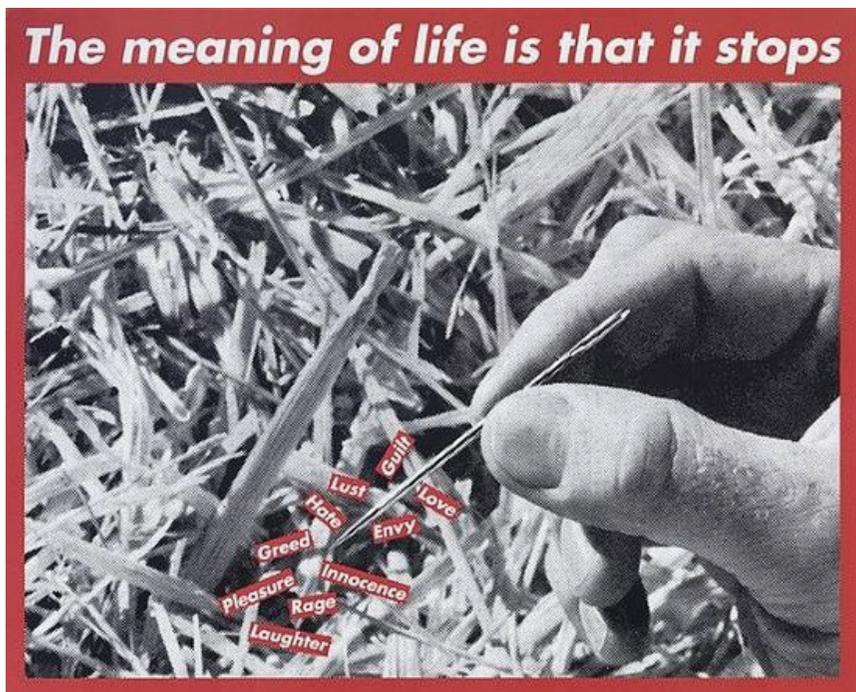


## SMALL RIOTS REVIEWING AN ARTWORK BY BARBARA KRUGER

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**Abstract** To what extent can art still be subversive in the age of neoliberalism? Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (The Meaning of Life is that it stops)" shows that there is no easy answer to this question. My critical reading of the artwork examines the contrast between its visual appearance, congruent with advertisements in consumer societies, and its more earnest critique of their practices. Ultimately, I argue that Kruger seeks to do what any commercial seduction deliberately fails at: to press the viewer to make up their own mind, while admitting – in the spirit of postmodernism – that it is itself perhaps but another form of lure and persuasion, inevitably caught up in the system it sets out to oppose.

At first glance, it looks rather ordinary. Cheap even – just another instance of flashy visuals requesting a splinter of our ever more divided attention. Somehow familiar. Just not in this composition, not with this status conferred upon it. Then again, perhaps this should not even come as a big surprise in an age where art, by the pointing of a finger (although, of course, not just anyone's), can come to mean virtually anything in a process of selection that invokes sacredness at the same moment as it undermines it: the spectacle. Indeed, one might rightfully wonder how a single artwork can reassert its own potency against such circumstances at all.

Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (The Meaning of Life is that it stops)" approaches the question of how an individual artwork may maintain an effect of its own in a society of spectacles by picking out specific visual elements from the artist's surroundings which, put together, construct a whole that may follow entirely different rules than its individual, appropriated parts. What Walter Benjamin in the 1930s called the loss of an artwork's "aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction has been irrevocably completed in the 21st century, in which society has become almost over-saturated with the usage and influence of technology in everyday life. Kruger's artwork openly exhibits this loss; in fact, her work seems to be downright revelling in the loss of the "aura" by showcasing it in so many aspects. The poignancy of her message is communicated, for example, with the choice of photographic print as its medium. As Benjamin had already observed at the onset of the large-scale popular diffusion of photography and film by means of new technologies art is no longer destined to remain in its initial environment. Being confined to a church or a museum for their display, artworks retain their unique nature of being bound to a particular time and place that constitute them as originals and inspire reverence and contemplation. However, as they become free to travel into living rooms, onto billboards, and nowadays, those digital spaces that do not even exist in physical boundaries but only through our clicks

and settings, internet searches and iPhone screensavers, the loss of the artwork's "aura" advances accordingly and indeed completely dissolves, rendering questions of authenticity obsolete. In Kruger's work, the image's individual elements have been lifted out of their original contexts and into a new one as the artist saw fit. For instance, the picture's caption is a quotation commonly attributed to strange-troubled-genius-writer Franz Kafka: The meaning of life is that it stops. This quote now finds itself cast in Kruger's signature font in a way that epitomises supposedly sensational but in fact banal news in its red letters on a white ground. The presentation is reminiscent of the almost aggressive style of advertisements, tabloids and the like (indeed, some of Kruger's more recent works appear in urban settings inbetween and as normal commercials).

The picture of a needle in the hay, in its grainy texture and stark lighting ignorant of professional subtleties, has in all probability been appropriated from another source as well. These acts of robbery, displacement, and insertion into something different become even more apparent in the smaller bits of texts appearing to be literally cut out of another place and glued into Kruger's piece. The artwork is not dated, but fits the style and method Kruger employed during the 1980s. During this time she became known for pairing mass media images with her own commentary in bold fonts. Later she moved on to include in her oeuvre work produced in other spheres of art such as installation. As a trained designer, Kruger started out working in the magazine industry before making use of her graphic design skills to create her own artworks. Considered a member of the Pictures Generation alongside figures like Jenny Holzer and Louise Lawler, Kruger has throughout her career been addressing concerns of feminism as well as consumer society and their intercepts, for example in the manifestations of power relations and social constructions of desire and sexuality in mass media (Kruger, Alberro, & Foster, 2010).

In Kruger's process of appropriation, it seems as though nothing is of a higher order – neither praised literary figures nor mass culture for sale, neither "laughter" nor "hate" – everything is clumped together, part of a haystack an individual is patiently picking at with a needle in the hope of pulling out a manifestation of one of the big concepts of life. The artwork demystifies the grandeur of these concepts, however, by representing them as mere snippets, each identical to the others. Thus, the "universal equality of things" envisioned as the masses' desire by Benjamin has been achieved. In his theory, this refers to the increasingly intense urge on the part of the masses to bring a particular object closer to them by means of reproduction, which contributes to the loss of the "aura".

In Kruger's art, the collapse of distance through the possibility of endless appropriation has above all resulted in eerie impersonality. This does not only

concern the authorship of her own work, which retreats into and thereby emphasises the frame from which it is fashioned, but also the very feelings that are mentioned on the slips of paper in the picture, such as pleasure, greed or lust. In life, such feelings do not come to us as concepts – they are subject in the first place to perception, not abstraction. Yet increasingly, these direct experiences have become mediated at almost the very moment they take place by desires that are not necessarily ours, but that claim they could rightfully be. Advertisements provide us consumers with embodiments of the ideal family, couple, home, product, whilst at the same time trying to persuade us that these models are so attractive, convenient and within our reach that they might as well be our own. There are certain things we seem to have to want or need as young, privileged, ambitious people on the path to achievement which include but are definitely not limited to: a relationship, good grades, a passport filled with exotic stamps and a CV boasting internships and extra-curriculars. Rather than questioning them right at the start, we believe we can still decide to discard them in favour of something else once we have attained them, although it is uncertain whether that is ever really going to happen. The circumstances of neoliberalism hold out the promise of brilliance and success but seem to add always yet another step in describing how to get there, urging to undertake just one more investment that will secure accomplishment in the long run, and make us more qualified, more secure and more beautiful in the meantime, which in fact stretches on indefinitely.

Kruger's artwork gives no indication whether "pleasure", "innocence" or any other feeling mentioned will – once we come across it – merely present itself to us as a preconceived notion that we must gratefully accept (precisely as only a word on a paper slip), or whether we will be able to recognise and receive it as something belonging to ourselves (to grasp this word from the mind's eye and watch it grow and take shape in our own life). We also cannot be sure which of the emotions we will precisely encounter, although Kruger seems to suggest there is little fundamental difference between them in any case. Indeed, there is even a possibility that we may not come across any of them at all, small, flimsy and hidden in the haystack as they are. Taken together, all these details imply that we have in fact little control over our lives, but are only vaguely aware thereof. This may shed some light on how to understand the artwork's title.

Kruger proclaims that the meaning of life is that it "stops", as something which happens to us and it is that act itself, which we have no power to direct or decide upon, that counts. Does this mean that all efforts for self-deliberation are destined to fail, that we should not even try to succeed at anything anymore? Yes and no. On the one hand, there is in fact no hope that the small, individual actions that constitute our lives will end up being significant as such. On

the other hand, the fact that it is through “stopping“ that life becomes meaningful indicates that there must have been an attempt to truly be alive and pursue things before. It is therefore dependant on our constant framing and seeking to realise ambitions up until the point when they are suddenly wiped out. Similarly, perhaps the only way in which the given artwork can itself be meaningful is by proclaiming the supposed meaninglessness of everything that lies beyond its own domain of critique, but of which it, ultimately and paradoxically, still forms a part. In positioning itself in opposition to hegemonic discourse, the artwork presents itself as removed from the former, as the possibility to formulate such a judgment in the first place presumably exists only in relative isolation to the object of criticism itself. At the same time, the discourse the artwork sets out to contest is so all-encompassing that there cannot be a state of absolute isolation from its reach. For example, already in creating the work, Kruger is participating in modes of production and distribution prescribed by the system.

Hence, at the same time that the artist is revealing her message, it is questionable which position she assumes herself. As Benjamin already anticipated, the loss of the aura, while having come about as a result of the people’s wishes, may have precarious consequences depending on who has the means to control and make use of it. Facism in particular makes use of art in order to aestheticize politics, reintroducing the “aura“ into political life, which for Benjamin always results in war. Ultimately, the destruction of humanity itself becomes an aesthetic experience. According Benjamin, the possible redemption to this danger of exploitation lies in a politicisation of art by Communism. This means that art is reconstructed as a number of fragments which can be used and recombined by an active user; an object that is characterised by its disjointedness and thus opposes the Fascist culture of spectacle, in which the constructed nature of the artistic whole is obscured and naturalized. However, it is questionable how one could adapt his clear-cut dichotomy of Fascism and Communism to present times as the main bodies to exercise power have transcended national alliances and institutional frameworks. Today.transnational companies shield from us consumers the exact details of their activities and above all keep transparent only that they are following the formula to profit, nowadays so ubiquitous that some might claim it cannot even be considered an ideology of its own. Under these circumstances, it is far from certain whether politicised art can still be produced to disturb the increasingly homogeneous field of ideology.

How, then, can Kruger respond to this situation? Whether she likes it or not, she is part of the capitalist society she sets out to criticise, and history – in particular the failure of the avant-garde to integrate art into life – has shown that there is no vantage point from which art can be seen as functioning auto-

mously from pre-established institutions. The artwork in question is on sale, “price upon request”; the image that pops up most often when searching for it on the internet leads directly to the gallery’s posh website. It may just be a typical irony of postmodernism that one simply cannot fully escape or indeed sustains precisely the totalising force which one seeks to resist. But Kruger takes into account and attempts to counter this irony, for while she cannot control whether or not her work will inevitably end up getting bought and sold, she can – and does – comment on exactly this practice.

Kruger is aware of the fact that her works will enter the circulation as commodities at the very moment she produces them. However, by cladding them in the latter’s attire, she only underlines their difference to them. The same letters and colours scream out a message in an attempt to seduce us of their offer, but Kruger’s art is fully aware – and seeks to instill a similar awareness in the viewer – that it possesses none of the qualities that would usually tempt us to buy into its slogan, that it comes with none of the perks that mark the purchase of other products: a shiny instant of consolidating status or identity and glossing over anxieties that may surface again at any given later time. On the contrary, the artwork voices these anxieties, but while doing so, it does not promise any solution or direct consolation, as Kruger recognises that in the system in which her art operates, relieving such anxieties ultimately only serves to further consolidate the status quo.

While the slogans of neoliberalism tell us that we can be anything we want as long as we only work hard enough for it, specifically for women, “anything we want” more often than not refers to a life that is spent cooking dinner and raising children while maintaining respectable jobs and perfect hair. If anything, such normative expectations set us all up to fail equally, although some people might be better at hiding or denying this than others. Contrary to dominant discourse, however, Kruger does not tell us we can do anything we desire, because she recognises this as the very deception on which the current system is operating. What she tries to show us is that there might be a way to be subsumed by the system in place only to come up with a most delicate gesture of resistance – a change which, by virtue of its very simplicity, almost invites its own obliteration at first glance but thereby ultimately secures its endurance.

In her work, Kruger also elucidates the formerly drawn categories of meaning and lack thereof in individual lives, for now it becomes clear why self-deliberation is so important in the face of an ultimate collapse of the meaning of singular actions when life ends. If the status of her art as a commodity – in fact, its very existence as anything at all – will eventually be meaningless, this opens up the opportunity to cater directly to the practice of commodification in place (as con-

temporary artists such as Takashi Murakami are arguably doing) just as it enables entering into an act of resistance against it. Kruger does so by likening the work to a mass product, pointing out that her artistic production is taking place in an established system of norms, capital and social relations that may never be fully overcome. The artwork seems almost to simultaneously question and advocate the message delivered by its caption: to at once bow to the inescapability of death – a slate finally wiped clean which can, however, no longer be used as the surface for any new creation and to ask “So what?”, and to attempt to identify and tug at the seams of a status quo that seeks to present itself as unchangeable. Altogether a bit of a twisted logic, but it works. Above all, it serves as a reminder of the possibilities that, though inevitably limited, are available to us, and that whether or not we make use of them is up to us, not any prescribed rule that tries to gain our favour, just as Kruger is and yet of course, infinitely differently - here again, she walks the tightrope between postmodern dilemma and delight.

Kruger does not deny that she may have a stake in our consumer behaviour or pretend to be neutral in a sphere which exerts its influence on everything anyway, but her artwork still attempts to speak truthfully from and about the imperfect place it inhabits; possibly the only place which it can occupy at all. Her work reveals itself as a thread of the all-encompassing narrative in the midst of which it exists, but a thread which at the same time lays bare stories that are otherwise silenced. And here is what it says: I am me, and you, and also the other that persists in spite – and because of – all apparent sameness. And here is all it asks: to listen and to see where it leads us, this answer to a question we could not find the words for before, which we can even now perhaps barely articulate, but whose weight we suddenly feel on our tongues, waiting to grow into a riot strong enough to enter this world.

## References

Kruger, B., Alberro, A., & Foster, H. (2010). *Barbara Kruger*. New York: Rizzoli.