the historically rich gathering of differences that once constituted urban life.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Do you have a particular process when you're given an architectural space to work with?

BARBARA KRUGER – Well, it helps to go to the space, of course. I don't have a million assistants and I don't build models. I just know what areas I want to engage. I need incredibly precise measurements to try and sync up how I want to visually and "retinally" engage the viewers. One great advantage about digital printing and working in video, is that I have a chance to do these immersive environments, which are huge opportunities for me. I never thought anyone would know my name or know my work and it's thrilling that things have played out the way they have.

ALEXIS DAHAN – What do you think made these opportunities come true?

BARBARA KRUGER – I've said this before: to me, what is seen and what is not seen is always a confluence of hard work, insistence, historical circumstances and fortuitous social relations. You know, it has so much to do with the connections that are made, the people we know, the moments that congeal and allow us to be known or not known. Unlike many people, I don't think it's necessarily because we are "great" or we are not "great." It's far more complicated than that, and it has to do with the kindness and cruelties of social relations combined of the power and rigor of our work.

ALEXIS DAHAN – It's a lottery then.

BARBARA KRUGER – In many ways, yes.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Something I also wanted to address is pleasure, because whenever I see your work, my first reaction is one of pleasure. Does pleasure play a role in your process or has something to do with your intention?

BARBARA KRUGER – Pleasure? Absolutely. Pleasure, and also laughter, I mean, thank you for saying that, to me, there's both pleasure and irony. A- In being alive (thank goodness we're alive having this conversation) and B- with the fact that you can engage someone visually, and make these retinal constructions that have to do with the intellect (or the lack of it), with seduction and with denial, with laughter and with pain. Irony plays a huge part in my practice, in a critical way. If we couldn't see the world with some degree of irony, we might as well just kill ourselves now.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Why?

BARBARA KRUGER – Because there is so much tragedy everywhere. And most of that tragedy happens in places where irony is grounds for imprisonment, the same way that doubt is.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Have you ever considered working in a place where there is real oppression?

BARBARA KRUGER – Well there is real oppression in some of the places where it's most hidden. But I know what you mean. I try to be as productive as I can in places where I feel my work can have an engagement and a meaning. And one of the great things about digital culture is that my work has floated to lots of places. It has made connections with people, especially young people, especially people of color and women. I've been incredibly gratified by that. As for myself, I have a hard time with the notion of cultural tourism, where an artist will go to a place and do a quick read for a day or two and then make a pronouncement about that culture. That's so arrogant and creepy.

ALEXIS DAHAN – How do you think your work is being perceived?

BARBARA KRUGER – To certain people, I'm so "important" and "major" and to others I'm "minor", a "hack" and "so over". I'm fascinated by the powers of judgement and taste: by how they can be informed by both rigorous critical thinking AND envy and pathology. I think adoration is so much like contempt. They're both extreme belief structures. There is a difference between a figure and a body. I'm glad that I'm a figure in certain circles, but I'm also a human being and I don't need that kind of adoration and sycophantic acolyte stuff. I hope that my work cuts through that grease. I did a work years ago that said "We don't need another hero" and I still believe that.

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