

Barbara Kruger, Graphic Designer? By Steven Heller

Barbara Kruger is not a commercial artist, but she is a graphic designer. Although she does not create signs, symbols, or messages that promote mass-market consumption or corporate identity, she exemplifies the continuum of activist designers who, since the nineteenth century, have used the tools of mass communications to subvert the myths perpetuated by the powerful. In the late 1970s Kruger was one of a group of artists who "intercepted," as she calls it, various popular media—from matchbooks to advertisements to movies—by which social and political stereotypes are propagated, redeploing them as offensive weapons against social inequity. Today the art world celebrates Kruger as one of its own, and graphic designers rightly claim her too. Given her medium and message—and as a woman who challenged an ostensibly male-dominated art establishment—her work resonates for its audacity in attacking assumptions of power as much as for transforming, through her choice of public address, the essence of art itself. That Kruger has brought graphic design into the museum proves that she has made inestimable progress in bridging the gap between art and design. By creating an art of word and image built on the vernacular of mass communication, Kruger's work seduces as well as informs.

In adopting her method Kruger had to quash certain art historical taboos regarding the unholy union between fine and applied art. Commercial art, which includes graphic design, is signs and symbols, layouts and formats, typefaces and typographies conveyed through styles and mannerisms as entertainment and information. The most utilitarian and pervasive of the popular visual arts, it serves many masters, not just the artist's muse, including marketing experts, account executives, product managers, clients, their secretaries and spouses. As a service to commerce, graphic design is usually shunted off to the sidelines of serious cultural discourse. It is a job that an artist may have done to earn a living before becoming a real artist, but certainly not afterward. And although Pop artists of the sixties (a few of whom were previously employed as art directors, graphic designers, and illustrators) monumentalized commercial art, they positioned themselves above the fray as commentators on, and critics of, consumer culture, reducing graphic design, particularly advertising and package design, to the raw material of artistic exploration, if not also the object of parody and satire.

The canard that graphic design is a distant and unwelcome cousin of art is not, however, entirely valid. In truth, graphic design has a consequential legacy throughout art history. In just one era, the early twentieth-century modern movements, Russian Constructivism, Italian Futurism, Dutch de Stijl, and German Dada were in large part characterized by the anarchic type and layout of manifestos in various esoteric and commercial media. Graphic designers were artists who led rather than followed existing ideas of rightness. The designers of free-form Futurist typography in poetry and publicity, for example, gave voice to the ideals of a movement concerned with disrupting the status quo. Likewise, with Constructivist graphic design, the unconventional arrangements of metal type-case material combined with photographic collage and montage used for propaganda posters and manifestos further underscored the role of art as a mechanism of the Bolshevik revolution, just as Dada was

a wellspring of non-conformist typography in the service of left-wing German polemics. Radical ideas perpetuated at this time ultimately influenced the New Typography, which was an unorthodox commercial design aesthetic, with political underpinnings, that sought to replace archaic standards as well as bourgeois values with utopian simplicity.

Inevitably, though, progressive ideas became stylistic mannerisms within mainstream practice. And once the cutting edge was dulled these design styles became perfectly acceptable for mass publicity and packaging, much the same way that in recent years outrageous typographic contortions challenging convention, and originating in alternative media, have swiftly become visual codes that marketers use in targeting youth. This natural feeding cycle is perhaps one reason why the postwar art world has marginalized the artifacts of commercial art and eschewed its practice.

There have indeed been blips where design plays a prominent role, notably with Fluxus, a collective of individual artists who produced reams of typographical printed matter. But it was not until the late seventies that art was unquestionably awakened from its formalist somnambulism by art world renegades like Kruger, who used the language of commercial art—words and pictures in disciplined compositions—not only to address here to fore taboo subjects, including critiques of gender, racial cultural, and economic stereotypes promoted by mass media, but co-opted the quotidian forms through which products are sold—ads, postcards, shopping bags, posters, billboards, bus shelters, and film. Kruger embraced graphic design as a component (not merely a tool) of her art. And thanks in large part to her accomplishment, the definition of what art is has changed during past twenty years to include virtually any imaginable medium. With increased commingling of the verbal and visual, the once prohibited language of commercial art is quite permissible. And with the emergence of the street as a gallery and the billboard as a frame, the appropriation of graphic design and advertising methods have become as common as paint and watercolor.

In addition to communicating ideas to a broad audience, Kruger's assimilation of commercial art has had a residual impact on the graphic design profession itself. Since graphic design is fungible, and like sponges graphic designers soak up influences wherever they can, art that utilizes commercial art, even as critique, has motivated contemporary graphic designers to push the limits of their own field further away from convention. Designers have always looked to art for inspiration, but they have rarely found so many common formal characteristics. While the intensity of commitment is weighted more towards the artist who retains more freedom than the client-driven designer, designers and artists share visual forms, suggesting that at least superficially the once formidable boundaries between art and graphic design have temporarily been blurred.

Perhaps because Kruger so completely ignored such boundaries in her mission to make art that transcends the insularity of the art world, she has arguably contributed more to current graphic design and advertising vernacular than have many leading, trend-setting designers. Kruger's art (which is her message) and her bold, minimalist typography (which is her style) have become something of a standard for those graphic designers

who reject the late eighties and early nineties trend towards excessive, decorative layering that obliterates content. She has also stimulated designers to use their skill in producing messages of social relevance.

Kruger's method was influenced by reductive Modernist graphic design, the kind that began somewhat idealistically but has dominated corporate identity during the postwar years, as well as the so-called "Big Idea" or "Creative Revolution" advertising style of the sixties, known for clever slogans and ironic single images. She certainly acquired her signature red bands of Futura Bold type from these sources, which she learned about as art director for *Mademoiselle* (in 1967 when she was twenty-two years old) and as a freelance book-jacket designer. Yet her graphic approach decidedly bucked the trend of complexity common in postmodern graphic design which claimed to be rooted in academic linguistic theory, but devolved into tony style.

Kruger did not merely adapt conventional advertising techniques in order to parody mass media, she tapped into a universal graphic expression that gave the public ready access to her ideas. As a frame for assertive commentary that questioned power structures and gender relationships Kruger's graphic style—which is best characterized as a rational "system" that unifies her messages—was more mesmerizing than the self-consciously edgy commercial styles and fashions of the day. And yet graphic designers did not immediately warm to Kruger's art. In fact, it wasn't even known to most professionals until the late eighties, when after a few highly visible exhibitions, this curious hybrid art form (at least from a designer's point of view) began to surface on their radar. The few commercial artists who encountered her work, notably the 1989 march on Washington poster, "Your body is a battleground," and the 1990 shopping bag with the now classic slogan, "I shop therefore I am," as well as billboards, posters, and postcards, were surprised to see graphic design—*their métier*—in prestigious galleries and museums. Forget for a moment, if that is really possible, Kruger's content, her form—the black, white, and red which are perhaps the most eye-catching of all color combinations (e.g. the early *Life* magazine and the Nazi emblem) —was so graphically powerful it unhinged the complacency of graphic designers. Add to this the message and Kruger became a force to be reckoned with.

Nevertheless, for some it was difficult to reconcile such an overt use of graphic design as art. Sure, the Guerrilla Girls produced advertisements criticizing gender inequality in American art museums that were rendered in an anonymous advertising style. But these were ads by artists, not integral pieces of art. Kruger's work, conversely, was perplexing because she propagated ideas in the same manner as mass product promotions, but with a very different intent. Among designers, the parochial attitude was to criticize a "downturn artist" for usurping their methods, while the more enlightened welcomed the graphically powerful work as subversion of the status quo. Presumably, conservative patrons of art were nonplused that such overt advertising was anointed as art. But what Kruger accomplished in melding art and graphic design—indeed art as graphic design—made art more populist, enabling a wide audience to consume social and —cultural dynamics that in other art might be more inaccessible. Which is not to say that Kruger's work is transparent. It is anything but. Her pictures and words are almost like teaser

advertisements—in fact, she arguably influenced the current trend in teasers—that hints at a message and stimulates attention by prompting curiosity. The parts that she leaves out—the ideas tucked in between the picture and the words—demand viewer participation and interpretation.

"Creative advertising" (current jargon for imaginative as distinguished from hack work) does not give the audience everything on a silver platter, but rather conditions the viewer to "expect the unexpected" in order to capture brand loyalty. Just think of Absolut vodka; the campaign began a decade ago as an abstract notion using art and over time has built upon an identity based on curious juxtapositions of product and image. Kruger's work is based on consistency and surprise too, but for a different purpose. Her audience has come to expect the black-and-white "stock" images and Futura type which gives the work its rational order and graphic identity. But the surprise appears in her countless variations on the basic form, from installations with huge type exigences on floor, walls, and ceiling, to wrapping a New York City bus with quotations about power and liberation.

Once gallery and museum artists balked at making art on commission for commercial advertising or editorial clients. Sure, a few might do the occasional book jacket or magazine cover (before Absolut came along), but often it was a reproduction of an existing painting or drawing. As Kruger's popularity grew within the graphic design field, editorial art directors began calling her to "illustrate" or rather compliment texts that matched her concerns. Completing the proverbial circle from when she was a magazine art director, Kruger's work has appeared on the covers of *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, *Ms.*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, revealing the adaptability of her method—which can be a dubious virtue. Since she has achieved high visibility, various designers now brazenly mimic the Kruger style. And yet she is rarely perturbed, because when her style is stripped of its meaning and used only for its graphic surface, it validates her critique of the entire system. But when it is used to promote issues that she believes in, as in the case of a 1998 advertising campaign for women's free-choice that appeared on the sides of New York City buses, Kruger doesn't mind at all. (Incidentally, regarding the pro-abortion campaign which has won a few advertising industry awards] permission to use her style was requested, which she gave.) Kruger asserts that she does not retain exclusivity to Futura Italic Bold or any of the design conceits that she borrowed from the vernacular.

Popular style in graphic design has a short life span. The more that designers copy a trend—whether its layered grunge type or French curves or black matte—the sooner it becomes clichéd. So with such unfettered access to her style by graphic designers, does Kruger risk becoming ineffectual? Only time will offer the definitive answer. Nonetheless, this is where the similarities to graphic design—or any art of the moment—cease. Although Kruger employs the language of mass communication, and has developed a visual personality as unified as any corporate identity, her graphic design is but a framework for organizing ideas into decipherable units. As an artist, however, she continues to expand her means of communicating by broadening the scope of her media and adding new forms, including video and satiric sculpture. There are changes from year

to year and installation to installation whereby all elements evolve. But more importantly, her art is motivated by a history of social involvement, her mission is constant, and the commitment to her art and the society it serves insulates Kruger from the vicissitudes of fashion.

Contrary to the assertion of this essay, Kruger rejects the terms design and advertising in defining her work, stating, "I'm someone who works with pictures and words, and people can take that to mean anything they like." However, by using a graphic design vocabulary Kruger has not only influenced graphic designers, she is a key figure in the field. At a time when many designers are looking for ways to balance their work for commerce with social responsibility Kruger is a role model who proves that graphic design is an influential medium for good and ill. And since the medium propels the message the designer is a conduit through which myth and reality are passed onto the public. Through her own interventions, by using the techniques of mass media to critique mass media, she proves that the public can indeed be conditioned by design to expect the unexpected in public media—the truth.