

**De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to one of the following topics:
the politics of representation, race or violence.**



Untitled (We don't need another hero) (1987)

According to John Berger, art has “shown to the future what the past suffered so, that it has never been forgotten” (1991, p.9). Berger explained that art is a useful tool for the preservation of history, as he believed it has a direct testimony about the world, and that images provide more precise and richer information about the world than literature does (1972, p.3). I believe that it is because of this that art can be used as a medium to discuss the politics of representation. This essay will look at the meaning of artwork in relation to the representation of gender in society and femininity, comparing classic artwork to the work of contemporary American artist Barbara Kruger, who is known for her work around societal stereotypes.

Kruger uses photography, mixed with collage techniques, in order to appropriate work as a way of conveying her beliefs and discuss a variety of topics, including gender and feminism. Carol Squires described Kruger as a “committed feminist”, who uses inequalities of gender and the skewed social relations they create as the focus of much of her work (p. 59). Kruger's work is heavily influenced by her background in graphic design, as in 1966 she began working at Condé Nast designing small ads, where she was awarded the title of head designer the following year. The influence of her graphic design background can be seen through her use of sophisticated advertising formats in her work (Tate Modern, 2022). For example, her striking inclusion of text overlayed on images, for which she is widely recognised, as seen in her piece *Untitled (Your body is a Battleground)* (1989) which was produced for the Women's March in Washington, which campaigned for reproductive freedom (The Broad). To create this distinct style, Kruger draws on Russian avant-garde and uses propagandist methods in photography. The influence of Russian artists, such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, can be seen in her work through her use of three colours, red, black and white, and a bold font which are defining main characteristics of her art (ArtNet). Both Kruger and Rodchenko combine photography and graphic design in order to draw attention to a social or political point. Their use of black and white with red in their work connotes a sense of urgency and importance. Kruger's methods involve taking images out of context and giving them a new meaning (National Gallery of Australia). This is a strategy used by Postmodernists. According to Douglas Crimp, postmodernism is “not confined to any particular medium” but rather makes use of a variety of artistic practises (1979).

Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero) (1986) is one of Kruger's most famous images, originally from a billboard project in London. To create this work, Kruger took a classic American vintage image, which was originally used for advertising, and injected it with a

new, alternative meaning. According to Victor Burgin, the meaning of an image is dependent upon common knowledge of typical representation of mainstream social norms and values (1982, p.41). Kruger is able to provide an alternative meaning by playing on the juxtaposition between the implied meaning behind the image and her text. The original image, which has subtle elements of sexism, shows two children: a boy who is flexing his bicep, and a girl who is looking at his muscle. The boy's expression makes it appear as though he is deliberately making an effort to impress the girl with his muscle and strength, whilst the girl appears to be intrigued and charmed by the boy's efforts to impress her. The composition of the subjects convey the societal stereotypes of women looking to men as strong figures who hold power over them. This image indulges these stereotypes about gender roles. By choosing a classic image with children as a subject, Kruger is making a point about how gender roles are perpetuated through society from childhood. Across the image, Kruger has overlayed a red text box with the text 'We don't need another hero'. Kruger's collective use of 'we' uses the same principles as propaganda, by confronting and addressing the viewer directly with an ironic undertone. This caption alongside the original image provides a new meaning for the image as a whole. By adding this caption, it juxtaposes the original image and gives the piece an entirely different meaning. Whilst the image perpetuates ideas of traditional gender roles, the text is saying that 'we', the women of society, do not need another hero. Additionally, her use of a red text box connotes urgency and importance, and makes her message stand out against the image. John Berger wrote that although images were first created to invoke appearances of the absent, 'gradually it became evidence that an image could outlast what it represented; it showed how something or somebody once looked' (1972, p.10). It is for this reason that art can be considered a vital tool in the preservation of history. Rachel Pierce (2019) argued that photography is "the best place to see whether there has been a reassessment of women's place in the archive". For example, Barbara Kruger created work during the 1980s,

meaning that her work is representative of society at this time. Her piece *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)* speaks volumes about the role of women during the 1980s and the feminist push for societal change. More can be learnt about the representation and roles of women in society by looking at other art pieces, from different time periods and comparing the portrayal of females in different artwork.

According to John Berger, women are the main subject in one category of European art, which is the nude (1972, p.47). Berger explains that the first nudes were depictions of the story of Genesis with Adam and Eve. Berger believed that one main feature of the depictions is that their nakedness was in the eye of the beholder. This is because eating the apple caused them to see each other differently. The second important point, in Berger's eyes, is that because Eve, the woman, was blamed for eating the apple she is "punished by being made subservient to the man. In relation to the woman, the man becomes the agent of God' and holds power over her. During the medieval period, this story was traditionally depicted scene by scene with paintings of the whole story. However, this narrative sequence disappeared during the Renaissance and was replaced by depictions of a single moment of the story. Paintings depicting this story now typically focussed on the moment of shame after Eve eats the apple. Berger continues to explain that the depictions of this story progressed, and rather than portraying their shame corresponding to each other, it is "not so much in relation to one another as to the spectator". This portrayal of shame later became a display. As painting developed and gradually became more secular, nudes were still prominent in art but were portrayed through other themes. As the idea of the nude progressed across a wider range of paintings, its meaning evolved. Instead of the idea of nakedness in the eye of the beholder, it became more about the subject, the woman in the painting, being seen by a spectator with the implication that she is aware of the spectator. (Berger, 1972, p.47-49). This

concept is the male gaze. The female subject is looking at the spectator viewing her, or viewing herself in a mirror in the same way that the spectator views her; she sees herself through a male's gaze. The portrayal of women in these paintings highlights the lack of power they held at the time of these paintings, and is evidence of how they were controlled by men. Classic paintings and the subject of the nude in European oil paintings represent gender roles and the position of women in society during the time they were created. By comparing art, in this case Kruger's work and classic paintings depicting the nude, we can begin to understand how women's roles and position in society has changed.

The way in which feminism and gender roles are represented in art has significantly changed and developed over time to reflect societal changes. These societal changes can be clearly seen when comparing representation of women in older artwork, such as classic paintings, to modern art such as photography. Classic paintings heavily feature the nude and look at women through a male gaze, showing that at the time these artworks were created women were confined by men in society and held less power. However, if we look at Kruger's work we can see that women are portrayed in a more empowered light. Despite this, her work still portrays issues of gender inequality, as much of her work focusses on fighting for gender equality and women's rights. Kruger's work is particularly useful in highlighting societal change in relation to gender roles, as her work comes from a period of transformation. Through her work, Kruger acknowledged a problem in society and questioned issues of gender roles in the public realm; it is because of this that she was able to play a part in bringing about societal change. Whilst much has changed since the time Kruger was making work, there are still gender equality issues in today's society meaning that feminism and feminist art, like Kruger's, is still applicable today.

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