

November 2010 Spotlight Essay  
Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1989–90  
by Bradley Bailey, Saint Louis University



Barbara Kruger's *Untitled* of 1989–90 is a prime example of her immediately recognizable aesthetic, in which familiar yet oblique phrases are set against an appropriated, generally black-and-white photograph. In *Untitled*, she presents a closely cropped photograph of the head and surrounding torso of a coiled snake. A bold red border frames the image, which is flanked above and below by two red text boxes, each containing a phrase printed in white in the typeface with which she has become inextricably associated, the eminently legible Futura Bold Oblique, a simple, highly geometric, sans serif design that is commonly used in advertising.<sup>i</sup> According to Kruger, she uses the aesthetic of advertising design specifically as a “device to get people to look at the picture, and then to displace the conventional meaning that that image usually carried with perhaps a number of different readings.”<sup>ii</sup> Kruger juxtaposes stock and editorial photographs taken from advertisements with brief, generally suggestive texts (“I shop therefore I am,” “make my day,” “your body is a battleground”), pitting polarities against one other (contemporary / classic, high / low, personal / political) in ways that create new commentaries through their myriad levels of association. In the box above the snake’s head reads the phrase “don’t tread on me,” while the text in the box at the bottom offers the words “don’t tempt me.” In spite of the latter plea (or threat), it is indeed tempting to locate the link that binds the three main elements that would provide the content or meaning of the work. Kruger’s methodology, however, resists such a traditional approach to reading and interpreting visual culture.

At nearly twelve feet high, the immensity of Kruger's *Untitled* screenprint is reminiscent of the banners and billboards that have featured her work worldwide. In addition to appearing in traditional museum and gallery spaces, her art has been equally effective and arguably more complex when exhibited in or on customarily non-art spaces and contexts, such as bills posted on public edifices, billboards, and inside subway cars, or on common consumer goods such as t-shirts, coffee cups, and matchbook covers, all venues where an unsuspecting public is generally less prepared to be confronted with messages that generate more questions than answers. Screenprinting itself, a process through which an image is produced by forcing ink through a woven mesh screen, was used almost exclusively as a commercial medium before Andy Warhol popularized it in the 1960s.<sup>iii</sup> And rather than printing on the more traditional canvas, Kruger chose to use vinyl, a durable plastic support that, like screenprinting, is better known for its commercial applications and is regularly used for large-scale outdoor signage.

The materials used in *Untitled* exemplify Marshall McLuhan's adage that "the medium is the message," by which he suggests that the content of the message cannot be interpreted independently of the medium through which that content is circulated.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, Kruger's signature aesthetic reflects McLuhan's concept on multiple levels, as it acknowledges that both materials and language are part of larger systems of signification that are subject to interpretation and deconstruction. In a sense, the artist's work is a confluence of two radically different vectors of meaning: advertising, which seeks to persuade and sell, and art, which seeks to provoke thought and generate discourse. Counted amongst the members of the generation of artists who emerged at the time of the highly influential exhibition *Pictures* in 1977, Kruger started to establish her aesthetic in the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Jean Baudrillard's philosophy regarding mass media consumption and the simulacrum, as well as Jacques Derrida's concern with deferred meaning and the deconstruction of text, she began to explore an aesthetic that sought not only to question the nature of originality—a foundational aspect of modernism—but also the underlying structures of power that seek to control language and its meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The dislocation stemming from the simultaneous cohesion and detachment of image and text in *Untitled* is carried over into the experience of the viewer, whose traditional role in processing art is to find the relationship between the image(s) and text(s) that will provide meaning. The stern warning “don’t tread on me” is tempered dramatically by the more vulnerable—perhaps even seductive—tone of the plea “don’t tempt me” below, resulting in a dichotomy of meaning that is mediated by the central image. Read in association with the snake, the phrase “don’t tempt me” conjures numerous Judeo-Christian themes, from the Temptation of Eve by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, to the line from the Lord’s Prayer, “lead us not into temptation.”

This dichotomy of strength versus vulnerability is of particular interest to second-generation feminists like Kruger, whose work explores how the power structures that inform language are gendered. For example, her 1987 *Untitled (We Don’t Need Another Hero)* demonstrates how clichéd gender roles and stereotypes are dictated and reinforced through the media by superimposing the phrase “we don’t need another hero” onto an image such as one would see on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* by Norman Rockwell, of a young girl cooing over a little boy’s effort to flex his bicep muscle. Such works not only remind the viewer that the very systems of signification that Kruger uses cannot be understood outside of the prevailing power structure, but also reveal the irony that her textual commentary cannot exist outside of the larger sociocultural discourse in which she must by necessity participate. Critical to this fluid, negotiable, and polysemous signification is Kruger’s characteristic use of pronouns such as *you / your* and, in the case of *Untitled* of 1989–90, *me / my*, which not only creates a polarity or protagonist / antagonist relationship within the narrative, but it also decenters the viewer’s position within the narrative in accordance with the viewer’s perceived sociocultural framework. The privileging of the subjectivity of “little narratives” over the modernist master narrative, wherein experience is universally meaningful, timeless, and seeks to establish “truth,” is central to her dialogue with the viewer.<sup>7</sup>

Dominating the composition of *Untitled* is the image of the snake, one of the most potent signifiers in ancient and modern cultures throughout the world. The phrase “Don’t tread

on me” immediately recalls the use of the rattlesnake as a familiar symbol of the American colonies in the eighteenth century, and it was used liberally on flags and standards during the American Revolution. The most famous of these, the Gadsden Flag, named for its designer, General Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina, has been in use since it was instituted as a naval ensign in 1775, and has in recent years been more commonly identified with the United States Marine Corps.<sup>8</sup> Though many variations exist, the most common version shows a coiled rattlesnake with thirteen rattles at the tip of its tail, representative of the original thirteen colonies. The snake in the photograph appropriated by Kruger, however, is not a rattlesnake, but rather a bull snake or pine snake, a species that is also exclusively found in the Americas. It is perhaps of some significance that the bull snake, while not poisonous, carefully mimics the defensive behavior of the rattlesnake, coiling its body in a striking position and vigorously vibrating its rattle-less tail in manner highly reminiscent of its venomous brethren.<sup>9</sup> The bull snake’s clever simulation of its considerably more dangerous relative as a form of defense is perhaps analogous to Kruger’s similar usage of appropriated texts and photographs, which comprise individual signifying elements that are not of her own invention, but, as in the case of *Untitled*, combine to convey a powerful and provocative statement of caution.

But unlike the brash confidence of the colonial revolutionary invoked by “Don’t tread on me,” the phrase, “Don’t tempt me,” casts the work’s “voice” in a considerably more complicated light, introducing the possibility of vulnerability or seduction, as the snake potentially transforms from a symbol of liberty against tyranny into the very face of evil itself, and a cold reminder of the human capacity for frailty and sin.<sup>10</sup> Of course, as Kruger has appropriated these popular phrases herself, one cannot ignore the aggregated meanings compounded by the appropriations of others. We cannot, for example, deny the potential significance that both phrases have been appropriated by gay activists. The Gadsden Flag was adopted by thousands of gay rights marchers at the Democratic National Convention in July 1984 in San Francisco,<sup>11</sup> and the Lord’s Prayer by lesbian social activist Rita Mae Brown, whose slightly altered and often-repeated version states “lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.” Grammy-nominated British

singer and songwriter Richard Thompson also used the phrase in the title of his song “Don’t Tempt Me” from his 1988 album *Amnesia*, in which he invokes the phrase “snakes alive,” a variation on “saints alive” or “sakes alive,” generally used as a more wholesome substitute for the epithet “for the Lord’s sake.” Indeed, depending on the level of investment on the part of the viewer, a rigorous analysis of Kruger’s *Untitled* can lead to labyrinthian depths of meaning that function much like a spider’s web: the more intensively you struggle, the more treacherously you become entangled. As Kruger herself has noted, “I would rather say that I work circularly, that is around certain ideational bases, motifs and representations. To fix myself, by declaring a single methodology or recipe, would really undermine a production that prefers to play around with answers, assumptions and categorizations.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in *Untitled*, the fictional and the factual, as well as the personal and political, collide and collude in ways that reveal ever greater potential for meaning—meanings that result not only from the artist’s intention, but from multifarious, seemingly unlimited intersections with society and culture at large.

---

<sup>i</sup> Kruger developed a facility with the language and visual structure of advertising while working as a graphic designer for several different publications at Condé Nast, during which time she was named art director for *Mademoiselle*. There are several excellent books and exhibition catalogs that exhaustively detail Kruger’s background, chief among which are: Kate Linker, *Love for Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990); Ann Goldstein, ed., *Barbara Kruger* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); and Alexander Alberro, et al., with an introduction by Hal Foster, *Barbara Kruger* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010).

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Kruger, in an interview with Jeanne Siegel, “Barbara Kruger: Pictures and Words,” in *Art Talk: The Early 1980s* (New York: Da Capo, 1988), 303 (originally published in *Arts Magazine* 61 [June 1987]: 17–21).

<sup>iii</sup> When the photographic image is transferred to a photochemically sensitive emulsion applied to the screen, the resulting negative image functions as a stencil, with the ink only able to pass through the permeable areas of the screen.

<sup>iv</sup> McLuhan’s often-cited phrase was first introduced in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

---

<sup>5</sup> While Kruger was not included in the *Pictures* exhibition, which art critic Douglas Crimp organized in 1977 for Artists Space in New York (where Kruger was also showing her work in the 1970s), her work is closely associated with the postmodern approach of the artists who were, among them Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. Kruger joins Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Jenny Holzer, and Laurie Anderson, among others, whose conceptual cross-media explorations of the late 1970s and 1980s have come to exemplify this aesthetic. Crimp's essay "Pictures," which extended his commentary beyond the scope of the exhibition, was published in *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 76–88. For more on this subject, see the recently published exhibition catalog by Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation: 1974–1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of the Simulacra," *Art & Text* 11 (September 1983), and Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93. Kruger's work also calls upon Walter Benjamin's theories regarding the influence of mechanical reproduction on the creative process and Michel Foucault's understanding of power and sexuality as powerful factors in defining discourse. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 219–26; and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> This distinction was first defined by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> The origin of the snake as an American symbol can likely be traced back to Benjamin Franklin's 1754 woodcut of a snake separated into eight sections (the head represented New England), accompanied by the caption "join, or die," which reappeared in November 1774 in the *Massachusetts Sun* newspaper with the same caption. Shortly after, the version popularized by Gadsden came to represent a wide variety of colonial regiments in the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and elsewhere. For more on the origins of the Gadsden flag and the rattlesnake as an American symbol, see William Rea Furlong and Byron McCandless, *So Proudly We Hail: The History of the United States Flag* (Washington DC.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), 71–77; Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press and the Pennsylvania Society of Sons of the Revolution and Its Color Guard, 1982); and Michael Corcoran, *For Which It Stands: An Anecdotal Biography of the American Flag* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> I thank Robert D. Aldridge, herpetologist in the Department of Biology at Saint Louis University, for identifying the animal as a bull snake. The description of the bull snake's behavior was found in Carl H. Ernst and Roger W. Barbour, *Snakes of Eastern North America* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1989), 102.

<sup>10</sup> This is not the first instance in which Kruger used a theme from Genesis in her work. Her *Untitled (You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece)* of 1982 superimposes the phrase over the Creation of Adam scene from Michelangelo's ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Here, the "you" being chastised in the statement can be a male spectator

---

or anyone complicit in the maintenance of what she perceives as the patriarchal systems of art-making, art history, and art criticism.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert L. Loeffelbein, *The United States Flagbook: Everything About Old Glory* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 147.

<sup>12</sup> Kruger, interview with Siegel, 304.