



*First published as "Shards In the Vanity Mirror," at Eyestorm.com (December, 2000).*

It is both an impressive achievement and an overdue banality that women artists currently enjoy unprecedented levels of success in art. From Rachel Whiteread to Elizabeth Peyton, Elke Kristyfek to Roni Horn, today's woman artists are much less burdened by the stereotypes that constrained Anni Albers or Louise Bourgeois. Indeed, for today's women artists, feminine stereotypes are more often an opportunity to be exploited than a mantle to be shed, to the extent that the qualifier "woman" no longer limits our appreciation of their standing as artists. This enlightened development has increased interest in those women whose pioneering works have helped to make it possible, and major exhibitions of the work of Valie Export, Anna Goncharova, Lee Krasner, Agnes Martin, Bridget Riley and Martha Rosler have occurred this year alone. Now Barbara Kruger, best known for her politically charged red and black photo montages, and the Countess de Castiglione, a politically ambitious noblewoman who made elaborate photo portraits of herself, can be added to the list.

At first glance, it would seem more reasonable to align Castiglione's highly theatrical self portraits with the work of Cindy Sherman—the contemporary artist whose fictionalized photographs have turned the representation of women in art on its head. However, the simultaneous occasion of a show of Castiglione's photographs at The Metropolitan Museum in New York with Barbara Kruger's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art makes for a more biting and unpredictable comparison, one that sharpens the pathos of Castiglione's narcissism and dulls the bathos of Kruger's diatribes.

Born Virginia Oldonini in 1837, The Countess Castiglione assumed her title through her marriage to the Count of Castiglione, Francesco Verasis, in 1854. The following year, in order to drum up support for the unification of Italy, King Vittorio Emanuele dispatched the Count and Countess to Paris where he hoped his wiles and her beauty would help garner the support of the French emperor Napoleon III. Little did King Vittorio know how persuasive the Countess's beauty could be, when, only months after meeting Napoleon III, the Countess became part of an international scandal when she disappeared with him for several hours at a garden party. Not long after, the Countess made her first visit to the photo studio of Pierre-Louis Pierson. It is still not known whether the 400+ photographs they produced together over the next forty years were intended as personal trophies or illicit propoganda. Inspired by the heroines of literature and the stage as well as by the highest fashions of the day, Castiglione's photographs were made for private viewers only or to satisfy her own colossal vanity. And even though most of her character references and costumes are now profoundly dated and illegible, over the years her faith in the power of appearances and her mastery of the tricks of the trade have helped turn her amateur obsessions into art.

Vengeance (1963-1967), for example, shows the Countess as the scowling Queen of Etruria, a fictional character apparently based on an obscure Spanish queen and the founding myths of the Roman Empire. Made in response to one of many marital bouts concerning her spending practices and scandalous behavior, the Countess commissioned the portrait and sent it to her husband with the note "to the Count of Castiglione from the Queen of Etruria." (Nearly bankrupted by her extravagances, he eventually disowned her.) In a sweeter vein, Elvira (1861-67) shows the Countess seated in a ball gown of exceeding

ridiculousness, with her bare head and shoulders visible above a mound of frothing silk, like a cherry perched on top of a ice cream sundae. Nonetheless, the stunning harmony of the stiff pose, the elaborate dress and her “la Lamballe” coiffure (layered pleats of hair piled high and dotted with pearls) is due in no small measure to the Countess’s ability to pull it off.

For all her deluded grandiosity, however, her most moving photographs were made in the final years of her life, when her failing beauty and bruised vanity led her to assume the self-imposed life of a hermit. Having moved to a small, barricaded apartment where mirrors were banned and which she had painted floor to ceiling black, the Countess nonetheless had the courage and self-awareness to memorialize her decline as works of art. *The Foot, the Amputation of the Gruyère* (1894) is the most self-deprecating from this period, showing a view of Castiglione’s feet as if she were lying in her own coffin. Similar in mood (but less macabre) are the *St. Cecilia* and the *Rachel* series, where the Countess assumed a number of veiled, languorous attitudes depicting melancholy and mourning. At one time supposedly having had a hand in the Unification of Italy and the Franco-Prussian War, the death of the Countess of Castiglione only confirmed her status as a first-rate *femme fatale*, one whose brash and elegant sexual politics live on in her images today.

Depictions of women as the victims of their own vanity or as the passive subjects of male desire are anathema to Barbara Kruger’s work, and I suspect she would loathe Castiglione’s self-abnegation regardless of her political conquests. Nonetheless, their goals are the same: to challenge and gain access to the masculine halls of power all the while demonstrating their independence from them. But where Castiglione gained her influence by sleeping with her allies, Kruger gains hers by sleeping with her enemies.

In our media-saturated world, where visual clichés and catch phrases get processed and reprocessed in a perpetual regurgitation of information, Barbara Kruger has accomplished no small feat: anytime you see red and white sans serif type pasted over a grainy black and white image, you immediately think of Barbara Kruger. Through her surgical reconfiguration of mainstream media images and words, Kruger has carved her idiosyncratic style out of the monolith of consumer capitalism, turning its soporific jingles into jagged slogans eviscerated by their over-sharpened hype. Kruger’s work is relentless, and her unflinching confidence over the years has been even more influential than her style, to the extent that you don’t really think of individual works by Barbara Kruger as much as you think of an overall philosophy and tone of voice. The tone of voice is aggressive, and the philosophy is attack!

Her retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York is an all out assault on the mind, an anti-aesthetic of fractured images and forked tongues spewing all the classic, acerbic Krugerisms: *I Shop Therefore I Am*. *It’s A Small World, But Somebody Has to Clean It*. *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face*. Central to Kruger’s approach is her splintering of the apparent complicity of consumer society, a false contract that magazines and television suggest everyone is perfectly happy with. By turning the “we” of the mainstream media into “you and I” and “us and them,” Kruger demarcates a position for her work outside the male-dominated ramparts of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. At least that was the case in the 1980s, when such confrontational dissent still held a flicker of promise left over from the 1960s. Twenty years later, coming home to the same Madison Avenue she has railed against her whole

career, Kruger's guerilla warfare seems oddly heartwarming, even quaint, like Dadaist pranks nestled safely in vitrines or a wizened Johnny Lydon recounting the story of God Save The Queen.

Kruger's work is better geared for the street, where it functions as pure information unencumbered by the material concerns of preservation and value. The sheer monetary value of art as property can overwhelm whatever message it might convey, and if Kruger's method has a blind spot it is in regard to the fact that the economic forces responsible for the propagation and consumption of her work are largely beyond her control. An interesting irony, then, is that wherever Kruger has been willing to relinquish control to economic forces is precisely where her work is most interesting as art. The best part of her show at the Whitney is the final room of the exhibition, where her trademark cut-and-paste emblems are displayed on a numbing array of media and merchandise: T-shirts, ball caps, newspapers, TIME magazine covers, watches, mouse pads, paperweights . . . it goes on and on.

Thus, what for most other artists would be a populist nightmare for Kruger is the fulfillment of her wishes, the achievement of a powerful and independent voice embedded in the network that that voice sets out to critique. And although it could be argued that Kruger's brand of mainstream defiance has become a cliché in itself, Kruger earns my respect for being able to accept her death by capitalism with the same aplomb that the Countess of Castiglione accepted hers: with dignity, a little irony, and a cold hard stare into the maw of her all-consuming adversary. That willingness attests not only to Kruger's personal strength but also to the place she occupies for women artists. Like the dynamite that disappears as it blows a hole in a barrier, Kruger has sacrificed herself so that others may rush in.