

Marcos Fabris

Installation art and site specific works: art as opposition

Translated by Ana Carolina Azevedo

Abstract: This article intends to investigate the oeuvre of the American contemporary artist Barbara Kruger, contextualizing the birth and development of installation, and the so-called *Site Specific Works*, tools frequently used by this artist. Some of her artistic matrixes will also be investigated, as well as the fruitful dialogue established with a certain tradition, in order to produce what I consider to be a combative and composite art, one that amalgamates and refunctionalizes elements of advertising, visual arts, and photography.

Keywords: Installation Art. Site Specific Works. Barbara Kruger.

I

All those interested in the relationship between art and photography must get to know the work of North-American artist Barbara Kruger (1945). With this statement, I do not intend to impose a taste or claim a place in the spotlight for an artist who is allegedly less valued in the Pantheon of contemporary art, who certainly lacks the merit she deserves, for Kruger is satisfactorily enshrined in artistic circles and in the (increasingly) heated arts market, where a piece of her work sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars. If major museums, galleries and collectors tend to measure the value of her work in astronomical figures (as per usual), I would like to conversely propose an evaluation of her work in artistic terms that shall not exclude political aspects. Advancing the argument that I intend to develop: by transiting between art, advertising and photography, Kruger aims at bringing together aspects of everyday life that *appear* to be separate from each other, namely, consumption, spectacle, gender and class, explaining as such the ideologically built fragmentation operation in conceiving, with the fragments borrowed from the language of advertising, installations in museums, galleries, shops and public spaces. As we shall see, such works shall aim at illuminating the existing – and methodically eclipsed – nexus in what Guy Debord defined as the “society of the spectacle”: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.” (Debord, 1997, p. 13).

The greatest contribution of the art produced by Kruger, which we could characterize as emphatic, plural and combative, full of critical, reflective and intellectual ambition will reside, in the terms that I

suggested, in disgust to the reigning trends in the universe of contemporary art, which rewards the reckless, the naïve, the immature, the anodyne, and all variation and combination that hides social or, rather, class conflicts. It is precisely this element that Kruger’s work intends to highlight. But how?

I used the word “installation” and I would like to contextualize the emergence of this kind of art, fundamental for the understanding of the work of the artist. Next, I will consider the formation and some of Kruger’s installations, thinking of how these works establish a fruitful dialogue with tradition that precedes it for, as I suggested, producing consistent art, because it elaborates criticism of its historical coordinates (or “opposition”).

II

What we know today as “installation” originated in the early 60’s in Europe and the United States. At the time, the term “employee” was used to describe, for example, works such as *The Portable War Memorial*, in 1968, by American painter Ed Kienholz (1927-1994). These settings, which were intended to relate to the space around it, constituted a blatant rejection to the traditional art practices because, on incorporating outer space, they included or absorbed the viewer in the work. Comprehensive and expansive, they intended to display certain experiences or contents, disrespecting the whole conception of art as a receptacle of fixed meanings.

In the 60’s onwards, installations developed in different ways by many artists from different contemporary movements: Pop art, Op art, Fluxus, Minimalism, Performance art, Sound Art, Earth Art, *Arte povera* and Site Works. In Paris, 1958, Yves Klein (1928-1962) from the New Realism group exhibited the empty space of a gallery (Iris Clert), which he named *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility. The Void*. It’s “replica” soon followed. The Franco-American Arman (Armand Pierre Fernandez, 1928-2005) filled the same gallery with garbage, calling the intervention *Full Up* (1960). It should be noted that the installations were not exactly brand new artistic procedures in the 60’s. However, previous to that, its essential goal was limited mainly to the expansion of painting to the field of three-dimensionality. Examples of this type of production are the great work of space occupation by Dada artist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), entitled *Merzbau*, 1923, which occupied the artist’s entire residence in Hannover, and Lucio Fontana’s luminous ambiances (1899-1968), as *Neon Structure for the IX Triennale di Milano*, 1958.

From these surrealist works came the idea of installation as a creative concept of exhibition. On the occasion of the surrealist exhibition

held in New York in 1942, Marshall Duchamp built a maze of wires strung around the screens in the place where they were installed. He called his intervention *Sixteen miles of string*. The installation required an active viewer who, entangled in the web woven by “the spider Duchamp”, would be able to contemplate the exhibited works at the same time he or she perceived themselves physically imprisoned to the viewing posture imposed by the established formats of traditional exhibitions – precisely what was intended. It is worth noting that Duchamp played an exemplary role in this sense, planning the installation of his works in the smallest detail, including, as we all know, the posthumous exhibition in which he worked in secret for years, named *Étant donnés*, held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969. He remains, to this day, an important reference for many artists who work with installations.

As of the 70's, commercial galleries and alternative spaces (including streets or any other places than the ones conventionally dedicated to artwork exhibitions) began to host art installations and all its variations, such as the so-called *Site Works* (a term that designates artistic works specially designed for certain spaces). The installations and their variants would be immediately perceived as vigorous genres for artists and activists, who believed in the idea that art should be as critical as it is democratic, and available to many, including with subsidy (public or private in nature) – think of the Mexican mural tradition. In this sense, such works will explore the contexts in which they are inserted, which will pass on to be part of their art. In other words, it is not a matter of thinking them as “street furniture” or as decorative pieces. The most successful installations are those that will seek to equate a (tensed up?) relationship between the possibilities and conditions of production and consumption of art in a space for a certain audience, all now part of the work in point. Without going into the individual merit or in the degree of success of each work, some examples in this production include *Batcolumn* in Chicago, by Claes Oldenburg, 1977, the famous *Les Deux Plateaux* (more commonly known as *Colonnes de Buren*) in Paris, by Daniel Buren, 1985-86, and *The Angel of the North* in Gateshead, by Antony Gormley, 1998. If, as we have seen, the installations and Site Works can be powerful instruments for artists who want to reflect on the relationship between art and society, then identify and evaluate successful cases of these artistic productions. Enter Barbara Kruger.

III

The art that was “committed to a cause” in the 70's became one of the pillars of what is now called postmodernism in art.¹ Its main unfolding

was precisely the confirmation of the trend of ignoring the traditional focus on class in favor of an insistent focus on issues of minority groups. I'm referring primarily to gender and race – queer, lesbian or black studies are examples of this segmentation in theoretical studies and American academic departments that eventually spread them worldwide. This unfolding was conducted under the rather vague, umbrella term of “power”, widely studied by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). To sum up, Foucault believed power was “secreted” by societies unable to escape even through revolutions. Not unlike Althusser, Foucault understood ideology then as a social condition of life or, if we prefer, a permanent condition of life in society. Such a theoretical position, spread widely in the academy and in the arts, was conceived as opposed to a fraction of what the French intelligentsia (of which Foucault was a part of, as well as an advocate) understood as the “Marxist failure”, which they believed was explained by the defeat of May 1968.²

In such terms, Foucault's analysis sought to devise alternative possibilities of resistance, aiming at targets such as institutional or contingency social struggles, not at systemic and structural transformations. Of course, on shifting the emphasis of economic relations, such as class, to the power relations between individuals, Foucault reorganized the whole concern to psychosocial areas: sexual orientation, gender and race substitute class to become the “melodic themes” of most cultural and intellectual practices considered radical in the period. The work of Barbara Kruger is often quoted and valued as an artistic paradigmatic example of *this* kind of post-modern production, which seeks to discuss gender issues within its production and, *essentially for this reason*, became enshrined in artistic circles. The blind spot to which I would like to draw attention lies precisely in the fact that the artist is not limited to gender critique, as previously mentioned. The interest, strength and actuality of her work dwells on the question of the limits of intellectual, critical and artistic production, which are restricted to only one area of social experience, which the artist, in her work, doesn't seem to do. On the contrary, I believe that her work computes and assembles various aspects of life under contemporary capitalism thanks to procedures learned throughout her education and career in the world (or industry!) of arts, photography and American advertising. I will now describe them in short.

Kruger studied art and design at the renowned Parsons School of Design alongside two persons that became important to her future art work: Diane Arbus (1923-1971), an icon of American

1. Cf. Wood, P. et alii, 1998.

2. Cf. Wood, P. op. cit.

photography, known for her artistic engagement and her portrait of socially rejected people (think of *Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark*, 1965), and Marvin Israel (1924-1984), the New Yorker artist, photographer and professor known for creating interiors and surreal, abstract, edgy and disturbing imagery that became characteristic of his artwork. Also crucial to the artistic development of Kruger was her work as a designer at the prestigious publishing house *Condé Nast* (in “chic” publications such as *Mademoiselle*, *House and Garden* and *Aperture*), where she learned and developed the typical language of advertising as a tool to stimulate consumption (common in this type of vehicle), which she then used in her works in a diametrically opposed way regarding the magazines where she worked. In other words, in appropriating existing images and associating text and image in photographic montages (which do not exclude montages in a semantic level, as we shall see), the artist redid the function of the traditional language of advertising for critical and reflective purposes. One might pinpoint a pattern in the strong connotation of advertising in her work: to the basic photographic image, generally in monochrome print, it is added a brief text that essentially works as an advertising slogan (as in *Untitled [Your Comfort is my Silence]*, 1981). Frequently, this text is displayed in white letters on red background, cutting or bordering the image, so that the text does not appear as a “classic caption” for the image, either is the image an “illustration” “subordinate” to the text. In these “pseudocaptions”, Kruger often uses semantic nuances of binary opposition (“We”/“You”, “My”/“Your”, “Life”/“Death”, etc.) to question both the traditional use of the *tagline* of advertisement and the operations of simplistic oppositions created by her to, I believe, rethink them in terms of its contradictions, functions and consequences (for example, *Untitled [Pro-life for the unborn]*, 2000).

One might add to that the fact that many of her works appear in places little or not conventional at all for “traditional” works of art: *billboards*, magazines, posters or t-shirts (as *Untitled* [of the series entitled *We don't need another hero*], 1986). These work in these places are also questioning the “ideal” place for the “ideal” work. Other works are specially designed for display in art galleries, in the form of *site-specific* installations, such as *All Violence is an Illustration of a Pathetic Stereotype*, 1991. I would like to dwell on this work, which seems emblematic of the composite character of the artist's work.

Here, we see a part of this installation, the third solo exhibition of the artist, in the prestigious Mary Boone Gallery, New York. The title is interesting and representative of the work of Kruger.

In English, the noun *illustration* can mean “illustration”, “figure”, “drawing” or “image”. It may also mean “typical”, “characteristic” or “example that explains”. Thus, already in the title, and through the montage (which will be present also in the images), Kruger introduces noise that points to the multiple and ambiguous relationships between meanings and their relationship to violence, as an example of imagery, (social and artistic) production processes and ratification (and challenging!) of stereotypes. To do so, Kruger transformed the exhibition space in order to provoke in the viewer an unusual experience of becoming unacquainted to something: on entering the Gallery, visitors encounter the following text: “*All that seemed beneath you is speaking to you now. All that seemed deaf hears you. All that seemed dumb knows what's on your mind. All that seemed blind sees through you*”. The initial sentences, as ambiguous as familiar to those who live in large cities, set the tone for what awaits the viewer in the rest of the installation. The walls, floor and ceiling of the room were covered of images à la Kruger, involving the observer's senses (sight and hearing were particularly highlighted in the initial sentences – talking, listening, seeing, unraveling...). We have no choice but to confront a surreal aesthetic universe of fear, oppression, violence and control. The image of a genderless and ageless figure cut off and duplicate apparently “silently” shouts (think of *Munch's* homunculus in *The Scream*). Its anguish is “verbalized” in the sentence “*All violence is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype*” which fills the room and reverberates in the other sentences and images, from the ceiling to the floor.

In clear dialogue with the Dada and constructivist aesthetic, Kruger intensifies the hostile tone of the relationship arising from between text and image, explaining its artistic arrays to activate the senses and the emotions of the spectator, who must imperiously ask herself of the artist's reasons for hurt herself so straightforwardly, confronting herself with a universe that is equally aggressive, punitive and watched over, always artfully *constructed*.

I would like to make very brief comments on the artistic tradition that precedes the artist and on one of Kruger's arrays, made explicit in this installation. It is the photomontage work by German John Heartfield (1891-1968). In the work done for the German magazine *AIZ*, *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, it is possible to identify certain elective affinities between the two artists. Let us take as an example the work *Adolf, The Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Rubbish*, 1932. Heartfield's work (who, as Kruger, did not photograph, but appropriated existing images) sits on the idea of collage and *assemblage*: here, traditional art materials (such as canvas and

paint) are denied in order to produce artistic “mestizo” works, that is, work that are structured by a principle that allows for the introduction of everyday reality elements (such as wallpaper fragments, newspapers, magazines... Let us think of the Picasso's collages as well). This is, then, what we could call “vulgar” matter, which, with its “productive vulgarity”, removes the conventionally conceived, artistic object from the position of sacred, moving it towards the everyday experience. This is the most violent coup against painting and traditional photography – and against all idealistic or sentimental conception of the work of art. In these terms, the artistic object is no longer conceived as a result of the privileged expression of the know-how that renders a kind of beauty that is absolute, removed from history and classicizing. With the disintegration of the hierarchy of materials and with the deeper questioning of the artistic practice, it is also suggested the possibility of increasing indistinction between artists that are exclusively producers and an audience that is made entirely of consumer.

Let us see how *Adolf, Superman...* clarifies certain artistic procedures that are typical of Kruger:

1. *Blechen* is a German verb that means “to pay”, “to swell” or “to spit”; *blech* is a neutral noun that means “tinplate”, “iron” or “nonsense”. It is noticeable how Hearfield, as Kruger, operates a significant montage, including in semantic terms, to expose the dictator.
2. The image, at fragment-level, is at the same time glued to its referring element and proposing new relations of meaning thanks to the construction of a denaturalized narrative of the whole in a new imagery. From the fragmentation or fragment – that is how the artist intends to understand the whole to which she relates or, if we prefer, how the whole presents itself (fragmented) in the fragment.
3. Hearfield produces irony and sarcasm in actual “photographic caricatures” (*à la* Honoré Daumier) that explain the marks of the artist's work (unlike the “well-made play” in representational arts, performed in order to hide the “amendments” or the marks in the artistic work – let us think, in contrast, of the “smooth” of the idealized picture of Sebastiao Salgado in *Genesis...*).
4. Here, the body of the puppet dictator is an object of study. The attempt to understand it in its gut goes hand in hand with the understanding of the “social body” that produces it.
5. Hearfield reiterates scientifically the limitation of human vision, that is, certain contents can't be seen to the naked eye – hence the need to penetrate the epidermis of reality, as an optical unconscious able to reveal unknown aspects of consciousness.
6. Thus we witness an analytical approach, which surgically analyses and organizes an apparently natural and continuous action, the speech of the leader, to investigate in its deep nexus.
7. The photomontage editor points a chronographic pistol to Hitler's heart, one similar to that used by Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904) in analyzing the movement of birds in the 19th century. It is with the scientific, technological and artistic breakthrough – which are inextricably linked to each other – that all matter becomes no longer impervious in order to become knowable.

This type of photomontage stems from artistic terms (because it demystifies the creator's act, which is both mental and manual labor) and social terms (because it proposes what could be defined as a “counter-vision”, which aims to sharpen the addicted look and allow a greater knowledge of optical, psychological and social structures). This subversion of instrumentalized rationality is not absolutely alien in regards of Kruger's work, which similarly structures, in a dialectical mode, carefully chosen photographic details, highlighting processes and their contradictions within her social reality to discuss relations between culture, society and power.

It is worth mentioning that the use of the montage technique by itself is no guarantee of the progressive character of a cultural artifact. There is an important distinction between the traditional montage, characteristic of propaganda and advertising, and that which we could define as reflexive: both have as their principle the recombination of “parts of reality”. However, traditional montage falsifies the social reality as a whole, using the pseudo-objectivity of the photography to hide processes and to give the impression that what is being presented is the “true reality”. Contrastingly, reflective photomontage dialectically structures reality in order to express an opinion about social processes in progress.

IV

In this sense, the work of the artist occupies a similar place to that of “advertisements” from Englishman Victor Burgin, produced in the mid-70's (think of *Going somewhere?*, 1975, or *Zoo78*, 1978-79). Isn't this a crossroad of institutions (art, economy, politics, sexual identity...) and reference to modern artistic traditions that, in their own time, also reflected upon such issues as a group (*A Bar at the*

Folies-Bergère, Édouard Manet, 1882). I believe that Kruger updates and extends certain discussions, advancing the very concept of installation or *site work* in rethinking the place occupied by the work of art, by the artistic practice and the consumerism of art – including art that is produced by the artist herself, questioning it as a commodity in the profitable market of the arts, forever ready to accommodate dissent... (*Untitled [I shop therefore I am]*, 1987; products with the images of Kruger; ad campaign for the British department store Selfridges, 2003). In her works and installations, the artist becomes, then, more of a manipulator of signs than a producer of art objects in the conventional sense, and the spectator, more of a message reader than a beholder of “classic” aesthetic objects...

To understand in deep terms the project and location occupied by the artist as an example of art of “opposition”, we must necessarily connect gender, class, consumerism and spectacle, pillars of the contemporary cultural and artistic business (*Untitled [Business as usual]*, 1987). Questioning the boundaries of art in such terms, Kruger approaches the artistic production demands articulated by the Walter Benjamin of *The Author as Producer*, reminding us that:

A [culture producer] who teaches [other culture producers] nothing, teaches nobody anything. The determinant factor is the exemplary character of a production that enables it, first, to lead other producers to this production, and secondly to present them with an improved apparatus for their use. And this apparatus is better to the degree that it leads consumers to production, in short that it is capable of making co-workers out of readers or spectators. (Benjamin, W., 1993, p. 132).

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