

Is This It

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to accompany the exhibition curated by Lloyd Gill of the same title. The essay will look into key elements under the theme of identity. Key elements such as mass-culture and how particular artists have observed the culture we live in and what techniques those artists have in applying mass-cultural observations to their work.

During the 1980's in America, there were a number of artists who closely observed feminist attitudes and included these attitudes within their work. I am interested in Barbara Kruger's work and hope to gain a deep insight into her practice. I know that Kruger's work uses bold iconographic statements that relate to mass-culture and in some cases feminism.

I want to look at artists who question gender and I have chosen to examine four in particular. They are Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Robert Gober and Sarah Lucas. I will ascertain their backgrounds and ideological understandings of identity, presenting my research along with my interpretations of their work.

Identity is a part of human existence and the reason we strive to be different. As we perceive society and absorb mass-culture we are forming preferences which shape our sense of identity. take on board what we are attracted to concerning our likes. Advertising executives work hard to ensure that the adverts they design sell the product or service. They do this by making advertisements which appeal to our nature as human beings. They tempt us with what we desire, be it food, materialistic objects or travel locations. The Psychology of human behavior has been studied by many artists from the Freud generation, where the Surrealists objectified Freud's teachings and used the ideas of the subconscious mind in their work.

Mass-Culture utilizes Freudian theory in a way which subverts attitudes towards buying products. You may find yourself buying products you don't need, can't afford, but make you feel better for doing so.

Mass-Culture: Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger studied graphic design at Parsons School of Design, Syracuse, New York. While studying graphic design her tutors Diane Arbus and Marvin Israel were aware of Kruger's interest in art and encouraged her to assemble a professional portfolio. Kruger entered the design department of Mademoiselle magazine and became chief designer a year later. During the late 1960's Kruger began working on political texts for book covers.

The basis of Kruger's work is appropriation of iconography on to mass-media imagery to expose hidden agendas. "Such work as 'Untitled', 1986, exploits an economy of images and text to articulate and undermine the power based relations established in such media images."¹



1. *Untitled* Barbara Kruger

¹ Grove Art online, copy right 2009 Oxford University Press.

This work has accompanied an object which looks similar to the back of a tear-off matches packet, where one may find in one of the many convenient neon rich motels which are so randomly isolated on America's highways. Kruger's art is on the reverse, which has appropriated a monochrome print of a nuclear explosion with iconography selected by Kruger from media disarray.

The power this work has is the suggestion that in one external boom all manias, stresses and concerns can be executed in one quick swoop. Kruger's work is intended to act as a billboard promotion in the peripheral vision of drivers and portray subliminal statements as advertisers do every day, but in a hectoring tone that can be often feminist in perception.

When being interviewed by Jenny Siegel in 1987, Kruger mentions the impact and influence of her graphic design background.

"I had friendships with many of the artists who were developing a vernacular sort of signage. However, the use of words lent my work a kind of un-cool explicitness. I have to say that the biggest influence on my work, on a visual and format level, was my experience as a graphic designer - the years spent performing serialized exercises with pictures and words. So, in a sort of circular fashion, my "labour" as a designer became, with a few adjustments, my work as an artist."²

I think Kruger's work asserts that mass-culture is forced upon us and molds our identities into a needier, lustful entity. Desire only exists where pleasure is absent. Desire for what is forced upon on us, that which is often unattainable.

It is evident, that Kruger is not exclusively commenting on American culture, her work translates many national identities. Her work assesses the struggles of others as everybody comes to terms with who they are. Kruger comments here on the photography which is appropriated in her work.

² Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art/Material Culture and Everyday Life/p377, line 4-9.

"I think that the exactitude of the photograph has a sort of compelling nature based in its power to duplicate life. The thing that's happening to photography today vis-à-vis computer imagining, vis-à-vis alteration is that it no longer needs to be based on the real."³

Kruger is suggesting here, that photography no longer has to keep to the rhetoric of realism and can linger into the course of the hyper-real.

Cindy Sherman

During 1977, Sherman began a series of monochrome photographs, which employed elements of persona of various different characters appropriated from film noir of the 1940's-50's era.

When writing about her own work in a statement for 'Documenta 7', Kassel Germany 1982, curated by Rudi Fuchs; Sherman discussed what her work was doing and how each photograph disguises the common denominator, herself.

"I want that choked-up feeling in your throat which maybe comes from despair or teary-eyed sentimentality conveying intangible emotions. I have this enormous fear of being misinterpreted, of people thinking the photos are about me, that I'm really vain and narcissistic."⁴

When we look at some of the characters Sherman has attempted to exemplify, we see that Sherman has chosen a stratum towards style and elegance. Film noir of the 1940's-50's often showed mysterious story lines by using epitomized male egos to dramatise the story, along with the delicate interwoven feminine roles, which carefully stabilised the

³ Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art/Material Culture and Everyday Life/p378, line 31-33.

⁴ Cindy Sherman, Untitled statement, Excerpts taken from Documenta 7, I (Kassel: Documenta, 1982),

plot. In the photograph, 'Untitled Film Still #13', 1978, we see a young woman reaching for a book, while gazing directly out of shot.

Her near-school girl attire transforms Sherman into an unguarded luscious librarian. It is her outward gaze and sharp features, which interests me and what is being suggested of this woman we see. The look away, I feel suggests an uncertainty of the book she is reaching for, as if the subject matter contained inside is some long forgotten taboo.



2. Untitled Film Still #13. 1978, Cindy Sherman

Robert Gober

"As a young artist in New York in the 1970's, Gober worked as an artist's assistant and carpenter, building complicated, shaped stretchers for Elizabeth Murrey, and crafting accurately proportioned and detailed doll's houses to make money. His father was a factory worker and an amateur craftsman who built the family house himself."⁵

This is the foundation of Gober's art, yes studying in Tyler School of Art, Rome shaped his work, but his art's very existence lays sentiment to his upbringing and what he learnt as a young man. His Father's interest in craftsmanship, undoubtedly influenced Gober to produce work which stipulates precision with miniscule detail.

⁵ <http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/robert-gober/default.shtm>.

Gober's work in the 1980's wore the pop shroud that was closely connected with artists such as Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Ashley Bickerton. These artists worked with objects from the real world and appropriated the objects from its original state of independence and playing with it as a toddler would do with a new toy. Gober's work also used mass consumerism as a subject to comment on through thought provoking work.

Here we see a work by Gober called 'Untitled leg' (on page 6), which was created in 1989-90. I believe the first question one would ask is; whose leg is this? Obviously the leg is not real as the exposed flesh would have rotten away years ago. So this work is suggesting that the solo leg and clothing is from a different era in time.

The pulled sock allows only a narrow band of flesh to be exposed, but also signifies correct manner and strict formality like a drill instructor demanding absolute perfection to the millimeter, which is all associated with the realism of the work.



3. *Untitled* Robert Gober

The work is strikingly realistic to the point to where the wax leg has actual human hair sprouting relentlessly like a deer carelessly meandering in a field of wheat. This insistence to detail belongs to his Father's teachings. The young Gober learnt well and that detailed realistic work encapsulates our nature to observe as humans. The viewer is caught unaware by this work by its strangeness and reflection to identifying the leg.

"These works often evoke the paradoxical phenomenon that Sigmund Freud called "The Uncanny" - Something ordinary that through even a slight disorientation reveals a hidden strangeness bringing out long-forgotten fears and collapsing long established certainties."⁶

Sarah Lucas

Lucas is a Goldsmith's graduate of the YBA era of 1988-90. A Brit-art phenomenon of a group of young graduates managed to successfully launch their own careers within the same year of graduating. The group included the now famous Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Angus Fairhurst, Gary Hume, Matt Collishaw, Sam Taylor-Wood, Michael Landy, Ian Davenport, Gillian Wearing, Fiona Rae, Anya Gallaccio, Simon Patterson, Mark Wallinger and Sarah Lucas.

Lucas utilises gender roles and the objectification of the sexes. Androgyny is a term which is used to describe masculinity and femininity as not conceived as opposite ends of one spectrum, but as two divisions joined as one.

This work by Lucas titled 'Oh Soldier', (page 8) uses androgyny as an assimilation of cross-gender by appropriating braces, nylon tights and workmen boots. As the title clearly states 'Oh soldier', the reference is made to war and this is clever Lucas at her best, Lucas has re-contextualised an assimilation of clothing from Britain in the 1930's-40's era, using wire coat hangers as a framework device.

⁶ http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81067

The viewer sees a projection of human essence of both sexes combined and interrelated. The idea of androgyny in the 1930's -40's era was at a level of taboo so entrenched that the very mention of cross-dressing would have caused outrage, where today the subject of androgyny is omnipresent in media and film.

The work uses an *aura* as a signification of a unique presence of time and space. By the use of historical events, and items gathered from an early era of British history, Lucas has augmented a time-frame.



4 *Oh! Soldier*

Sarah Lucas

Conclusion

I have thoroughly researched into the four artists I mentioned in the introduction and observed how they have questioned their own identity in relation to mass-culture, femininity and gender. Barbara Kruger was fascinating to research into and understanding her quest for embodiment in relation to human behavior and the interrelationship of body and mind. I found her work re-contextualises iconography through appropriating photography, which is relevant to scrutinising mass-culture.

Kruger combines iconography from media, juxtaposed slogans, jargon and political disarray, in a regurgitated form that commits to shouting out feminist speak, outrage, identification of society and links the imaginary that has been used which has also been juxtaposed from the media.

Kruger interweaves national identities of America and other nations by the use of the selected images being vague enough to relate to anywhere. The nuclear explosion could have been photographed anywhere and closely ties with any nuclear explosion in history. The iconography is strictly forms into a feminist stronghold or political manifestation. Thus, connects with the society of women, the Government and geo-politics.

Cindy Sherman's provocative photography drives towards feminist epistemological concerns as she acts out alter-egos of a highly characterized era of 1940's-50's film noir. Sherman's ability to transform into a multitude of guises makes the viewer halt and wonder about our own identity. Her work is a facet of characters from a retiring shy librarian to a commanding officer of law. Sherman's work is not narcissistic in any way as what is portrayed are egos of characters from a decadent era of film.

I was greatly enthused in observing Robert Gober's sculptures for their expression of the human species in terms of mind-body separation. Gober's work questions the body, the body's existence, and many philosophical ideas like that of Descartes; the mind is

immaterial, a realm of thought, whereas the body is material, a realm of natural cause and effect.

Gober's sense of realism connects well to the theme of identity. There is a sense of loss, loss of limb, loss of body and loss of mind. We all can relate to a loss of person, be it ourselves, or a loved one. There is a defining connection between perception and how we perceive from what is real and what is not and what is surreal. Gober plays on human perception in the work 'Untitled leg', which connects to our identity.

Sarah Lucas's work was intriguing, but through the research I made I acquired an understanding of why she questioned gender and simultaneously questions her own existence.

Lucas's work challenges society's identity by amalgamating the sexes. Lucas's work is brilliant at questioning gender and stereotypes which are in part the fundamentals of identity.

List of Illustrations

1. (1986). One multiple from a series of seven photolithographs on matchbooks, Each: 1 7/8 x 2 1/8 x 5/16" (4.8 x 5.4 x 0.8 cm).
Publisher: David Meitus and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Edition: unlimited. Given anonymously. © 2011 Barbara Kruger
2. **Untitled Film Still #13. 1978.**
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
3. 1989-90. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair, 11 3/8 x 7 3/4 x 20" (28.9 x 19.7 x 50.8 cm). Gift of the Dannheisser Foundation.
© 2011 Robert Gober
4. 2005. Braces, wire hanger, cast concrete army boots, and nylon stockings, 6' 4" x 18" x 11" (193 x 45.7 x 27.9 cm). Fractional and promised gift of Lawrence Benenson. © 2011 Sarah Lucas