
An Interview with Barbara Kruger

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An Interview with Barbara Kruger

W. J. T. Mitchell

MITCHELL: Could we begin by discussing the problem of public art? When we spoke a few weeks ago, you expressed some uneasiness with the notion of public art, and I wonder if you could expand on that a bit.

KRUGER: Well, you yourself lodged it as the “problem” of public art and I don’t really find it problematic inasmuch as I really don’t give it very much thought. I think on a broader level I could say that my “problem” is with categorization and naming: how does one constitute art and how does one constitute a public? Sometimes I think that if architecture is a slab of meat, then so-called public art is a piece of garnish laying next to it. It has a kind of decorative function. Now I’m not saying that it always has to be that way—at all—and I think perhaps that many of my colleagues are working to change that now. But all too often, it seems the case.

MITCHELL: Do you think of your own art, insofar as it’s engaged with the commercial public sphere—that is, with advertising, publicity, mass media, and other technologies for influencing a consumer public—that it is automatically a form of public art? Or does it stand in opposition to public art?

KRUGER: I have a question for you: what is a public sphere which is an uncommercial public sphere?

MITCHELL: I’m thinking of a utopian notion such as Habermas’s idea of the liberal bourgeois sphere of the culture-debating public. You may recall how he opposes that to a culture-consuming public,

which he thinks of as mainly consuming images and as being spectatorial. He contrasts it with the culture-debating public, which he associates with the literary.

KRUGER: I live and speak through a body which is constructed by moments which are formed by the velocity of power and money. So I don't see this division between what is commercial and what is not commercial. I see rather a broad, nonending flow of moments which are informed if not motored by exchange.

MITCHELL: But do you see yourself as "going with the flow," as they used to say, or intervening in it?

KRUGER: Again, I think that the word *oppositional* becomes problematized because it's binary. It has to do with anti's and pro's, or whatever, and basically I feel that there are many of us who are working to make certain displacements, certain changes, who are invested in questions rather than the surety of knowledge. And I think that those are the ways that we displace that flow a little or redirect it.

MITCHELL: When someone feels like they're either intervening or redirecting a flow like the circulation of capital or publicity, I want to ask what they have to push off against that allows them to swim upstream or to make eddies against the current. I realize we're speaking very figuratively here, but you're awfully good with figures. Is it a sense of solidarity—you said others are also engaged in doing this sort of thing, trying to disrupt the flow, intervene in the circuits in some way? Is it the fact that there are others that gives you some way of having leverage?

KRUGER: Yes, in that one hopes to make a space for another kind of viewer. But I think that there are those of us who don't see ourselves as guardians of culture. We hope for a place which allows for differences and tolerances. What we are doing is trying to construct another kind of spectator who has not yet been seen or heard.

MITCHELL: You mean a kind of innocent spectator, who hasn't been seduced yet?

KRUGER: Oh, no, I didn't say anything about innocence.

MITCHELL: You said it was someone who hasn't been approached yet?

KRUGER: No, I said someone who in fact has not had control over the devices of their own representation. Now to me that doesn't have anything to do with innocence. I'm not talking about discourses of innocence or morality or anything like that. I'm just saying that we

Barbara Kruger is an artist who works with words and pictures. **W. J. T. Mitchell**, editor of *Critical Inquiry*, is Gaylord Donnelly Distinguished Professor of English and art at the University of Chicago.

have always been represented rather than tried to represent ourselves.

MITCHELL: Would you say the issue, then, is empowerment rather than innocence?

KRUGER: Well, the question certainly is one of the constructions of power and how they work and what perpetuates them and what trips them. Sure. Absolutely.

MITCHELL: Let me ask you another question more specifically directed at some of your own work. I noticed that a couple of your pieces at least, I'm sure more than two, have in a somewhat technical sense been works of public art—that is, they were not only in a public space, but they had some kind of support from a public agency and public funding. The one I'm thinking of specifically is the “We Don't Need Another Hero” billboard, which in one version—I think it may have been the Chicago version—it said “A Foster and Kleiser Public Service Message” along the bottom of it. Did you have control over that text, or was that part of the billboard company's . . . ?

KRUGER: Of what text?

MITCHELL: The “A Foster and Kleiser Public Service Message.”

KRUGER: Oh, no, they just had that on the billboard. That was in California. And I was so *happy* that it was there, because it in fact puts these words in the mouths of this corporate group which I think is great! To see that sort of enterprise saying “we don't need another hero” is terrific! I wish that they would practice what they preach.

MITCHELL: Yes. “This is a public service message. This is not something that comes from the art world.”

KRUGER: But it really isn't something that comes from the art world because I don't feel like I'm something that comes exclusively from the art world. And it basically is a line from a Tina Turner song from a Mad Max movie, and it's a plea to reexamine hierarchies, and I don't see it as coming from any vocational ghetto, one or the other.

MITCHELL: We started to talk last time about the Little Tokyo controversy which looks like a classic engagement in the public art battles of the eighties. It's recently been connected with previous controversies over unpopular works of public art. I wonder if you could say a little more about your point of view on that controversy, what you think it meant, and the way it has worked out for you.

KRUGER: I don't see it tied to any other so-called controversies around so-called public art because to me, the process was one of negotiation. I learned a lot from it, I really liked the people who I spoke to and spoke to me and we had a very generative exchange. I basically don't feel that I'm like some mediator between God and the public who comes into a space and has got an inspiration and that's it. To



We don't need another hero

me, all my work comes out of the idea of a social relation. And I hope that all my work—regardless of where it's seen—is an extension of that relation.

MITCHELL: So you think that the process of social exchange, political negotiation, that went on around it is as much a part of the object as the thing on the wall?

KRUGER: Sure. Absolutely.

MITCHELL: Let me switch tracks a little bit and move over to the art world, a place you say you're not from, at least not exclusively.

KRUGER: Well, to say "from" . . . the only reason I said that is because you said that "this message came from the art world."

MITCHELL: Much of your work seems quite capable of leaving the art world if it ever felt it had to be there—that is, when I say "the art world" I'm thinking of physical places like the gallery or museum. Your work seems in some sense independent of that, it makes its way in the larger sphere of publicity—billboards, bumper stickers, postcards, and posters—yet it also seems, to use a loaded word, "destined" to return to the gallery and museum. What do you think is the effect of this kind of circuit, the circulation of your images—or anybody else's images—between the spaces of the art object and the spaces of publicity?

KRUGER: Well, I don't see them as separate spaces. I'm interested in pictures and words because they have specific powers to define who we are and who we aren't. And those pictures and words can function in as many places as possible.

MITCHELL: But do you think those spaces are undifferentiated or alike?

KRUGER: No, no, I think that they're different, that there are different contexts and that the contexts themselves create different meanings. I don't want to collapse the difference of those spaces *at all*, but it would be nice to occupy as many of them as possible.

MITCHELL: I agree. It seems to me that one of the interesting things about them is that as they move between these different places, it's as if they pick up momentum from one place that might be carried into another one, so that something that appears in the space of the postcard, or the shopping bag, or the poster, looks at first as if it belongs there but also doesn't belong there. Do you think that that kind of double take of the image belonging to its place but also looking like it came from somewhere else is . . . is that something you're trying to achieve?

KRUGER: Yeah, that could be good. Basically, the most important thing is that in order for these images and words to do their work they have to catch the eye of the spectator. And one does what one can to make that moment possible.

MITCHELL: Do you have any sense of how long you want to catch the spectator's eye? One thing that always strikes me about advertising

is that there's a whole lot of imagery that's competing for attention. I suppose the measure of success is how it does in that competition and perhaps also how long the image stays with you, some kind of implantation in memory. Are those the sort of criteria that you're using? How do you decide when one of your images is successful?

KRUGER: Well, I really think the criteria change for different images, and certain images are successful in one site and not in another. For instance, there are pictures that I would choose to show in a more intimate gallery space that I wouldn't use as billboards, and . . . well the pictures that are on billboards usually work in both spaces, but I think it's important to realize who your audiences are. I also think that my work is a series of attempts, and some make it for some people and not for others.

MITCHELL: So your notion of success and failure is very much tied to the site, the audience, the particular context that it's addressed to.

KRUGER: Yeah, I don't think in those terms of "success" and "failure," as sort of chiseled somewhere in bronze or something. I think that there are some pieces which have really done their work and have pleased me and others, and that others have found totally ineffective.

MITCHELL: Can you exemplify that a bit for me? What works do you think of as most successful or least successful?

KRUGER: Oh, I can't say since the effectiveness of various works depends on the pleasures of various viewers, and I wouldn't want to make a declaration of "successes."

MITCHELL: What if I were to take a couple images that I think of as epitomizing what strikes me most and what at least I'm puzzled by or what doesn't arrest me, and try them on you?

KRUGER: Okay, but I should say, it's hard for me to talk about specific meanings in specific works because it creates a kind of closure that I'm really wary of. I like people to sort of generate their own meanings, too, and if I start naming, "Well this is what I meant here and this is . . .," it's too tied to the conventions of a closed reading. But if you want to ask me some things in particular, I'll see how far I can go with it.

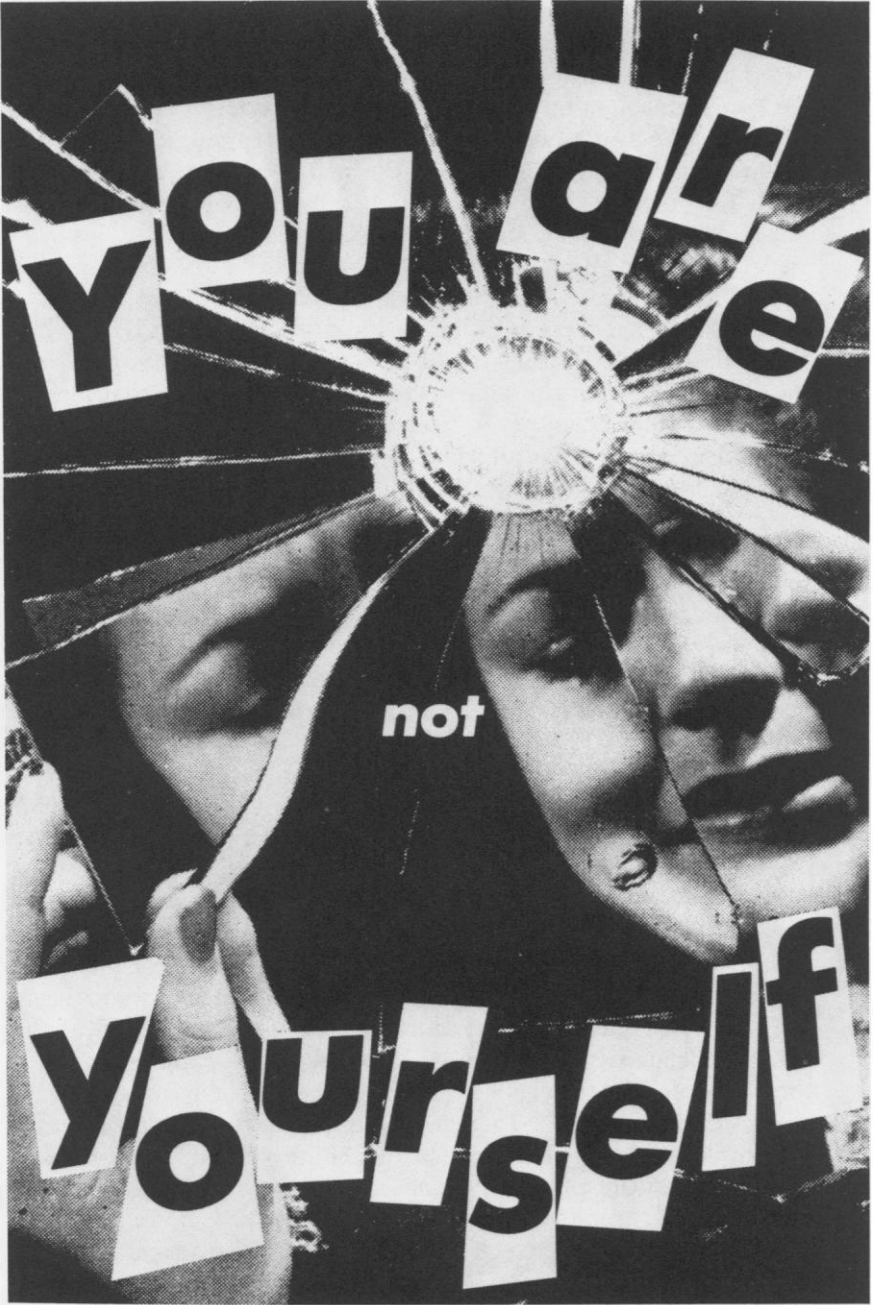
MITCHELL: Okay. This isn't so much a matter of meanings as a matter of affect.

KRUGER: Well, yeah, but what's one without the other?

MITCHELL: I don't know. These are the two images: one which I feel I don't understand yet, but it really strikes me and stays with me; and the other one . . . it isn't that it disappears for me, but I feel that perhaps I've exhausted it too quickly. The one that really strikes me and has kind of been haunting me for the last week is the last image in *Love for Sale*, "Remember Me." I told you I wasn't going to



Remember
Me



give you an interpretation, but for some reason that image just strikes me and remains deposited indelibly in my memory. Now the other one I was looking at was “You Are Not Yourself,” the shattered mirror with the logo “You Are Not Yourself.” It’s not that I forget the image but it’s just that it somehow doesn’t keep working. Partly, I guess, it’s because I feel like the fragmentation of the image and the fragmentation of the words perhaps translate too easily for me, that there isn’t enough resistance between word and image. Does any of this make sense to you?

KRUGER: Yeah, I just think that basically there are viewers for different images and certain viewers can decline that image. I’ve had much feedback on that second image. Not all of it, but a lot of it comes from women. It’s a picture of a woman who’s in front of the mirror. So, if in fact the so-called empathetic device in that piece is not sort of ringing your bell, I can certainly understand why. But it also doesn’t mean that all identity is structured through gender, necessarily, I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that certain works speak more to certain people.

MITCHELL: Perhaps it’s that identity for me isn’t structured through a mirror. That that’s just not my . . .

KRUGER: That’s very interesting. What kind of enzyme are you lacking? That’s terrific.

MITCHELL: I don’t know. Could be that this is the missing gene.

KRUGER: Or some kind of weird Lacanian lapse and you missed the mirror stage.

MITCHELL: I passed right through it to something else.

KRUGER: I would venture to guess that many people heed their mirrors at least five times a day and that vigilance certainly can structure physical and psychic identity.

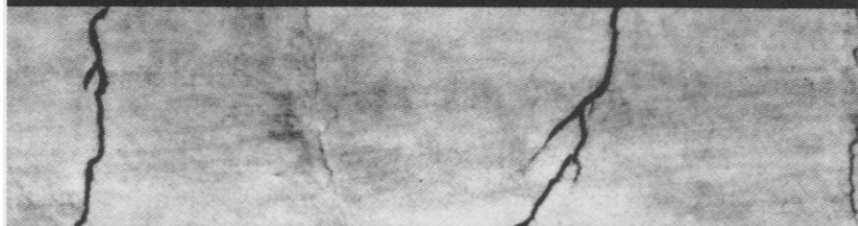
MITCHELL: One other image—and I apologize if this seems like a predictable question, but what the heck. The piece “You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece,” the Michelangelo creation scene, I take it, is a satire on the ideology of artistic genius, particularly in the trinity of Father, Son, and Michelangelo, suggesting the patriarchal succession of genius. The piece is now the property of the Museum of Modern Art, and I guess this is a question also about places that works occupy and what happens in that place. Do you think in this case the piece is undermined by the place it occupies, or does it undermine the place?

KRUGER: Neither. I think the binary form of *either/or* is not a necessary handle.

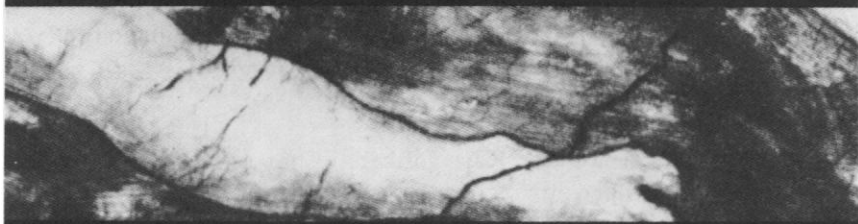
MITCHELL: Then my question is, is there a third way of seeing this which is better than those two alternatives?

KRUGER: Oh, well there are thirds, fourths, and fifths for sure. I wouldn’t be that deluded as to think that I’m going to undermine

You invest in the



divinity



of the masterpiece

the power of the trustees of the Museum of Modern Art. I basically *knew* when that piece was sold that it was sold to MOMA and luckily the curator who was working there *knew* how much it meant to me, that that work, of the works that they were looking at, be the one that they should have. It seems to me that very seldom does one have a chance to address the power relations of an institution from within that institution in that way. Ironically, the second time was when I curated the show "Picturing Greatness," also at MOMA. To me, life is far more complex than either being pure or co-opted. I don't think anyone exists outside the gravitational pull of power and exchange. I believe that we can be effective when we come to terms with concrete social realities rather than a deluded sense of utopianism. So I'm very *pleased* that the work is there, I'm very *pleased* that people come to museums, and I'm *convinced* that a lot of people, if not most people, who go to museums don't know why they're there, except this strange need to affiliate with what they think is high-class "culcha." I don't go to museums very much, but every time I go I remember the kind of staging ground for power that they can be. I would be only too happy to—I'd love to—be in there to make other assertions and to plant some doubts and ask some questions. Absolutely.

MITCHELL: You said before that no one is completely outside the market, the circuit of exchange. On the other side, would you say that no one is completely inside of it?

KRUGER: No, I wouldn't say that. Again because I think that there are more than two ways to look at this, and it's not just the old "in and out." So, no I wouldn't say that. I'd say that all of us in some way—and this is not to collapse differences of nationhood and differences of culture—I definitely think that we are all touched by the constructions of exchange. Yeah, absolutely.

MITCHELL: But do you think we're determined by them? Completely?

KRUGER: To some degree, yes. I can't say what percentage, but of course, sure.

MITCHELL: Can I ask you some questions about pictures and words? I wanted to ask you first whether you have a sense of traditional functions or characteristic roles played by word and image that you are trying to work against. If you want I'll elaborate that, or I'll just stop and let you . . .

KRUGER: Okay, elaborate.

MITCHELL: Elaborate. Okay. Kate Linker, in her introduction to *Love For Sale*, says that your pictures entice and your words accost, and that seemed like a handy formula.

KRUGER: Sometimes it could be the opposite, too. There is no recipe. At times it is just as Kate has written it. Yes, that is very true. But I think it needn't always be that way.

MITCHELL: In your book, you also talked about one of the dialectics of your work being the attempt to bring together the ingratiation of wishful thinking with the criticality of knowing better. Do you think that those two functions—which seem dialectically related: one perhaps involved with the kind of thing that Linker means when she talks about “enticement,” that is ingratiation; the other one with criticality—that the composite form of word and image lends itself to the playing-off as contrary messages in that way?

KRUGER: I think it can, but I think that there are so many different kinds of playings-off. I think it’s easy to be witty with pictures, and be seductive with pictures and words, and all that is very nice. But I think that it’s important for me to somehow, through a collection of words and images, to somehow try to picture—or objectify, or visualize—how it might feel sometimes to be alive today. That’s what my work, hopefully, is about, to some degree.

MITCHELL: Let me put the image-word relation in terms of gender, or ask you to do that. Do you have a sense of . . . here you have a semiotic opposition with word and image, and you’re also very concerned with the general problem of difference and with the specific difference inscribed in gender. Could you say something about how word and image—how that difference—plays against gender difference?

KRUGER: Plays against gender difference?

MITCHELL: Or plays on it.

KRUGER: No, I don’t think that there is a particular methodology that sort of operates across the board. No, not really. Do you want to maybe rephrase that?

MITCHELL: Well, for instance, one of the things I notice about your representations of women is that they often involve the text as a female speaker. It sounds as if the implied “I” is female and the addressee is male. This looks to me like a deliberate going against the grain of certain traditional ways of organizing words and images. I don’t need to tell you that little girls are brought up to think of themselves as things to be looked at. You can go back to the Old Testament to find sentiments like “a silent woman is the gift of God.”

KRUGER: Oh, let me write that down.

MITCHELL: So, what I’m asking is, do you think that the media themselves come with traditional codes and associations?

KRUGER: I don’t think that they’re encoded in a *specific* way all the time. I think that frequently people think that there are conspiracies of admittance, and in fact it’s not. It’s just that people are socialized in cultures in specific ways, and they take that socialization into their lives, and into their jobs, and into their successes, and into their failures. Of course. So there have been stereotypes, and as Barthes

said, the stereotype exists where the body is absent. When that embodiment—not just in a literal sense of embodiment—but when that which is embodied, or lives, is no longer there, there is a rampant sort of rushing-in of caricature and stereotype and repetition. Of course.

MITCHELL: Is part of the agenda of your images, then, to re-embody, or to restore the body to these stereotypes?

KRUGER: Yeah—and I hate to get to you on these words, but I wouldn't call it an agenda—but I would say that I am interested in sort of, in not just displacing and questioning stereotypes—of course I'm interested in that—but I also think that stereotype is a very powerful form and that stereotype sort of lives and grows off of that which was true, but since the body is absent, it can no longer be proven. It becomes a trace which cannot be removed. Stereotype functions like a stain. It becomes a memory of the body on a certain level, and it's very problematic. But I think that when we “smash” those stereotypes, we have to make sure and think hard about what we're replacing them with and if they should be replaced.

MITCHELL: If stereotypes are stains, what is the bleach?

KRUGER: Well, I wouldn't say that there is a recipe, and I wouldn't say “bleach.” Bleach is something which is so encoded in this racist culture that the notion of whitening as an antidote is something that should be avoided.

MITCHELL: So you just want to stop with the stain.

KRUGER: I don't want to get things whiter. If anything, I would hope when I say that basically to create new spectators with new meanings, I would hope to be speaking for spectators who are women, and hopefully colleagues of mine who are spectators and people of color. Now that doesn't mean that women and people of color can't create horrendous stereotypes also. Of course they can. But hopefully one who has had one's spirit tread upon can remember not to tread upon the spirit of others.

MITCHELL: Most of your work with the problem of difference has focused on gender. Are you interested in or working on problems with ethnicity, since that certainly involves a whole other problematic of embodiment?

KRUGER: Well, I think about that all the time. I think about it in terms of race, and culture. I think about it when I teach. I think about it in a series of posters that I do and of projects for public spaces, but I also—unlike a number of artists—feel very uncomfortable and do not want to speak for another. I basically feel that now is the time for people of color to do work which represents their experience, and I support that, and have written about that work as a writer, but do not want to speak for others. I basically feel that

right now people of color can do a better job of representing themselves than white people can of representing them. It's about time.

MITCHELL: Let me just take one further step with the problem of word and image, and try to tie it back into the issue of public art. I'm interested in the combining of words and images in the art of publicity and in traditional public art, the old-fashioned monument. Let me just give you a little background on what I'm thinking here. The traditional public art, say, of the nineteenth century, is supposed to have been universally readable, or at least it's often invoked that way, as something that the whole public could relate to. Everybody knows what the Statue of Liberty was supposed to mean, what it "says." When modern works of public art are criticized, they're often characterized as "unreadable" in contrast to traditional works which were supposedly universally popular. The modernist monument seems to be a kind of private symbol which has been inserted into the public space, as I think you said, the garnish next to the roast beef. So it looks as if modernism kept the monument in terms of its scale, and egotism, and its placement in a public site, but it eliminated the public access to meaning. This is all a kind of complicated preamble to asking whether it might be possible that word-image composite work—especially coming out of the sphere of advertising and commercial publicity—might make possible a new kind of public art. I know this is to bring you back to something you said you're not terribly in love with, or you have some problem with, the whole issue of public art. But, does this question make sense to you?

KRUGER: Yeah, I think that there is an accessibility to pictures and words that we have learned to read very fluently through advertising and through the technological development of photography and film and video. Obviously. But that's not the same as really making meanings, because film, and, well, television, really, and advertising—even though it wants to do the opposite—let's just talk about television—it's basically not about making meaning. It's about dissolving meaning. To reach out and touch a very relaxed, numbed-out, vegged-out viewer. Although we are always hearing about access to information, more cable stations than ever, But it's not about the specificity of information, about notions of history, about how life was lived, or even how it's lived now. It's about another kind of space. It's about, as Baudrillard has said, "the space of fascination," rather than the space of reading. "Fascinating" in the way that Barthes says that stupidity is fascinating. It's this sort of incredible moment which sort of rivets us through its constancy, through its unreadability because it's not made to be read or seen, or really it's made to be seen but not watched. I think that we can use the fluency of that form and its ability to ingratiate,

but perhaps also try to create meanings, too. Not just re-create the spectacle formally, but to take the formalities of the spectacle and put some meaning into it. Not just make a statement about the dispersion of meaning, but make it meaningful.

MITCHELL: That's what I was hoping you were going to say. My next question was whether you feel there's still some place for the unreadable image or object (which I've always thought of as one of the modernist canons: the idea that an image has mystery and aura and can't be deciphered).

KRUGER: But that's not what I'm saying. That is *not* what I'm saying.

MITCHELL: You're speaking of another kind of unreadability.

KRUGER: I'm not saying that something should be unreadable. I'm saying that it should be *readable*, but it should suggest different meanings or that it should give a meaning. I'm saying that what we have now is about meaninglessness, through its familiarity, accessibility, not through its obscurity. Whereas modernism, or what I take it to be (you've used the word), was meaningless to people because of its inaccessibility. What the media have done today is make a thing meaningless through its accessibility. And what I'm interested in is taking that accessibility and making meaning. I'm interested in dealing with complexity, yes. But not necessarily to the end of any romance with the obscure.

MITCHELL: There was one other question I wanted to ask you, and that's about interviews. The old idea about artists was that they weren't supposed to give interviews. The work was supposed to speak for itself. How do you feel about interviews?

KRUGER: I think that the work does speak for itself to some degree—absolutely. But I also feel that we're living in a time when an artist does not have to be interpreted by others. Artists can "have" words. So it's not like I think I'm going to blow my cover if I open my mouth.

MITCHELL: Well, you certainly haven't blown your cover today.