



1983

Gelatin silver prints (three)

Framed (a): 49 x 97 x 2 inches
(124.5 x 246.4 x 5.1 cm)

Framed (b): 49 x 97 x 2 inches
(124.5 x 246.4 x 5.1 cm)

Framed (c): 49 x 97 x 2 inches
(124.5 x 246.4 x 5.1 cm)

BARBARA KRUGER
American

Gift of Henry S. McNeil, Jr.,
1985, 1985-36-1a--c

LET'S LOOK

Describe the person in this picture. Who could she be?

Why is the mirror broken?

What is "circumstantial evidence?" (Use a dictionary.)

Which words are pronouns?
To whom do you think they refer? Why?

How do you think Barbara Kruger made this picture? Explain why.

How are the words arranged on the picture? How would you describe the typeface? What feelings does the design of the words give you?

What does this combination of image and words communicate to you?

Imagine a man's or child's face in this picture. How would this change the artwork's meaning?

UNTITLED (WE ARE YOUR CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE)

In this picture, a black-and-white photograph of a woman's face is reflected in a broken mirror and accompanied by the sentence, "We are your circumstantial evidence." Using a photograph she found, perhaps in a magazine or newspaper, Barbara Kruger added the black-and-white words marching down the center of the picture in narrow rectangles. What could they mean? "Circumstantial evidence" is the legal term for proof of a fact based on the circumstances or situation surrounding it. Is the beautiful young woman's face reflected in the mirror fragments circumstantial evidence? Why is the image of her face in pieces as if it had fallen and shattered or been struck with force? What happened? Who did this and why?

As in much of her other artwork, Kruger uses a phrase without identifying the speaker. Through the pronouns "we" and "your," she engages us in a conversation, but lets us decide to whom these words refer. We may respond to the words differently, depending on our sex, race, ethnic background, or age. In the 1980s, feminist artists like Kruger started using photography to expose society's power structure and to question the limited, stereotyped roles assigned to women. In the United States, feminism had exploded in the 1960s, when social critics began pointing out the preferences given to white men in business, sports, health care, education, and the art world. In this picture, with its legal language and violent overtones, Kruger demands that we become aware of women's social roles and status, which are still disturbing.

Kruger uses techniques she learned as a graphic designer (a commercial artist who creates book, magazine, and CD covers and advertisements with text and visual images). She attracts and focuses our attention by enlarging and cropping, or trimming, the photographs and by choosing her words carefully. The word size and

placement and the Futura typeface all suggest boldness, clarity, and speed. At first glance, Kruger's picture seems to communicate a simple message, like an advertisement. After a longer look, we may see that Kruger is questioning the mass media's stereotypical presentation of women. The woman in the photograph is not a real person. She is a glamorous fashion model with a perfect face, similar to a Barbie doll. We must decide who destroyed her—Kruger, an angry man, the mass media, or a society that discriminates against women?

Many of us do not expect to see pictures that look like advertisements in art museums. Like Pop artist James Rosenquist, Kruger appropriates visual images, using other people's photographs. Her goal is to question traditional ideas of beauty and originality and the differences between fine art (art in museums) and commercial art (art in advertising and popular culture). Kruger deliberately makes art that is somewhere in between, art that is challenging, puzzling, and political.

ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Born in 1945 in Newark, New Jersey, Barbara Kruger was an only child. Her mother was a legal secretary, and her father was a chemical technician. After high school, Kruger attended Syracuse University for one year, returning home when her father died. She spent the following year at Parsons School of Design in New York City, studying with photographer Diane Arbus and graphic designer and former art director Marvin Israel. When Kruger became bored with school, Israel encouraged her to prepare a portfolio. Soon she was hired as a graphic designer at Mademoiselle magazine. Within a year, at age twenty-two, she was promoted to the position of chief designer. After four years at Mademoiselle, Kruger had earned enough money to work part-time as a freelance picture editor. This gave her time to make art that expressed her own ideas and political beliefs.

In the 1960s, she explored traditional women's materials and techniques, such as cloth, sewing, crocheting, and weaving. At a time when men's paintings and sculptures were considered more important than woman-made crafts, Kruger hoped to earn equal recognition for women's work. Then, in the 1970s, she began writing poetry, working with other New York artists, exhibiting her artwork, and teaching at several universities. These experiences changed her approach to creating art. Kruger began making single-image photographs superimposed with a work or phrase. For example, she added the label "Container" to a photograph of a ranch house and the word "Perfect" to a photograph of folded hands.

Kruger's first big success came in 1981, when she participated in a group exhibition at a New York gallery. Her high-contrast, black-and-white photographs—with their bold-faced slogans and bright red frames—caused a sensation. After this success, Kruger was invited to organize and show her work in important exhibitions. Her images appeared on billboards around the world, including Times Square in New York City. When she participated in panel discussions on art, crowds of young artists, especially women, attended.

Besides producing art that hangs on walls, Kruger creates installation art, in which she covers an entire space (floor, walls, and ceiling) with words and photographs. She designs posters, magazine covers, and book covers that highlight controversial issues and people. Her sculpture has critiqued the commercialization of Santa Claus and Jesus Christ. Her film and video reviews and her monthly television column titled "Remote Control" have appeared in Artforum magazine. Although her bold images and political texts typically criticize society, some are humorous. For example, the 1987 photograph of a hand holding a card includes the words, "I shop therefore I am."

WOMEN, ART, AND POLITICS

In the 1970s, many women questioned their traditional roles as wives and mothers, and seized the same rights and freedoms as men had. In the United States, this revolution—called the Women's Liberation movement—coincided with the Civil Rights movement. Both brought new energy to women artists of all races and ethnicities. They created cooperative galleries for women, started feminist programs in colleges and universities, and made artwork in various styles and approaches.

Despite the advances of the 1970s, in 1982 the Equal Rights Amendment, which was first proposed in 1923 and states that men and women have the same rights under the United States Constitution, was defeated. Two years later, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City held an international survey of painting and sculpture in which only 13 of 169 artworks were by women. In protest, some women artists formed the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous, activist group dedicated to fighting discrimination. Guerrillas are soldiers who fight in small groups inside enemy territory by making surprise attacks. The Guerrilla Girls operate like masked male heroes, using humor such as wearing gorilla masks (a play on words) to expose inequalities and rescue women artists from oblivion. Today, they still produce witty, provocative posters, make public appearances wearing their masks, and publish books that revise traditional, white-male-dominated versions of art history.

CONNECT AND COMPARE

- Compare portrayals of women and men in artworks throughout history.
- What is propaganda? When is art with a political message propaganda? What political messages do public sculptures in your community suggest?
- Look at works by contemporary feminist artists Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, and Carrie Mae Weems. How did advertising, popular culture, and social issues inspire their works?

RELATED ART PROJECT

Identify several issues confronting society today in newspapers and magazines. Choose one that is meaningful to you and write several paragraphs explaining different points of view on it. Find a black-and-white photograph and a word or phrase that expresses your point of view. Using a photocopier, try cropping and enlarging the image. Use peel-off letters or a computer printout to experiment with typefaces and create the words. Which issues and points of view are expressed by the class? Do any communicate a point of view that you oppose?

This object is included in Five Women Artists, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.