

***Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground): A Visual
Analysis Using Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology
Framework***

XU CONG

Assignment 1: Visual Analysis Essay

MECM20014: Visual Communication and Digital Media

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28/03/2024

Required words: 1200

Actual words: 1255

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“*Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)*” is a seminal 1989 silkscreen portrait by artist, feminist, and activist Barbara Kruger (Figure 1). The artwork features a striking juxtaposition of a fragmented female face overlaid with a bold red strip of text declaring, “Your Body is a Battleground.” This compelling composition not only foregrounds feminist issues but also boldly contests the norms and hierarchies of Western art traditions, as noted by Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek (2019).

Figure 1

Kruger, B. (1989). *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* [Photographic silkscreen on vinyl]. The Broad Museum, Los Angeles, CA, United States.



Employing Gillian Rose's visual methodology framework offers profound insights into Kruger's piece, presenting scholars with a robust toolkit for analyzing visual materials. Rose (2016, p. 25) delineates four crucial sites of visual analysis: production, the image itself, circulation, and audiencing, and introduces three modalities within these sites: technological, compositional, and social. This essay endeavors to unravel the layers of meaning in Kruger's work, exploring each site and modality within Rose's framework and their interplay.

Rose (2016) contends that the socio-political contexts underpinning the creation of an image are crucial for its interpretation. This viewpoint underscores the significance of exploring the historical backdrop that shaped Kruger's creative vision. The year 1989 was notable for widespread protests against a series of anti-abortion legislations that eroded the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision. In harmony with the Women's March on Washington and its firm stance on reproductive rights, Kruger crafted an unforgettable visual statement (The Broad, 2018). Echoing the distinctive style seen in Kruger's other notable works, such as "I shop therefore I am" (1987) (Figure 2) and "You are not yourself" (1981), this particular piece offers a sharp critique of mainstream media. By reimagining common imagery and pairing it with powerful text, it delves into themes of feminism, personal freedom, and the critique of consumer culture.

Figure 2



According to Rose (2016), the visual elements of an image itself play a crucial role in shaping its meanings. The image in question, featuring a dichromatic portrayal of a woman's face, immediately draws our attention—especially her eyes, which lock onto ours with unwavering intensity. These eyes, central to the image's composition, serve as a compelling visual metaphor that echoes the societal tensions surrounding women's rights in the United States. Eisenbarth and Alpers (2011) have discussed how eyes can convey a broad spectrum of emotions, including anger, sadness, and fear. Here, the woman's direct gaze is not just a symbol of defiance; it also subtly hints at the emotional and psychological wounds that society often ignores or sidelines. Furthermore, this bold confrontation challenges us to interact with the artwork from a deeply introspective point of view, encouraging a dialogue where the subject (representing a larger slice of American society) critically observes the viewer. This inversion disrupts the traditional viewer-subject dynamic, challenging the societal and cultural threats to women's rights and bodily autonomy perpetuated by the male gaze (Allen, 2018).

Kruger further bridges the connection with the audience through the strategic use of the word "your," emphasizing the eyes and text as central elements of the image. Their significance evolves into a dual call for accountability and alert, directing focus toward the contentious issue of reproductive rights while urging viewers to introspect about their own positions and reactions to women's issues. Kruger herself remarked, "I think I developed language skills to deal with threat. It's the girl thing to do – you know, instead of pulling out a gun" (Mitchell & Kruger, 1991, p. 9), underlining the strategic use of verbal expression as a form of resistance and dialogue. Additionally, the image's division by a sharp line draws the viewer's attention to the perfectly symmetrical faces, with the eyebrows serving as mirrored counterparts. Morra and Kruger (1995) argue that this bisected, half-solarized photograph, delineated into opposing sides and ensnared behind red bars, hints at the onset of a technologically dominated regime. Kruger's work, with its retro-futuristic propaganda elements, invokes the dread of illegal abortion and, more broadly, the perilous state of bodily

autonomy under an authoritarian surveillance society, capturing the gender-specific consequences of such an environment.

Exploring the site of circulation, as per Rose's framework, provides further insights into the significance of an image's dissemination. In 1989, Kruger's initiative to print and wheat-paste her designs from the same series across New York brought the menacing uniformity and dystopian undertones of those cropped faces into public view. This act stood in stark contrast to the idealized and innocent portrayal of the fetus by anti-abortion organizations, often depicted in their poster campaigns. This juxtaposition became notably pronounced (Figure 3) in 1990 when, shortly after the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, showcased a horizontal version of "Your Body is a Battleground" on its billboards, adjacent spaces were quickly filled with advertisements showcasing eight-week-old fetuses, aimed at promoting "the pro-life vote" (Ruiz, 2020). Similarly, Kruger's work has been embraced as a rallying cry in marches and rallies dedicated to women's rights (Figure 4).

Figure 3



Figure 4



In the era of the digital revolution, Kruger has seamlessly extended her influence beyond traditional formats, reinventing collage as a vibrant visual language of the 21st century through innovative uses of ‘replay’ video formats and LED technology (Figure 5). The advent of smartphones, the ubiquity of social media platforms, and the application of big data have ushered in new avenues for the circulation of Kruger’s works. According to Zappavigna (2016), platforms like Instagram leverage user preferences to tailor content delivery, not only broadening the audience for Kruger’s art but also encouraging active engagement, sharing, and reinterpretation by viewers. Despite Kruger’s own absence from social media, her work adeptly captures the essence of social media storytelling, especially evident in the presentation of her Chelsea exhibition. This reflects her keen understanding and innovative engagement with contemporary modes of communication (Scott Lynch, 2022).

Figure 5



Within Rose’s analytical framework, the site of audiencing is crucial for unraveling the interpretations and meanings attributed to an image. Initially, some interpreted Kruger’s work as mirroring society’s reductive perception of women as mere objects of beauty. However, Kruger challenges this interpretation in “Love for Sale,” where she is quoted criticizing the notion that her work perpetuates stereotypes, describing her thematic focus as “figures without bodies” (Kruger & Linker, 1996, p. 37). Despite the passage of 25 years, the resonance and relevance of Kruger’s message remain undiminished. Caldwell (2018) points out the continued significance of Kruger’s work in light of recent events, such as the U.S. House of Representatives’ decision to overturn a Texas abortion bill and Hillary Clinton’s support for women’s “constitutional right to make their own reproductive choices.” Re-engaging with Kruger’s seminal work not only encourages public reflection and dialogue on pressing social issues but also showcases the profound societal influence of art in the digital era.

In sum, this paper utilizes Rose’s visual methodology framework to dissect Kruger’s iconic work, exploring its aspects of production, the image itself, circulation, and audience reception. Through this lens, Kruger’s art emerges as a vibrant manifestation

of the feminist art movement's objectives, particularly in its capacity to challenge viewers' perceptions and foster discussions on themes of gender and consumerism. Moreover, the enduring relevance and impact of Kruger's work are emphasized, both within the artistic domain and in wider societal discourse. Kruger's creations transcend mere visual artistry to serve as potent instruments of social and cultural critique, enriching public dialogue and action on critical issues surrounding gender, power, and consumerism.

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