



**I shop
therefore
I am**

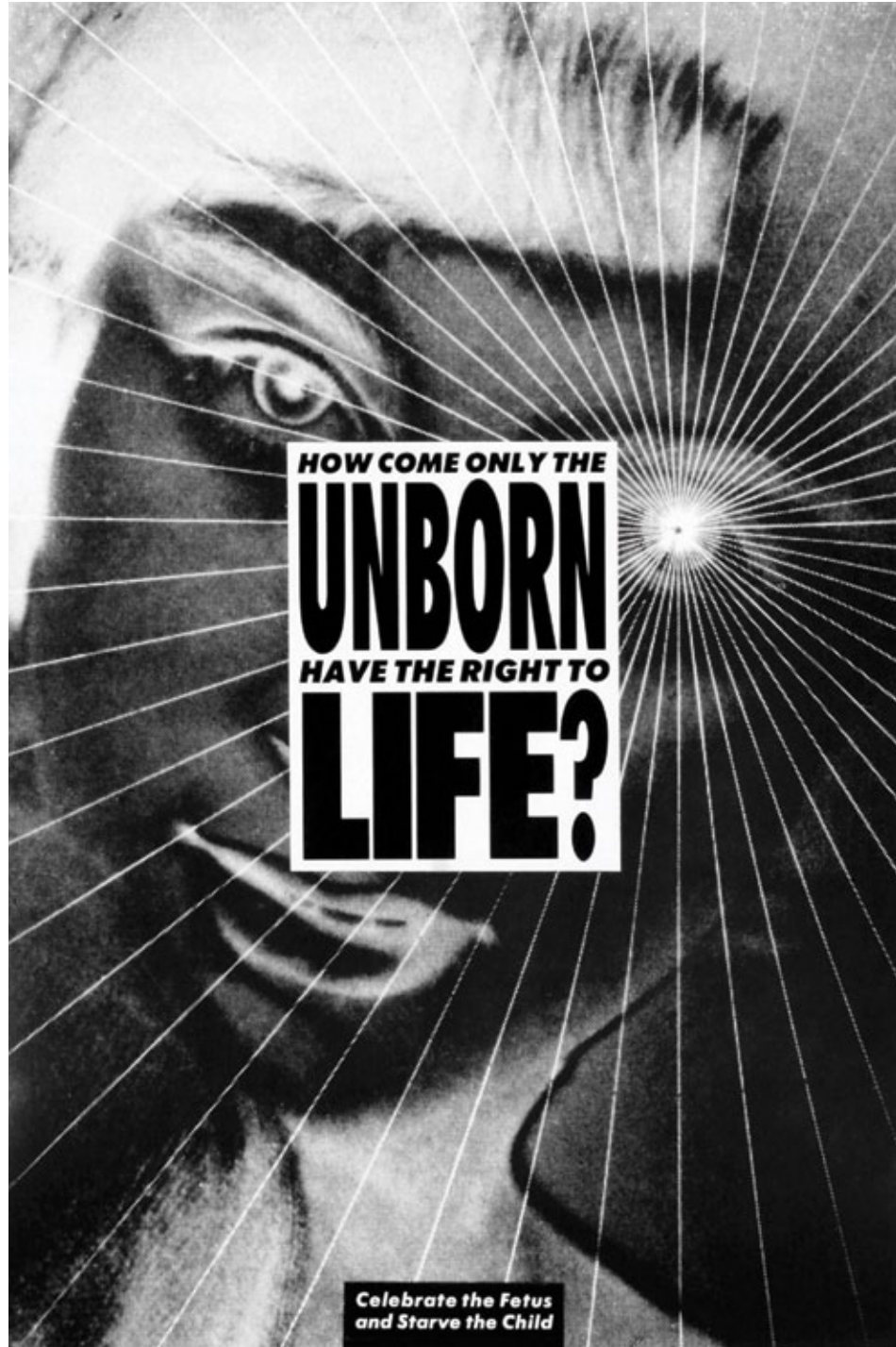
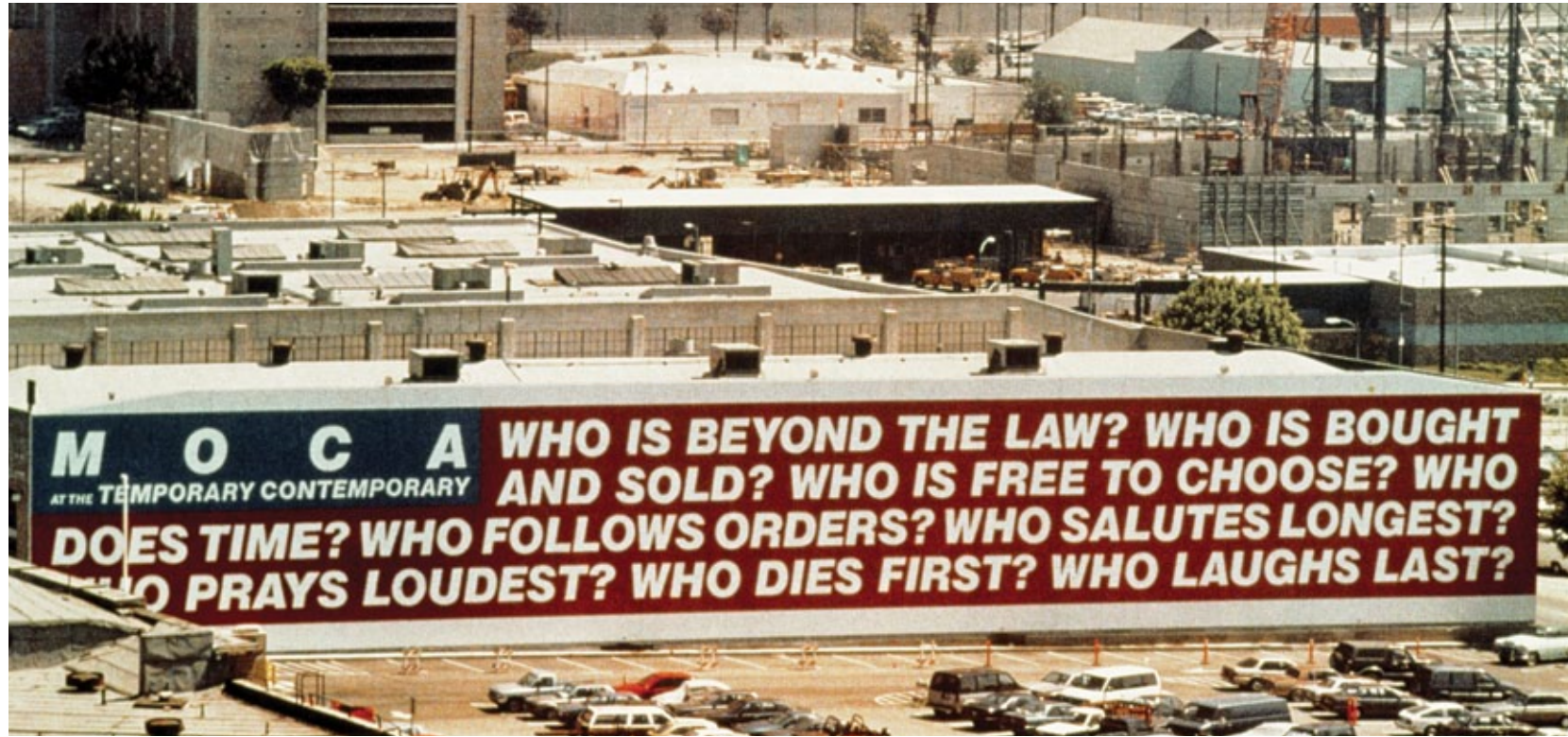


ABOVE: BARBARA KRUGER IN HER TRIBECA STUDIO, NYC, 1987.
PHOTO: DMITRI KASTERINE. OPPOSITE: KRUGER'S UNTITLED (I SHOP
THEREFORE I AM), 1987. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Barbara **KRUGER**

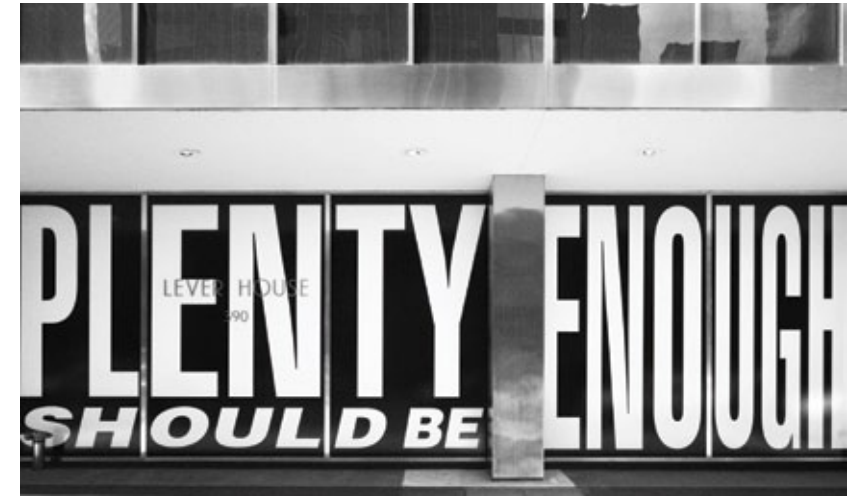
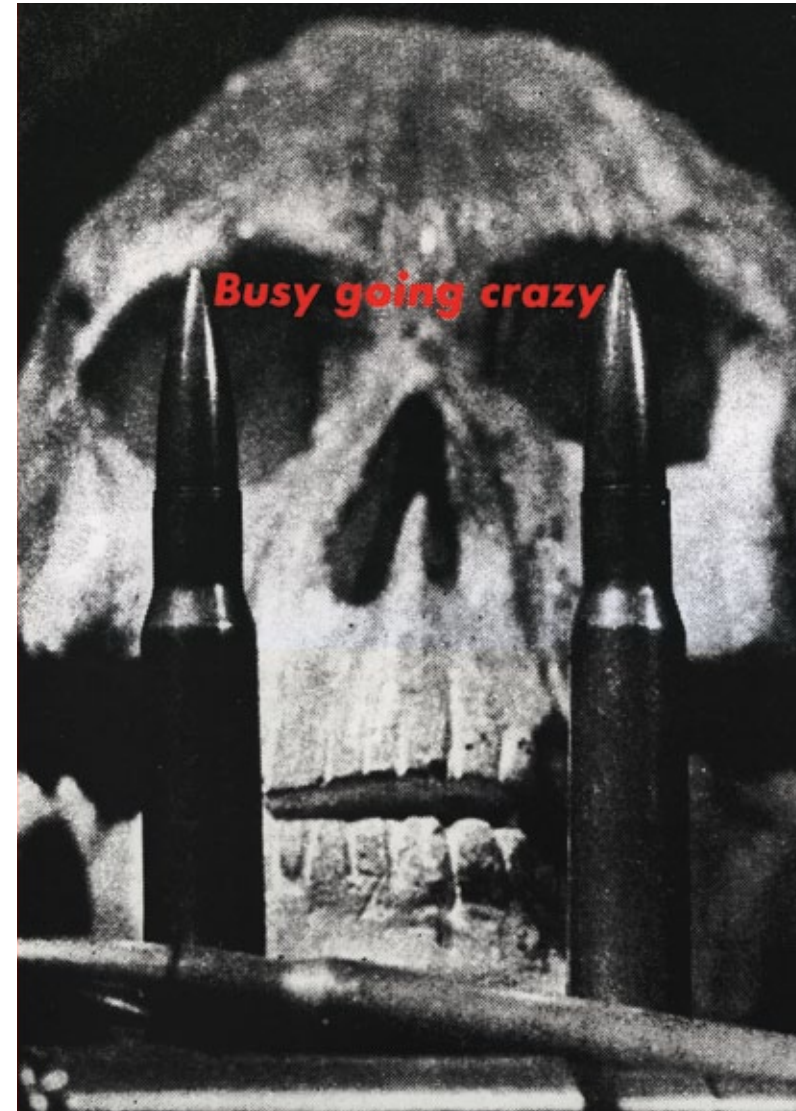
By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

THE ARTIST WHO TRANSFORMED QUESTIONS OF CONSUMPTION AND CONTROL INTO A SIGNATURE FORM IS STILL APPLYING HER PROPULSIVE TEXTS AND IMAGES ACROSS THE PUBLIC SPHERE. BUT WHILE THE MESSAGES THEMSELVES ARE OFTEN BLACK-AND-WHITE (AND RED), THE ISSUES, EMOTIONS, AND IDEAS THEY DREDGE UP RARELY ARE



“ I HAVE PROBLEMS WITH A LOT OF PHOTOGRAPHY, PARTICULARLY STREET PHOTOGRAPHY AND PHOTOJOURNALISM. THERE CAN BE AN ABUSIVE POWER TO PHOTOGRAPHY. ”

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BARBARA KRUGER'S UNTITLED (QUESTIONS), 1989-90. MURAL, SOUTH WALL OF THE TEMPORARY CONTEMPORARY, MOCA, LOS ANGELES. COURTESY RIZZOLI NEW YORK; UNTITLED (QUESTIONS), 1991. MARY BOONE GALLERY INSTALLATION, 417 WEST BROADWAY, NYC. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK; UNTITLED (HOW COME ONLY THE UNBORN HAVE THE RIGHT TO LIFE?), 1992. DESIGN FOR THE VILLAGE VOICE, COURTESY RIZZOLI NEW YORK; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BARBARA KRUGER'S UNTITLED (BUSY GOING CRAZY), 1989. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK; INSTALLATION BETWEEN BEING BORN AND DYING AT LEVER HOUSE, 2009. PHOTO: JESSE DAVID HARRIS; BILLBOARD PROJECT FOR ARTANGEL IN LONDON, 1986. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK; UNTITLED (YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND), 1990. POSTER FOR ARTS PRO-CHOICE ART SALE AND BENEFIT FOR THE NATIONAL ABORTION RIGHTS ACTION LEAGUE, NYC. COURTESY RIZZOLI NEW YORK.



Your body

“MY WORK HAS ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT POWER AND CONTROL AND BODIES AND MONEY AND ALL THAT KIND OF STUFF.”

Readers flipping through the front section of *The New York Times* on Saturday, November 24, 2012, might have come across, on page A21, in large white Futura type on a black background, a piece from artist Barbara Kruger. Under the title “For Sale,” the work read: “You Want It You Buy It You Forget It.” This newspaper-embedded artwork was particularly apt because it appeared on a weekend that was kicked off by Black Friday, one of America’s busiest shopping days of the year (and also, in some years, one of its deadliest). So on that morning, the Barbara Kruger piece functioned exactly as Barbara Kruger pieces have so often functioned since the 68-year-old artist first began working with invented texts in her art in the 1970s. The direct address is disarmingly direct. Certainly, the “you” implicates the reader—a shopper, a consumer, a part of the capitalist enterprise, guilty of impulsive buying habits. But the “you” is also a general composite—that annoying, far more guilty everyperson—and the reader sides with the artist in condemning this sector of the population who is greedy, wasteful, and irresponsible. So already—and almost always in a graphic Kruger text piece—a haunting repositioning occurs in the mind of the viewer: judged and also judging; agreeing with the charges even as she or he is charging others.

Kruger’s spectacular corpus, spanning four decades, is often described as political—and it is. But just as much it creates these moments of internal identity confusion in which we don’t know if we are acting as victim, oppressor, or witness. Usually, we are all of the above.

Two weeks after the *New York Times* piece ran, a recent work by Kruger could be found on a wall at Art Basel Miami Beach, alongside convention-center booths showing works by her contemporaries—many of whom have been her peers since the ’70s in downtown New York. On the aluminum-mounted vinyl was printed: “Greedy Schmuck.” Art Basel visitors must have passed this startling graphic accusation and had the same interior rift that I did: “That is about me because I’m participating in this hysterical culture of art-buying. I am the greedy schmuck.” And at the same time, “No, the greedy schmucks are all around me, the ones selling and the ones buying and the ones making the huge profits. I’m just passing through. Yes, that painting is correct; these people are greedy schmucks!” This is how the meaning—and re-meaning—of a Barbara Kruger builds and builds and builds. There is a distinctly Krugerian tone to all of her pieces—“Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face,” from 1981; “Not Cruel Enough,” from 1997; “Plenty Should Be Enough,” from 2009—that compels the viewer to side with her and against her simultaneously, and always stop as the balance of our thinking shifts.

Kruger famously—and perhaps, at first, inadvertently—got her training as an artist the hard way: through a full-time job as a magazine designer at Condé Nast, starting out at *Mademoiselle*. And while some of those early layout techniques of bold graphics inform her work, a pulsating visual-linguistic triple-take keeps all of her pieces so alive that she’s

is a

battleground

become known for her own immediately identifiable, authoritative style—even if authority is what is being questioned in the authoritative typeface. Her work has promoted a march on Washington for women’s reproductive rights with the iconic “Your Body Is a Battleground” poster in 1989 [Untitled (*Your Body Is a Battleground*)]; swallowed buses with wrap-around vinyl; taken over the exterior of a department store in Frankfurt, rendering a giant eye across the building’s façade; is currently sliding across the sides of escalators of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in the nation’s capital; and, premiering this May, will be cloaking the bodies and backdrops of ballet dancers for choreographer Benjamin Millepied’s gem-themed ballet at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

Kruger lives and works in both New York and Los Angeles (where, since 2006, she has taught art at UCLA). I met her in New York for breakfast on a Sunday morning in January at one of her old downtown mainstays, the Square Diner on Leonard Street. CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: You’ve lived downtown since the mid-’60s, so obviously you’ve seen a lot of change in New York—how it’s increasingly become less of a place for artists and more of a place to show expensive art.

BARBARA KRUGER: Yes, but I’m not into it when people say, “Oh, I remember the gritty ’70s.” I feel like, Oh give me a break. I’m not nostalgic. I can’t stand that. The only scary thing—and this is true with most cities everywhere—is that there’s no room for the working-class and middle-class people here anymore. Tribeca is exhibit A. I moved into this neighborhood in 1967. Nobody lived here. You know, artists did not gentrify this neighborhood. These floors and these buildings were empty. All these small businesses had moved out to Long Island or Queens. That’s when artists appear, right? But when I first came here, the only people who’d been on Chambers Street were Yoko Ono; [acid pioneer] Owsley Stanley; and Ken Jacobs, the filmmaker. I was living in the Village, going to Parsons for a year; I used to go to parties in a building down here on Reade Street where some friends lived. I got involved with someone who had just settled in that building. I think we were there for about two years and then I moved for one year to a building in SoHo, and then in ’70 or ’71, I moved back to a place in Tribeca. But to me it’s symbolic that people take over buildings and luxury lofts. It’s just the way it goes. For a long time, literally, when the roof leaked, it would be fixed with Scotch tape. When AIRs [artists-in residence, permits which allowed artists to live legally in buildings zoned for manufacturing use] happened, the landlords wouldn’t give an AIR to a single woman. They wouldn’t give artist-in-residence status to women in the 1970s. BOLLEN: That’s important to note.

KRUGER: That’s the way it was. So you’d stick your bed down in the apartment of a guy who lived downstairs and make believe it was only a

“THE WHOLE DECADE-IZING THING DOESN’T WORK FOR ME. TO ME, THE ’80s BEGAN IN 1975 AND ENDED IN 1984—’84 OR ’85.”

LEFT: UNTITLED (*YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND*), 1989. PHOTOGRAPHIC SILKSCREEN/VINYL. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Op-Art
BARBARA KRUGER
For Sale



Barbara Kruger is an artist who works with pictures and words.

“ I THINK THAT DESIGNERS HAVE AN INCREDIBLY BROAD CREATIVE REPERTOIRE. THEY SOLVE. THEY CREATE IMAGES OF PERFECTION FOR ANY NUMBER OF CLIENTS. I COULD NEVER DO THAT. ”

the times they have come up in. And I think that, for us, there was a real historical change, and it was the first time that women had entered the marketplace, that their works had not been marginalized. I didn't show my work at A.I.R. [A.I.R. Gallery, a pioneering artist-run women's gallery], at the women's gallery. Most of the men I came up with were colleagues and peers; they supported my work.

BOLLEN: So you don't feel pigeonholed by that kind of association?

KRUGER: I never say I do political art. Nor do I do feminist art. I'm a woman who's a feminist, who makes art. But I think what work becomes visible and what work remains absent is always a result of historical circumstance, you know—hard work, to some degree, and social relations. That sort of strange happenstance of luck, about who knew who, and who is connected . . .

That's why I curated the show at MoMA years ago that nobody even thinks about anymore, "Picturing 'Greatness'" [1988], where I went through their portrait collection. I had these photos of famous artists and the text script was about "How is fame produced?" or "How is value produced?" This is something you really feel now, where things have changed so in the past. When you talk to dealers, you realize that not that many people come around and want to buy art because they love art. There are very few speculative bubbles left, and the art world is one of them. So it's really about buy and flip, or, like the work I did recently, buy low, sell high [*Buy low sell high*, 2012].

BOLLEN: I was at Art Basel Miami Beach last December. It would probably make me a less cynical person if I skipped that week, but I remember one of your works at the convention center, "Greedy Schmuck" [*Untitled (Greedy Schmuck)*, 2012], screaming over all of the partitions and paintings and bald heads. I love that your work continues accumulating new and accurate meanings each time it is hung in a different context. Certainly that was the case for "Greedy Schmuck" at Miami.

KRUGER: It's funny because I remember one critic in around 2002 or so wrote about my "I Shop Therefore I Am" piece from '87 [*Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)*] and said things are so different now than they were when I made that work. But that is completely wrong. Things are like they were but multiplied in terms of the intensity of commodity culture and how the digital world has intensified that to a certain degree. One of the real crises of how things have changed began with hip-hop and sampling. You know, I never call myself an appropriation artist. Critics do that. But the issues around copyright and so-called intellectual property, which, for me, is a euphemism for corporate control in so many ways . . . I believe in copyright. I do. But it's been taken to such lengths. Remember when Donald Trump wanted to copyright the phrase "You're fired"?

And then there's this guy who killed himself last week, Aaron Swartz [26-year-old computer programmer and advocate for freedom of information over the internet who had been under indictment on federal data-theft charges] . . . These are contentious issues. I'm not saying there's an angel and a devil in them. These are huge issues today and they're something artists have dealt with constantly, whether it's sonically, through music, or visually. When the record industry won the Napster kerfuffle, you knew that was a Pyrrhic victory. You knew they had won but they had lost. Think of the amount of time it took for record stores to collapse. And publishing is in a similar crisis. And movies, too, even though they've had a good year.

BOLLEN: There have been moments where you've applied your work directly to political movements and events. "Your Body Is a Battleground" was originally done as a poster for the 1989 pro-choice march on Washington. Many artists fear mixing their work with anything



“ I REMEMBER GOING INTO GALLERIES AND SEEING THIS THING CALLED CONCEPTUAL ART. ”

overtly political, for fear of it reading as propaganda. KRUGER: My work has always been about power and control and bodies and money and all that kind of stuff. Sometimes you can be broad, but that time I wanted to be more specific. I also did that text again without the words that said where to meet on the lawn.

BOLLEN: I'm always stuck by that image of "Your Body Is a Battleground" as a billboard on a street in Columbus, Ohio, that was right next to a pro-life billboard of an eight-week-old fetus . . .

KRUGER: Their billboard went up 12 hours after mine did. They saw it and responded.

BOLLEN: So theirs went up second! I wasn't sure who was responding to whom, but together it makes such a powerful moment of cultural provocation.

KRUGER: There was an ad for car insurance or something when I initially put it up. But yeah . . . And it's still an issue. I've gone back to Washington and I just cry—oh my god, this is about something so much bigger than a fetus. I've done lots of work about abortion and domestic violence.

BOLLEN: It seems like in your career there's been this constant panning out, from individual works to streets to buildings to newspapers to commercial products to installations in the earth. And you haven't been reticent to use the latest technology.

KRUGER: I'm very fortunate that my work reproduces very well. And because I worked at a magazine, I really do understand what it's like to have a short attention span. I have a short attention span. So, for example, in my time-based videos, I make sure there are always places to sit. People walk in and they walk up; they come in and they sit down if a seat is available. You just try to figure out instrumentally how the work does its work and what's the most congenial site for it. How to make it meet the viewer's eye, you know?

BOLLEN: It amazes me that your work has swallowed whole buses and buildings and has become part of the landscape of skylines in terms of billboard signage.

KRUGER: Early on when I had no money I wanted to do a billboard and I called a company up and they said, "What are you selling?" They couldn't understand what I wanted to do. I was lucky to have early support from places like the Public Art Fund, which allowed me to do projects I never could've done on my own. BOLLEN: Like those "Help, I'm Pregnant!" posters in bus shelters [*Untitled (Bus Shelter Posters)*, 1991]. I noticed those were done in a different font from the work before. Do you have a formal rule about your fonts—which ones you use and for what?

KRUGER: Whatever works! BOLLEN: When you do bus posters or billboards or digital screens, your works are purposely placed at the site of advertising. Do you follow the evolution of advertising? I think it keeps getting wittier and funnier, and I wonder if advertising becomes more a threat to art or if it makes it harder to compete in a public environment?

KRUGER: It's always been so clever and smart. When you go to London, for instance, advertising has always had a really elevated place in culture, much more so than here, and things are even wittier there. Most advertising is schlock here, but a lot of it is witty and great, and I admire it tremendously.

BOLLEN: You did the exterior of a department store in Frankfurt and, last year, the lobby and escalators of the Hirshhorn Museum. Are there any new arenas where you'd like to apply your text works?

KRUGER: I have a project in May in Paris with Benjamin Millepied. He's invited me to do the stage sets and costumes for a ballet. We're meeting now. And David Lang, who did *The Little Match Girl Passion*, he's doing the music.

BOLLEN: Can I ask you about your decision to resign from the board of MOCA in L.A.? [Last July, weeks after the forced resignation of chief curator Paul Schimmel, Kruger, along with artists Catherine Opie, John Baldessari, and Ed Ruscha, resigned from the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.]

KRUGER: It wasn't really my decision. I didn't want it to play out that way. I don't know if you read the letter signed by Cathy [Opie] and me. That's how I feel. And in that letter there was no accusatory bad guy versus good guy, which is

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 271)

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS INTERVIEW'S EDITOR AT LARGE. ABOVE: BARBARA KRUGER'S BARBARA KRUGER. BELIEF + DOUBT. 2012. INSTALLATION AT THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C. COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK. OPPOSITE: BARBARA KRUGER'S FOR SALE. 2012. "OP-ART" PIECE FOR OP-ED PAGE OF THE NEW YORK TIMES. ALL ARTWORK © BARBARA KRUGER. >See more of BARBARA KRUGER on interviewmagazine.com

the way it was played in the press. Not all the press, but some of it. I think it's a very complicated issue. I've known Jeffrey Deitch for 30 years. I had the first show in his Wooster Street space of my first multiple-channel video, *Power Pleasure Desire Disgust* [1997]. I have tremendous affection for Jeffrey, and I think Eli [Broad, MOCA founding chairman and life trustee] has built an incredible collection. He's a great supporter of the city of Los Angeles. He's a Democrat. [laughs] I think there are complicated issues at work, but the real complicated issue is cultural funding in this country and what happens when philanthropy is reduced to speculation. How do institutions survive? In New York and in the European cities it's one thing if you want it based on attendance, which I think is ridiculous for cultural institutions, but in the denseness of certain cities, it's at least possible. In L.A., you cannot run an institution that way. Attendance is not a measure; it cannot be a revenue stream for the success of museums, and MOCA has always had this great curatorial, critical program, which has made it different than any other museum. And I want it to stay. But you can't get people to fund intellectually ambitious, non-art-star shows now. It used to be different. There are a few people who will fund it, but they want their horse in the race; they want their artist in the show. I think MOCA is a great institution—I want it to continue. I think all the players in that game really want the best for Los Angeles. It's a great city to be an artist in—the American city to be an artist in, in many ways. It's much more affordable. It's where the art schools are. It's like London. It's an art school town. I love New York, so it's not a New York versus L.A. thing. But [L.A.] has great museums and great museum directors and more and more galleries, which I think is puzzling because it's a difficult place to sell art. I should say that in my leaving, Cathy and I were never told that John was leaving the board. I read it in the press. I wish it hadn't happened that way. Enough said.

BOLLEN: Okay. No more on MOCA. How about the influence of galleries in the art world, or rather, their growing need to self-multiply into global brands and constantly sell, sell, sell at any and all art fairs. Is art suffering on the chain of supply and demand?

KRUGER: First of all, most galleries are less empowered than they've ever been in terms of these art fairs. Galleries are interesting because they're free for people. You don't have to pay \$12 to walk in the door like you do at a museum. It's expensive to go to museums! But dealers who go to these art fairs frequently can't sell work to people unless those people can look up the history of the artist and see what the secondary market sales are. It ain't fun for a lot of dealers, either, even though they make money. But that's because there's this bubble that still exists, especially for those of us who've been fortunate enough to have won the lottery for 20 minutes. But I see it as all temporal, so arbitrary.

BOLLEN: I'm surprised you don't have a problem with your art being sold in a convention center.

KRUGER: To me, the art world is an anthropology, right? My parents traded their labor for wages. You have to live inside of capital unless you have a huge inheritance and can afford to have these pipe dreams. Most artists will never make money off their work, but that spark, that need to create commentary, to visualize, textualize, and musicalize your experience of the world will continue whether it's a hot commodity or not. You see that places where that need is shut down, we see oppressiveness and subjugation. That need to create commentary is huge. Most of that commentary will not make a big flip profit for some guy buying a condo on the next block. You have to go in knowing that. When I came up in the art world, it was twelve white guys in lower Manhattan with maybe two women—two visible women. Now it's much bet-

ter. People who are calling themselves artists are people of all colors and persuasions and genders. It's hard to figure out how to support yourself because you're not going to end up making a lot of money from your work. And those that do better save it because it's fickle and brutal, and what's hot will be not in two seconds. It's the way all markets function, and it's just become another market.

BOLLEN: Finally, about translation. Your text pieces are often literally translated into the language of the countries in which they are being shown and installed. Do you see your works as universal messages? Since much of your work is public—wrapped around buses, on the steps of train stations, inside churches—does the history of politics or functions of the place determine what you will show?

KRUGER: Of course. Everything's site-specific. I've always been sort of critical of artists who go in and do a quick read of a place and then do a work with the people there. To me, that's exploitative in the way that some photography is exploitative. Issues my work is involved in—issues of consumerism, the place of women's bodies—when I'm in these places, I have a reading of whether they're issues or not, of course.

BOLLEN: Where is "Your Body Is a Battleground" not an issue?

KRUGER: I've not been to that place yet.