The Postmodern Simulacrum— A critique of the work of Allen Weiss and Barbara Kruger

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Abstrak

Om die aktiewe sestiger/sewentiger politieke dialoogstyl na 'n gebruikersvriendelike van-en-vir die mense dialoog te verander, betree postmoderne taalgebruik die verhewe arena van skyn-realiteit, waarin 'fiksies' geskep word deur dié wat 'beter weet', en fiksies/waarhede word sinonieme in 'n psigo-analitiese wêreld van onsekerheid en twyfel. Dit word beklemtoon in die kritiese essay Lucid intervals: postmodernism and photography *(1990), deur Allen S. Weiss, waarin hy die werk van die kunstenaar Barbara Kruger bespreek. In sy essay weerspieël Weiss die verplasing, van die teorie na die praktyk, van hierdie nuwe kennisbasis in die epistemologiese verskuiwing. Die onderwerp word oëskynlik ten gunste van die voorwerp 'vernietig' (maar dit beteken slegs dat die onderwerp verander word na 'n voorwerp), en die voorwerp self word verander na 'n kopie van die werklikheid. In hierdie vals spieëlbeeld is daar geen onderwerp waarna verwys kan word of wat verstaan kan word nie — 'n sielkundige verskuiwing in waarneming, wat enigeen wat hierdie beelde sien, van normale interrelasionele kontak isoleer met betrekking tot sosiale kommunikasie en kulturele waardes as riglyne. 'Visuele woorde' in kuns is nie op sigself bewyse van realiteit nie, maar hulle kan ons waarneming van realiteit verander. Omdat skyn-realiteit op hierdie irrasionele wyse oortuigend kan wees — daar is nog steeds 'n sterk skakel tussen onderwerp en voorwerp insoverre dit inligting-in-die-wêreld betref — kan die gesimuleerde voorwerp (as versteekte voorwerp) terugverwys na die 'normale' voorrang-verwantskap wat die onderwerp oor die voorwerp het, en sielkundig word dit aanvaar as die dominasie van die een oor die ander. Omdat ons nie bewustelik aan hierdie voorrang-verwantskap as dominasie, in die politieke en ideologiese sin, dink nie, kan ons die transformasieproses, wat in die visuele oortuigingskrag van Kruger se werk plaasvind, verkeerd interpreteer. Hierdie transformasie, of epistemologiese verskuiwing van postmodernisme, herinterpreteer taal as 'n kommunikasiesisteem wat die bewuswording van die 'nuwe sosiale realiteit' vergemaklik: die beheer van inligting en kennis verbloem as die postmoderne uitroep na vryheid.*

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Abstract

To effect the change from an active 60s/70s style political dialogue to a user-friendly dialogue of-and-for the people, postmodern language use enters the sublime arena of virtual reality, wherein 'fictions' are created by those who 'know better', and fictions/truths become synonymous in a psychoanalytic world of uncertainty and doubt. This is highlighted in the critical essay Lucid intervals: postmodernism and photography *(1990) by Allen Weiss, in which he also discusses the work of the artist Barbara Kruger. In his essay Weiss shows the transference, from theory to practice, of this new basis of knowledge in the epistemological shift. The new epistemology allows a subject to be seemingly 'destroyed' in favour of an object (but this only means an attempt is made to change the subject into an object, it does not mean the subject disappear). The object itself is then changed to a copy of the real, and in this false 'mirror image' no subject (so it would seem) can be found to refer or to relate to —a*

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psychological shift in perception that isolates anyone viewing these images from normal interrelational contact re:*social communication and cultural values as guidelines. 'Visual words' in art are not in themselves indicative of reality; they can, however, change our perception of reality. Because virtual reality may be persuasive in this irrational way — because there still remains a very strong link between object and subject as far as information-in-the-world is concerned —t he simulated object (in its operation as a hidden subject) can relate back to the 'normal' primacy of the subject over object relation, and psychologically this is accepted as the domination of the one over the other. Because we do not consciously think of this relation of primacy as domination, in the political and ideological sense, we may mistake the transformation process that takes place in the visual persuasiveness of Kruger's work. This transformation or shift in the epistemology of postmodernism re-interprets language as a communication system that facilitates a reading of the 'new social reality': the control of information and knowledge disguised as the postmodern call to freedom.*

Introduction

The research contained in this article hinges on the use that I believe the language-game of postmodernism makes of existing dichotomies and contradictions in the social/cultural domain of modern life, and these are the age-old questions of *being* and *becoming*, life and death, the origins of meaning and existence in the material world or in the metaphysical realm.

If the factor of 'prior signification', the idea of shared meaning and understanding in the social structure itself is absent, the postmodern 'descriptive' voice becomes unintelligible, speaks of matters unknown, and largely unknowable, to the social domain. If, however, that voice is 'prescriptive', it can only be effective if the audience understands the prescription, if the language use is shared between speaker and listener. 'Language' in this context refers to the textual or spoken language, but, with the postmodern blurring of distinctions, the 'visual language' of art has appropriated the mechanisms of textual language, and a work of art is 'read' — interpreted — as a textual signifier. However, the factor of 'prior signification' can, in a certain sense, be absent, the voice can still be prescriptive, and its message still be understood by listeners. This would, on the face of it, be a contradiction; but then, I believe, so is much of postmodern theory and practice. The particular use of a materialist postmodern language-game that I refer to in this article, displays this seemingly contradictory element. I have come to believe that many of the 'postmodern' discourses are using a new form of language-game that at first sight seems familiar, but that show elements of persuasion and subversion undermining that very familiarity. This language-game also contains elements that undermine the Western idea of existence and meaning itself. The results of this new language-game can be seen in the artistic, and materialistic, language-use of that aspect of postmodernism that produces the simulacrum.

One of the reasons for this contradiction may be what George Steiner (1989: 93) described as a break between the word and the world, which defines the very term *modernity* itself; yet if we look at postmodernism from a different angle, we see that it is hardly as radical a break with modernism as some would have us believe (other postmodernists refute this 'break'), and the break between word and world seems to have been reconstructed. Describing the work of Piero Pizzicannella, Balmas (1983: 32) said, "But if we look at how he arrived at those affinities, we see that his outlook is in fact quite different, embracing highly interesting images ... for which the story told is unimportant ... where one must take as sufficient reason for their appearance only the artist's progressive effort to *move away from any preference for subject-matter over language and its use*" (my italics). Late postmodernist art, whether it be media-based, installation, sculp-

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ture, or painting, uses language as we understand it, in the textual sense; the visual language of this type of postmodern art is not the visible surface of the work, neither is it a 'visibly' materialistic visual language, but the image of the work; it is the *how* and not the *what* of postmodern artistic endeavour. Contextual ambiguity produces works of art in an intentionally ambiguous way. Michael Corris (Corris & Nickas 1993: 83) says that "These young artists are much more inclined to admit that a contradiction between the *what* and the *how* exists in their paintings. I would go farther: it is central to the way they work". *What* the artist says may be linked to the descriptive in the language-game, describing the 'new' social insights (cf. below), intermingled with the 'old' or culturally accepted social insights, so that the reader/viewer of the work can understand, or rather, *come to realize*, the message contained in the prescriptive element of the work, the *how*.

Jameson (1992: 139) provides a clue to this theory-to-practice transition, in speaking of the 'fashionable term' *materialism* in connection with philosophy and theory. Materialism now means, virtually, the repudiation of the essential, or anti-materialist/anti-referential, in deconstruction strategy, for materialism is "the dissolution of any belief in 'meaning' or in the 'signified' conceived of as ideas or concepts that are distinct from their linguistic expressions". However paradoxical this materialist philosophy

may seem, the postmodern materialist theory of language transforms the function and operation of theory itself, and in the effort to accommodate the demand for recognition from the Other, this theory, being a 'materialist language', wants to formulate, and I would add, regulate, verbal propositions incapable of implying "unwanted or ideological consequences" (Jameson 1992:139). This is not possible in reality, and the consequences of practice following theory "is a violent and obsessive return to ideological critique in the new form of a perpetual guerilla war among the material signifiers of textual formulations" (Jameson 1992: 139). The 'material signifiers' — as textual signifiers — are to be 'read' as the protagonists in this new language-game of postmodernism, and their 'textual formulations' as the 'new' insights into culture, history, and literature. The textual formulations are developed in theory, and convey little empathy toward the common-sense reality of society; to speak of 'common-sense' is to be a 'metaphysical prig' (Himmelfarb 1992: 13). Yet the giving of substance to the theory, the open ideological critique of the symbolic forms of society from within the postmodern discourse, show a willingness to let society participate in this discourse. Without that 'return' to society, there can be no overcoming of the self by the Other; the material signifiers, in their diverse forms and ideologies, wage 'guerilla war' for the position of the Other.

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I believe the following to be the case: there exists, within postmodernism itself, a discourse using a 'materialist' theory of language, one that seems to adhere to the critical project of postmodernism as it evolved from deconstruction and post-structuralism, which is instead a discourse that subverts both the critical postmodernist/deconstructionist discourse, and the so-called metanarratives of the logocentric tradition. This language-game does so by speaking to the social domain in a descriptive and prescriptive voice, using a subverted form of prior signification that works on a double level of cognition, and this effectively creates *realization*, a situation in which we 'come to understand' that 'they' (the theorist/artist) must be right. The descriptive in this language-game speaks of so-called 'matters unknown' (incommensurability), and yet remains intelligible, because those matters are *not* unknown to us, the only unknown factor being the real significance of what we listen to, or 'read' in a work of art. It is in this new significance that we find the prescriptive in a materialist postmodernism, for we can clearly see the countermanding — to postmodern critical theory — claims of the artist/writer, for as Wood and Harrison (1993: 247) say, these claims "to universalism, creativity, the privileged — and mythic — insightfulness of the author/artist, plainly stands opposed to critical postmodernism". These 'new insights' contain an alternative 'story', one that claims to be better than the discredited 'story' of logocentrism.

In psychoanalytical terms this becomes *the better story that explains the facts*, an element that is totally contradictory to, or is supposed to be contradictory to, the aims of postmodern critical theory. In this *better story* we find the use of contextual ambiguity, appropriation, the advancement of 'alterity' as the better story of the self, the emergence of the Other and its claims for recognition from that self, the rise of hybridity and heterogeneity in pluralism and in Lyotard's 'babbling of languages', that seem to be in itself, and because of its solidarity, a form of homogeneity and a new kind of 'universalism'.

The better story that explains the facts

The privileged and insightful claims of a materialist work of art becomes *the better story* of the Other, which in many cases happens to be the theorist/artist (cf. above). Presence is to be found in absence, in the entirely other, thus the entirely other becomes presence, because, as Levinas says (quoted in Lyotard 1989: 278), *the self does not proceed from the other; the other befalls the self.* What Levinas wrote is: "The interiority assuring separation *must*... produce a being that is absolutely closed on itself, not drawing its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the Other. And this closure *must not* forbid the exit out of interiority, in order that exteriority may speak to it, reveal itself to it, in an unpredictable movement" (Lyotard 1989: 278). In the light of Derridean deconstruction we can derive mean-

ing from this passage through interpreting it in the 'normal' logocentric sense of the term; it refers to the revealing of other voices/readings in the text. But *because* the Other is extratextual and logocentric, in the sense of being allied to a presence and privilege, this reading does not satisfy someone like Lyotard, and we can understand this materialist appropriation (*the better story*) best by interpreting it in the light of Derrida's warning: if an 'interpretation' simply declares an end to logocentric reason and the metaphysics of presence, and offers an alternative set of arguments, this will "amount to an inevitable and immediate fall back into its system ... one is back in the perception of the thing itself, the production of its presence, its truth, as idea, form or matter" (Derrida quoted in Norris & Benjamin 1988: 31). Instead of deconstructing the logocentric tradition, the Other comes to occupy the position of the self, by using a subverted form of deconstructive strategy. What such a pragmatic 'interpretation'/argument also proves, is that the use of a materialist theory of language gives the critic and the artist the 'right' to 'make' the truth. This would satisfy Rorty's (1992: 176) claim that the truth is 'made' and not 'found out there', proving Terence Hawkes (1977: 144) right, "it can be seen to cause a new reality to come into being".

According to Brooks (1991: 11), Lacan holds that "the unconscious is structured like a language ... *is* the language of the other"; this language of

the Other is its power, and offers 'guarantees' to the self — 'security and satisfaction'. But these guarantees come with a cost, "namely the acceptance of the 'Castration' which is the inevitable by-product of being subject to language and its prohibitions" (Wright 1992: 26). *The acceptance of the 'Castration'* equates with Levinas' *conditional upon the closure of the self*, since Lacan, like deconstruction, sees not a relation between signifier and signified, but a relation between signifiers, thus "escaping from the signifieds, leaving the subject signifying 'something entirely different from what it says'" (Wright 1992: 26). Lacan, through Freud, had turned "the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' into a mirage" (Wright 1992: 26).

If simplistic (primary) reference to real-life situations were all that the 'postmodernist' had to advance as an argument, there would be no epistemological shift in the basis of knowledge. A materialist postmodernism works on a secondary, deeper level, in which it uses Gestalt psychology against itself, and it is here that its real success lies — with the myth-making properties of art 'as species' — the success that is then appropriated by the postmodernist materialist to privilege the Other, in order to strengthen it. Using the Gestalt psychology of consumerism, a process which man is perfectly in tune with, and given the fact that this psychological organization of language and visual stimuli is *art making the artist's world visible*, this new language-

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game creates a mythology of redemption and sacrifice that can not only be recognised for what it is, but is very difficult to resist or counter; man searches for this 'healing and reintegrating' myth of redemption to 'save' him, and, since this myth is offered in the form it takes in the 'creative fictions' of art, it seems to promise exactly what man hopes for.

The simulacrum

Can't pictures also be prophetic; and falsely so?
Kitaj (1989:71).

Because the Other is logocentric and extra-textual[1] in concept, our logocentric tradition is not being deconstructed so much as reconstructed, in the Other's image. The strategy for this reconstruction is to use the tradition of logocentric reasoning and language use, and to combine it with a new theory of meaning that subverts, but does not destroy. It is with these 'images' of the expressions of our culture we have to deal with. These images constitute the 'conversation' that has to be opened in order to establish the 'right' of the 'more realistic' and 'rational' discourses, and this 'conversation' has a subverted hermeneutics as its base: an epistemological shift.

Nothing seems *real*, and everything is simulated. Allen Weiss (1990: 155) begins the epistemologi-

cal drift with a reference to *Veronica's Shrouds* (1983), a short story by Michel Tournier, in which the photographer, Veronica, becomes obsessed with making representations of her model, ever increasingly simulated and *enhanced* representations of the original, until she destroys her model in this accelerated and manic search for the ultimate in *telling the story* of identity. In the process, she subverts the 'meaning' (the life) of the model, the subject, and turns it into an object of very minor value, if at all. Subject becomes object in the search for the simulacrum; the self-autonomy and activity of the subject are sought *in the simulation of the object* itself, and the subject is destroyed. We see this process at work in the genderized/artistic 'conversation around the body', and apropos of this, Bel Mooney (1986: 22) says that our world has become so obsessed with image, which includes images of the body and fantasy, that we have created a market for the 'dramatically horrible'; that we, having become accustomed to image and consequently finding it problematic to deal with reality, find the truth in image. That image in the subject has been dissimulated, the author is dead and the reader has to take on the role of making, not sense, but *use of,* the stories presented for consumption. With the psychoanalytic theory and schizophrenic tendency entering the world of art — which may as well be known as the world of 'writing', for even the photographs of *Word Art*

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[1]   The term extra-textual is used in the same context as the postmodern claim that logocentrism is extra-textual: this refers to the search for meaning in a presence, or 'truth', outside the intra-linguistical mechanism of the text itself.

are 'written' more than 'taken' — the emphasis is on disorientation and the breakdown of the system of significations.

Objects, or simulacra of the original subjects, in the form of photographs, paintings, and novels, can take the place of subjects, and assume the significance of the original. Thus Veronica's *dermography* takes the place of the photograph in her attempt to reach the 'real', the ultimate *being/*significance of the object. It is unfortunate that this process should include the death of the model she uses. After countless contacts with developing fluid, to activate the process of the simulacrum and serve as a kind of human contact print, the body of the model deteriorated to the point of his death (Weiss 1990: 155-156). We may compare the developing fluid to this new 'creative' narrative, and the body of the model to society. Veronica's attainment of the final simulacrum removes the original, an extreme example of the search for identity. As story-telling, this process copies Nietzsche's myth of redemption: the 'will to power' is supreme, and can demand even the sacrifice of the self (subject) to attain the oneness, the ultimate state of being that is known only to the enlightened self. In mystical terms, this is Foucault's death of the self to allow the *daimon*, which is the Other of the self, to exist, because Foucault learned well from Nietzsche that the only purpose of existence is through the self, completely self-referential and self-centred on its own existence (Miller 1994:

71-72). But that existence, or being, is still dependent on *objects*: a photograph of the self, or a simulated self in the mirror, or worse, as *others* see the 'self' that is supposed to be you. So that will not serve, and what does not serve, subjugates. The self has to turn inward, away from the subject (the body), even away from the object (photographs of the body), and seek identity in *the simulacrum that is the real* — in Dionysus, the *daimon*, Faust — it does not matter which. It seems that Barthes' ''desire to change the object itself", and Benjamin's "desire to politicize art" are to be read in this context, according to Weiss (1990: 162-163), and this calls to mind Nietzsche's *pathos of distance* (Nietzsche 1987: 122) — to truly be oneself. Identity does not exist in either the subject or the object — there is no 'home' to return to — and exile is the only human condition that can lead to the 'truth' of the self, in this simulacrum that is more real than the original.

Thus materialism (materialist postmodernism) ostensibly became a 'private language' *in code*, while seeming to speak the language of the social bond. Hal Foster (1985: 179-188) likens the artists Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer to Barthes' "watcher at the crossroads": the 'crossing' of the new language-game being "of languages of the self, of art and of social life". The ambiguity and blurring of distinctions, the transformation of the subject into object, and the epistemological shift in the signification of the object,

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allow artists to use these languages as both 'targets and weapons'. According to Weiss (1990: 167) the images of Kruger's work investigate the *symbolic* aspect of photography (as sign or simulacrum), but the work of these artists, whether overtly or implicitly using these *languages of crossing*, avails itself of *all* the categorizations of C.S. Peirce: *icon, symbol*, and *index*. Weiss (1990: 168) explains the use of Peirce's semiotic terms by pointing out that postmodern criticism does not differ from art semiologically, since photography now appropriates the role of criticism. This strengthens Balmas' (1983: 32) statement that the artist prefers language use over subject matter. These modifications of reality "correspond respectively to the *mirror* of the real, the *transformation* of the real, and the *trace* of the real" (Weiss 1990: 164). The epistemological shift has transferred meaning from the *mirror* of the real (*mimesis*), to the 'indexical nature' of the work, or the *trace* of the real. It is charged that the metanarratives of power and domination use the mirror and the transformation (in the logocentric form as respectively myth and narrative) of the real to remain in power.

Any discursive practice using Lyotard's pragmatics has to use the *trace* of the real, its indexical nature, in order to subvert the previous two representations, while at the same time seeming to refer to the *mirror* image and its 'normal' *transformation* into narratives of cultural formation, of symbolic value to the social bond. Kruger's sym-

bolic aspects are thus not the 'normal' transformations, but a premeditated pragmatics that allow a subtle — lateral — shift *in* the process of transformation of the image: i.e., the use that images are put to normally. Weiss (1990: 164), refuting Barthes' claim that the photograph could be used as straightforward representation — as a 'message without a code' — points to Philippe Dubois' statement that "as index, 'the photographic image has no semantics other than its own pragmatics'" (*L'Acte photographie*, 1983)' " it doesn't 'speak' by itself as 'photographic language'. Barthes' denial is but one of a series of occlusions that must serve to hide his true intention: to use the hidden persuasion of *Mythologies* (1957) to his own ends, for he says: "It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked ... it is the sign itself which must be shaken ... in order to ... fissure the very representation of meaning ... to ... challenge the symbolic itself" (Barthes quoted in Weiss 1990: 162). In the light of this type of 'reading' Barbara Kruger's work has to be understood, for the "photograph's pragmatics precede its semantics" (Weiss 1990: 164). The hidden meaning, or 'indexical nature' of the work, precedes its semantic reading by the viewer/reader, exactly as prescribed by Lyotard (1989: 122-153).

Kruger's work functions on a level of complicity that ambiguously allows her to appropriate and use as a 'weapon' that which she targets. Getting 'great pleasure' from reading theory, she
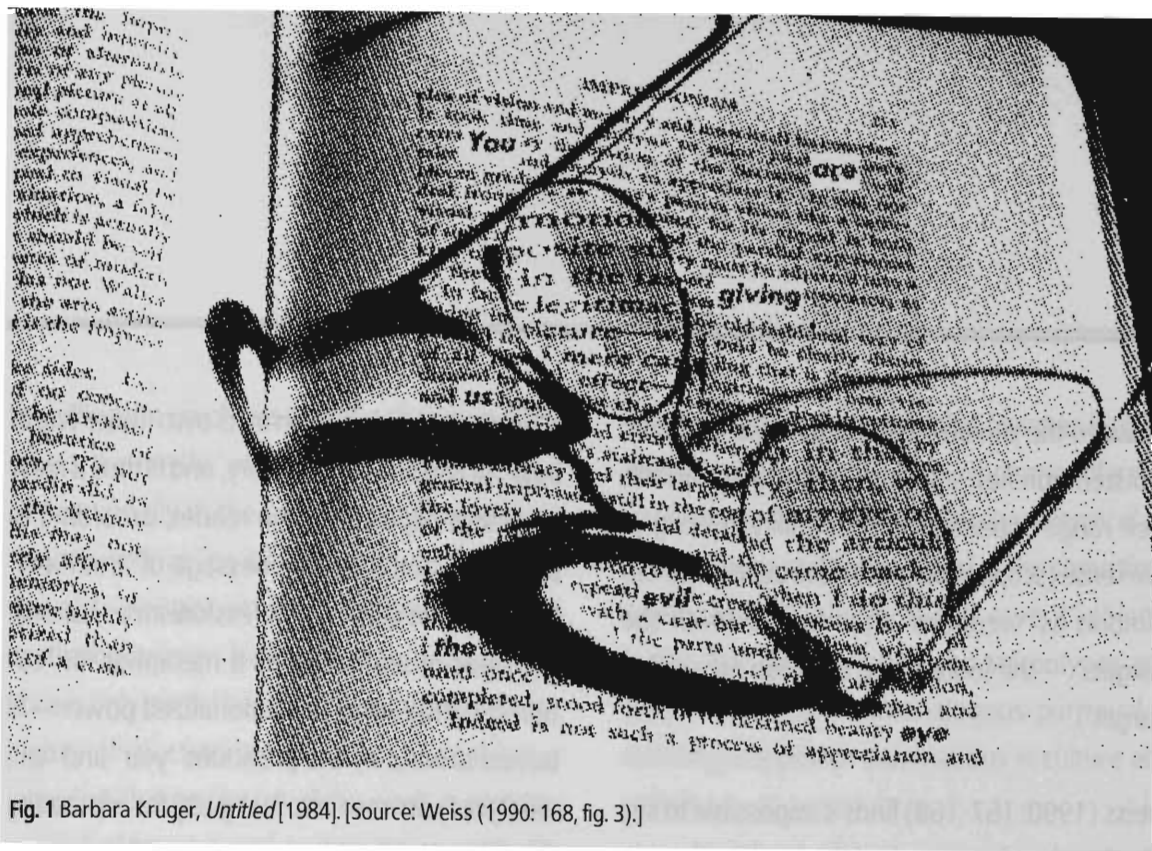
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Fig. 1 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled* [1984]. [Source: Weiss (1990: 168, fig. 3).]

quotes Baudrillard, and reveals her weapons and targets: "fashion and its territorial scope"; the media being "responsible for the murder of response"; "the commodification of the art object" (Siegel 1988: 309). These concepts she uses as ambiguously as the pronouns[2] 'you', 'we', and 'us', recalling Popper's injunction that propositions are abstractions and products of our reason, serving to order our world. These propositions are used by Kruger to attack society at large, and not just to address certain social issues as she would have us believe, making her work as politically inclined as the work of the *Language & Art* group. Siegel (1990: 308) asked Kruger about her 'compelling' pronouns that did not allow the reader to view the work on any aesthetic level; her answer is to the effect that these pronouns "cut through the grease" and get to the point: it is a direct invitation to the 'spectator' to become involved in the message of the work, and the ambiguity, or not, of the pronouns

would depend on the reader, depend on whether or not the reader could decode the message and on *the reader's* observational stance. Decoding is rather simple, for this is the language of consumerism that we are all used to 'decoding', it being "the object of our desires" (Siegel 1990: 308).

In **Figure 1** Kruger frames the words *my eye* with a pair of spectacles resting on a book about Impressionism; superimposed on top are the words *You are giving us the evil eye.* Weiss (1990: 168) makes much of this, saying that "the confusion of text as meta-text *and* as icon establishes an equivocation between epistemophilia and scopophilia in the symbolic register", significantly altering the symbolic aspect that Kruger's work investigates. This statement of Weiss' rather graphically spells out the purpose of the simulacrum; equivocation is using ambiguity in order to deceive, and this deliberate confusion

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[2] Weiss (1990: 168) calls them 'linguistical shifters', after Foster (1985: 183): "In linguistics the pronouns 'you' and 'I' are known as 'shifters': in speech they continually change places and referents".

between the possible meanings of the symbols (epistemophilia), and, this is quite important, their *range* or penetration capability in a cognitive sense (scopophilia), allows Kruger to use *our* symbols as 'weapons' against that which she 'targets' — the logocentric tradition (*skopos* — 'target').

Weiss (1990: 167-168) finds it impossible to say whether the photograph of the book or the text in the book is the signifier or the signified. They do not 'act together as one whole sign', as they would normally, for in this type of work signifier and signified act on two different levels at once. As with the figure and ground dichotomy that we are so familiar with, this work functions as a socially political message in order to subvert accepted opinion — there *is* no confusion between meta-text and icon. What should have been figure becomes ground in changing the object itself. The book, indeed the whole of the photographic image, becomes the unimportant, the ground to the figure of the message implied in the collaged words. Signifier and signified, meta-text and icon, work in the 'normal' way; they are in fact relied upon on to work in this way, so that we can recognise them (initial decoding). Through the epistemological shift that now changes the object — signifier *and* signified become object, become ground — the 'new language' message then takes over the role of signifier/signified: the collaged words make explicit the meaning of this work in a 'message' that

is not there, but is hidden in its own 'inner workings', according to the theory, and is thus a message that depends on the reader, according to the artist. The 'normal' message of 'truth' embodied in the book — Impressionism as canonic narrative of art, acting as a metaphor for 'canonic' narratives of institutionalized power — is turned around by the pronouns 'you' and 'us'; we ('*you*') are meant to feel guilty for repressing the Other ('*us*') with our stories of domination. Signifier and signified together become *a subverted new signifier*, leading away from the original meaning, toward the new meaning signified by the collaged words; *they* do not signify on their own, but depend on the recognition of the changed signification of an old message.

Barthes, who represents one of the 'texts' which 'interface' with 'moments' in Kruger's life, directs the artist and prescribes the pragmatics on how to go about shifting the significance of the 'epistemophilia': "Elsewhere than in advertising, the anchorage may be ideological and indeed this is its principal function; the text *directs* the reader through the signified of the image, *causing him to avoid some and to receive others*; by means of any often subtle *dispatching*, it remote-controls him toward a meaning chosen in advance" (Barthes quoted in Siegel 1988: 304). Is Barthes talking about the despised metanarratives of domination, or the 'new language'? The answer is that it applies to both, which is why Barthes changed his stance from exposing these myths

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to shifting the emphasis onto the changing of the object: the 'myths' of domination could be used as functionally in the new language to hide its 'inner workings' as it hid the persuasiveness of the old. Kruger attacks the symbolic with unstinting energy, but subverting gender relations is only part of her total strategy, for the 'ambiguity of spectatorial/authorial position' is the intended charge (force) of the work, a remote-control of spectatorial guilt in being part of a *stereotyped image* of domination.

In **Figure 2** Kruger ostensibly refers to gender domination, but the words included in the smaller side panel make it clear that this is not the case. Again figure and ground shift position, and the long list of derogatory names becomes the focus of her message: *All violence is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype* refers to narratives of domination practised by the bourgeoisie over the Other, and not exclusively to gender relations.

The concept of *difference* also features largely, with no redemptive impulse, no chance of a reconciliation in these works; "the stereotypical inability to accept difference and at the same time, *where advantageous*, to preserve it" (Siegel 1988: 304) Kruger's work on stereotypes and difference points to an analogous portrayal of stereotypical power dominations in culture and society.

As Weiss (1990: 157) says, the epistemological shift means the "conflation of representation and reality", and Kruger echoes this with her interest in "*coupling* the ingratiations of wishful thinking with the criticality of knowing better" (Siegel 1988: 303). Kruger's works are simulacra for the real *and* for the stereotypical, moving *through* icon to symbol to index, with the icon/mirror of the real being the photograph of the subject turned object, the stereotypical image being the symbol/transformation of the real — the photo-

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Fig. 2 Barbara Kruger, *Installation* [1991]. [Source: Wood *et al*. (1993: 240, plate 201, installation of main room, Mary Boone Gallery, New York, 1991).]

graph is not a 'stereotype' until conflated with the words — and the import of her work being the index/trace of the real. Her strategy slots in perfectly with Klossowski's theory of simulacra (Weiss 1990: 158), which originated in 'fascination' and 'visual pleasure' with/in objects that *stood for something else*: a communication from the gods, through their idols and representatives, differs very little from Kruger's 'criticality of knowing better'. Klossowski, like Kruger, creates these simulacra, and Weiss (1990: 158) says that "the demons invoked by his art works are merely 'hypostases of active obsessional forces' ". Weiss (1990: 158) finds this an "uneasy conformity with modern depth psychology" (Lacan), this conflation of ancient gods and modern obsessional forces. Kruger seems to be offering 'redemption' in disavowing these stereotypical images of domination: this is the *inevitable*, the only way out to the future. According to Klossowski, these simulacra, *in being*

something else, "are the actualization of something in itself incommunicable and unrepresentable" (Weiss 1990: 158). The materialist has no difficulty in offering the trace of the real in these new mythologies, that no longer intend to explode the myth itself, but only to change the signification of that myth. Kruger's simulacra (stereotypes) 'in its imitative sense' express the 'incommunicable' in a rather straightforward way, not at all 'unrepresentable', as is seen in **Figure 3**.

In this overtly political work[3] Kruger, ironically, refers to *Our Leader* as a puppet: "Ronald Reagan is an actor. He is directed and produced" (Siegel 1988: 302). This is ironic, coming from an artist with the critical faculty of knowing better, as Siegel (1988: 303) confirms, whilst herself being 'directed' and 'produced' by the texts of Barthes and Lyotard. The central panel of this work re-

3. Kruger finds this category 'problematical' (Siegel 1988: 301).

Fig. 2 Barbara Kruger, *Installation* [1987]. [Source: Honnef (1988: 214, installation April–June 1987, Galerie Monika Sprüth, Cologne).]
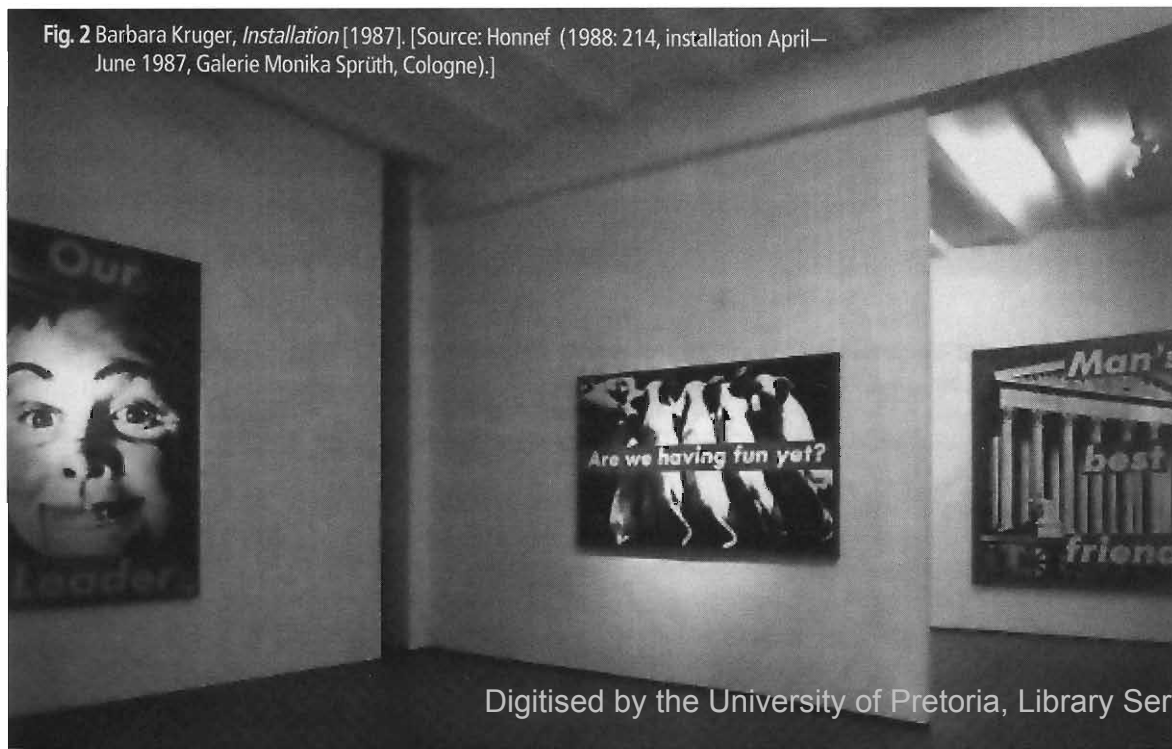
minds one rather of Joni Mitchell's song line, *I even kissed a sunset pig* (Californian policeman). and rightly or wrongly, Kruger may have had this analogy, or something similar, in mind when referring to Reagan's status as actor (Hollywood dreams of desire and pleasure: *Are we having fun yet?*)and Reagan in California, where she had spent some time prior to his election as president. The only really genderised element in this work is the last panel, in which she states that man's best friend ... *is power*, and even here the gender question is incidental to the critique of the institutions of power and domination.

The origins of these simulacra are the 'modern obsessions', "operating differently but simultaneously in the artist and the viewer" (Weiss 1990: 158). These simulacra, as representation, serve to transform 'inner phantasms' — the hypostases of the modern obsessions — into realizable stereotypes: *clichés*. These stereotypes are defined by Klossowski as "residues of phantasmatic simulacra fallen into current usage, abandoned to common interpretation" (Weiss 1990: 158). The common interpretation construes these stereotypes as the notion of 'home' in the metanarratives of power institutions; country, nation, government, repression of the Other who do not fit in with this notion of 'home'. It is here that Kruger's gender stereotypes fit in and can be read as complicitous with power relations, not only on a personal and masculine level, but on the level of society in general and the institutions

governing, and prescribing to the social bond. The masculine 'home' is domination of the feminine; the social bond's 'home', or the notion of a role in culture and in life, is rooted in nation-building which excludes the Other, even when that 'Other' chooses exile in cosmopolitan encounters. This is really what Kruger means when she says that her work is circular; her work operates differently from, but simultaneously to the stereotypes — the social bond's image of itself — that her work targets. It moves away from the bourgeois stereotypes in expressing the myths, the residues of phantasmatic simulacra, only to fall back into current usage, but this time not 'abandoned to common interpretation'. Weiss (1990: 158) defined the word *cliché* as both photograph and stereotype, but that is deceptive, mere wordplay. The simulacrum, the changed object, contains but a superficial trace of the real, and refers to the 'inner phantasms' of its creator that are not 'abandoned to common interpretation'. According to Eco (1984: 155) the simulacrum refers to the predetermined 'white spaces' in the Torah — reading between the lines to find a truth that lies *inside* the simulacrum — to the 'fact' that "the only truth ... is the very play of deconstruction". A *cliché* is a stereotype plate, a photographic negative, or a sculptural *cast*; it is the 'wrong' image and not the 'real', while simulating something of the real, only inverted. The simulacrum does not operate on the level of the mirror image, nor that of the photograph abandoned to common interpretation. Eco

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(1984: 223) asks, "What makes a picture similar to a mirror image? A pragmatic assumption whereby a dark room should be as truthful as a mirror ... . The difference lies in the fact that the exposed plate is indeed an *imprint* or a *trace*". While a mirror signifies the *presence* of an 'imprinter', or at least the existence of presence *outside* the simulacrum/image, presence in the case of a photograph is past, and signification shifts from presence to imprint/trace; significance shifts from self to Other.

The postmodern *mise-en-abîme* now becomes the modern depth hermeneutics in Klossowski's sense of the simulacrum as representation (phantasm/simulacra: 'us'/'them'). In the *mise-en-abîme* "authorship and spectatorship are merely rhetorical/grammatical constructs" (Weiss 1990: 169); in other words, the *discrete realities* of the artist's alternative world cannot be brought back *out of the abyss* to organize, or help in any way, the social bond. But this *abîme* is a deep cleft on the surface of reason, with a wide shelf only a foot or so below the surface. It is akin to two people jumping over the edge of Lover's Leap, but only one of them knows about the shelf that will save him from the *abîme*. "Aesthetic catharsis ... consists in ridding the artist of the phantasm's obsessional constraints, only to instill it anew in the viewer. Thus the simulacrum ... operates as a structure of exchange" (Weiss 1990: 159). No wonder Klossowski regards catharsis as operating on a psychological/theologi-

cal model when it refers to the viewer's experience. It is the catharsis anyone has to undergo in Nietzsche's myth of redemption, now clothed in a political paradigm.

Walter Benjamin paved the way for the 'dissolution of artistic aura', which Barthes echoed in assigning the photograph's pragmatics as dominant over its semantics, the 'fascination' of the simulacrum that Klossowski spoke about (Weiss 1990: 158). The epistemological shift, the changing of the object itself, *is* "this 'change' in the photographic sign — to reveal its simulacral position within postmodern enunciation" (Weiss 1990: 165) that allows it to operate as 'a structure of exchange'. Figure and ground, yours for mine. The 'structure of exchange' is a deceit in both senses of the word: this artist steps over the abyss with you, but has one foot on the ledge just below the surface, while you, *your* exchange value and the meanings of your images, plunge into the *abîme* to be swallowed up — which is what the word also means. The 'structure of exchange' refers to the shifting of the figure/ground concept which subsumes your values in exchange for that of the artist's — Popper (1962: 246) said that the irrational wants to make *its* limits the limits of our world. According to Weiss (1990: 159) Benjamin foresaw the political use of the changed image, and the role that catharsis could play in this exchange programme, not as a 'personalist psychological model', but as a 'political, revolutionary model'.

Conclusion

As Foster (1985: 180) says, in Kruger's work the 'truth' becomes a mixture of subjective ideology and social stereotypes, and these artists of the Word, like Holzer, become "manipulators of signs ... a shift in practice that renders the viewer an active reader of messages more than a contemplator of the esthetic". The artist encodes his/her work with a preceding pragmatics that allows the spectator to read only the semantics the art 'directs'. Foster's comments on Jenny Holzer apply equally well to Kruger's work; while it may seem to the reader as analogous to any other form of mass media information, what the work contains is merely opinion, and hidden underneath that are the demands; "verbal anarchy in the street" (Foster 1985: 179). Kruger's work became more political as the 'fashion' of the times changed, despite her denials. Foster (1985: 179) points out that her emblematic images became more appropriate to whole situations – though still a stereotype of power – than to people as individuals. In her 'structure of exchange' the signified of the image lies in neither the photograph or the text, but in the 'conversational implicature' that is an inherent feature of "the dialectical revision of one by the other" (Foster 1985: 183); by changing the object, challenging the symbolic, Kruger establishes an 'indexical nature' in her work that serves the same purpose as the mythologies Barthes at first exposed, and later used for his own ends. It is no wonder that

Kruger's work reminds Foster (1985: 181) of Nietzsche's concept of the 'truth': "Truths are illusions whose illusionary nature has been forgotten, metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and that now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins". This may be true, except for the fact that the materialist artist, in the 'structure of exchange', *helps* us to forget the 'illusionary nature' of *our* 'illusions', or narratives of power, helps us with these 'words and pictures' to recognize 'mere metal', while the 'coin' is embodied in the 'dialectical revision', ready to be exchanged, *as new illusion*, new myths of power and domination, for the old social bond. This 'better story that explains the facts' is one of dubious complicity disguised as critique, for a materialist postmodernism is as contradictory as 'postmodern' capitalism itself, at once liberal and authoritarian. Like the 'postmodern' economy, the structures/critiques of materialism are moving toward a centralization of power and control, an 'essentially undemocratic' system (Toffler 1991: 405-406). These 'postmodern' discourses treat individuals as the society it critiques treats them, but pretends it does not; in the process 'postmodernism endorses its logic while unmasking its ideology' (Eagleton 1994: 4). In this way does the postmodern simulacrum operate as a 'structure of exchange' – disseminating predetermined and pragmatic information to attain positions of power.

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