Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical And Psychological Observations

Bruna Bejarano

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PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled "**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**" is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

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CHAPTER 1

THE ART OF RESISTANCE IN THE WORKS OF GUSTAVE COURBET, JACOB LAWRENCE, PABLO PICASSO AND BARBARA KRUGER

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ABSTRACT: This article centers in the discussion of how certain historical moments might have influenced the development of four artists who lived in different places and times: Gustave Courbet (France, 1819-1877), Jacob Lawrence (USA, 1917-2000), Pablo Picasso (Spain, 1881-1973) and Barbara Kruger (USA, 1945-). Courbet, Lawrence, Picasso and Kruger, knowingly to them or not, were all shaped and influenced by their sociohistorical context and engaged in artistic expressions that can be thought of as "Art of Resistance" – a form of art that seeks to denounce or invert dominant discourse, representing a sort of rebellion against the ruling powers and established ideas. Specifically, the purpose of this article is to briefly analyze ways in which Gustave Courbet, Jacob Lawrence, Pablo Picasso, and Barbara Kruger – who, as many other artists, critically tried to reflect upon human condition – engaged in "Art of Resistance," taking a critical approach to society and challenging the ways it creates and maintains power structures that often mask injustices, abuse of power, censorship, misogyny and prejudice.

KEYWORDS: Art of Resistance; Gustave Courbet; Jacob Lawrence; Pablo Picasso; Barbara Kruger.

1. INTRODUCTION

Art history is a field of study that can provide readers with great knowledge and understanding of the past, while giving insight into the present. It helps to organize and interpret facts and train the mind to evaluate different world views and perspectives. Most importantly, the study of art history encourages empathy and humanity, allowing for the visual apprehension of other people and societies through time.

Since human experience is not documented only in the pages of history books, but on the many objects and paintings produced by artists as well, artistic productions are also objects of historic relevance – a history which stands still, made of the marks of the creativity of those who left behind pieces of their culture, inviting us to reflect upon a moment, a person, an idea in time and of a time (PREZIOSI, 2009). For no other reason, the study of history encompasses the study of all human production, including the manifestations we call art.

This article centers in the discussion of

how the historical moment – the social factors that make up human existence at a certain given time and space – might have influenced in the development of four artists who lived in different places and times: Gustave Courbet (France, 1819-1877), Jacob Lawrence (USA, 1917-2000), Pablo Picasso (Spain, 1881-1973) and Barbara Kruger (USA, 1945-). Each of these artists dedicated at least part of their efforts to challenge dominant views of society through their work.

2. RESISTANCE: A COMMON DENOMINATOR

Gustave Courbet, Jacob Lawrence, Pablo Picasso and Barbara Kruger, knowingly to them or not, spurred artistic expressions that can be thought of as "Art of Resistance" – a form of art that seeks to invert the dominant discourse, representing a particular kind of rebellion against the ruling powers and established ideas. To resist against "power" is to fight oppression, to challenge the ways a society or culture create and maintain structures that often mask social injustice, abuse of power, censorship, misogyny and prejudice.

Barbara Kruger, in her book *Remote Control*, explains the great power of art as a tool of resistance and its ability – albeit at times limited – to disseminate a message from within the confines of the market or of a ruling class:

> That doubt tempers belief with sanity. That 'we' are not right and 'the enemy' wrong. That it's a good idea to remain self-critical when power is near. That God is not on our side. That all violence is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype. That the notion of 'human rights' should include the oppression of women. That it's important to vigilantly look for the moment when pride becomes contempt. That TV and print journalism should begin to acknowledge and understand their ability to create consensus and make history. That certain terms are long overdue for examination and clarification. That it is time to question what is meant by the words 'moral,' 'normal,' 'manhood,' 'community,' 'standards,' 'drawing the line,' 'values,' 'political,' 'objectivity,' 'agit-prop,' 'avant-garde,' and the prefix 'post' in front of anything. That the issues of money, sex, power and racial difference are inseparable from one another. That the richness and complexity of theory should periodically break through the moats of academia and enter the public discourse via a kind of powerfully pleasurable language of pictures, words, sounds, and structures. That empathy can change the world. That feminisms suggest many ways to live a life and that they continue to question both the conventional arrangements of power and the clichés of binary oppositions. That there should begin to emerge in America a kind of secular intellectual who can fight the fear of ideas with clarity, generosity, humor and eloquence. (KRUGER, 1993, p. 223)

It is beyond the scope of this article to include all forms of artistic works of resistance, since they are possibly infinite and resistance is sometimes very subtle. The artists selected, however, were able to "push the envelope," each in their own way exploring and (re)defining many of the issues pointed out by Kruger, within their respective social context.

Thus, the French Revolution ushered a new era of radical social change and thought that influenced the work of Gustave Courbet; the rise of the Harlem

Renaissance imprinted itself onto the art of Jacob Lawrence; the Spanish Civil War inspired Pablo Picasso's most celebrated piece: Guernica; and the social and cultural issues of the 70s gave way to poignant criticisms in the images of Barbara Kruger. Each of these artists were able to surpass the boundaries of their sociohistorical condition to look at the world from a new perspective, seeking to redefine it in their own terms.

3. GUSTAVE COURBET

Well aware of art's great capacity for propaganda and influence, Emperor Napoleon III[1] thought it wise to hold many art exhibitions in France in order to showcase progress and consolidate his power. Of course, both aspiring and recognized artists sought to exhibit their works at such events, including French painter Gustave Courbet.

Having submitted his paintings for approval to the jury of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855, in Paris, Courbet had some of his works denied. Fighting against the decision, the painter established his own pavilion (outside the official one) in which he could display the artworks that were not accepted, finding himself somewhat at odds with the government[2].

Among the works was *The Painter's Studio, A Real Allegory Summing up a Seven-Year Phase of my Artistic Life* (below). In total, there are thirty-five life-size characters in the painting and it is divided into three parts, with Courbet as himself in the middle:

1. Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte was the first President of France (elected in 1848). In 1951, unable to be re-elected, he seized power and founded the Second French Empire, becoming the Emperor until 1970, when France was defeated in the French-Prussian War.

2. Despite the fact that Napoleon III held a traditional taste for art, the monarch was not unsensitive to public opinion, and came to be a great contributor to the French avant-garde. In 1863, following a complaint by artists Edouard Manet, Camille Pissarro and Johan Jongking, whose works had been refused by a jury organized under the conservative director of the Paris Salon, the Monarch signed a decree allowing for the rejected paintings to be exposed at a different part of the palace where the Paris Salon took place. The new exhibit, the *Salon des Refusés*, attracted thousands of visitors who were, for the most part, contemptuous about the works of art. Ironically, despite the ridicule and the mocking comments from critics and visitors, this put the avant-garde alongside traditional art.

Figure 1. The Painter's Studio, A Real Allegory Summing up a Seven-Year Phase of my Artistic Life, Gustave Courbet, 1855.

Courbet shared, in letters to colleagues, some insights that have allowed for an interpretation of the figures and better understanding of the work. On the left of the canvas, Courbet depicts "commonplace life," represented by various types such as a priest, a worker and a hunter (who physically resembles Napoleon III). On the right lower corner, some of Courbet's close friends can be seen, many of them advocates of the artistic movement known as Realism, which wished to see a true, natural (and not idealized) depiction of existence. Thus, scenes of everyday life and people, which were a departure from the allegorical subjects of the past, were favored.

In a way, Courbet's title addresses and summarizes this notion: he is not painting fictional, idealized characters in his work, but real people who pertain to his time and place – many of which share in his views about art and society.

Noteworthy characters on the right include philosopher and anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – who had been arrested and jailed from 1849 to 1852 for insulting Napoleon III – and art critic Charles Baudelaire. These real-life subjects are of particular interest for the analysis of the painting due to the political and artistic ideologies they symbolize: Proudhon for his socialist views and ardent criticism of capitalist society; Baudelaire, who was known for penning many essays in which he discussed the ills of modernity and the need for artists to express these troubles within their work.

In the center and at the heart of the image, a seated Courbet is seen painting a landscape – here he affirms the ideologies of his Realist colleagues: a return to nature in its purest form. An opposition to the superfluous cities that are consumed with luxury and desires and which only lead to a life of dissatisfaction and pain.

Courbet scrutinizes his environment and paints subjects deemed unworthy of depiction both artistically and politically, rejecting academic convention and assuming an approach that was in stark contrast with some of his contemporary fellows, including Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, who respected the ruling class and monarchy and abided by classical artistic ideals.

The painting *The Stone Breakers* (destroyed in the bombing of Dresden, in 1945), considered one of his first great works, was inspired by a group of peasants Courbet met on a roadside:

Figure 2. The Stone Breakers,Gustave Courbet , 1849.

In the 1820s, French Utopian Socialist Henri de San Simone appropriated the word *Avant Garde* to distinguish an elite body of artists whose imagination and skills could create an art capable of paving the way to a better society:

> Let us be filled with one great idea: the well-being of society… We, the artists, will serve as the ***avant garde***, for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use, in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel, we inscribe these ideas on marble or canvas, and we popularize them in poetry and in song. (NOCHLIN, 1989, p. 12)

According to art writer Linda Nochlin (1989), Courbet was one of the first artists to portray *Avant-Garde* content successfully, as he promoted socialist ideals and

represented the artistic movement of Realism. His materialism (the emphasis on the physical characteristics of his subjects, their material reality) would later also influence Cubism. In a nutshell, he challenged convention and redefined art by painting common subjects and highlighting social issues.

4. JACOB LAWRENCE

Decades later, and across the globe, a new form of art resistance was occurring in America. Beginning in the 1920s, black artists sought control over their representation and actively depicted the lives of African-American men and women in their work.

The Federal Arts Projects, under the New Deal, encouraged the development of many black artists, including Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). This art movement would later be known as The Harlem or Negro Renaissance.

In his work entitled *The Migration Series,* Lawrence places African American social issues at the forefront of the national agenda (Dickerman and Smithgall, 2015). Occurring in the decades after the Civil War, the Great Migration represents the movement of African-Americans from the South to the North of the country:

> (…) the accomplishments of community leaders, student organizations, politicians, and other advocates of racial equality in the 1950s and 60s would in many ways have been unthinkable without the example set by the millions of black migrants in previous decades. In leaving their homes, black Southerners collectively took a stand against the enforcement of racial discrimination that had plagued their social, political, and economic well-being for centuries. (GREGORY, 2005, p. 18)

Several factors contributed to this migration including economic inequality, unfair labor practices (specifically on farms) and racial discrimination in the South; compelling African-Americans to move North in hopes of better treatment and prosperity in factories.

Composed of 60 individual panels, the work is a visual representation of this migration of Southern African-Americans to the north of the country:

> The migration constituted one of the greatest demographic transformations in U.S. history, recasting an overwhelming rural Southern population as a largely urban Northern one. Over the next six decades more than six million African Americans decided to seek better lives far from the farms and small towns that had been their homes, forever changing the nation's racial profile, political priorities and cultural landscape. (SCOTT, 1969, p. 44)

Seen on the panels are expressions of sorrow, people crowded and tired, lifeless bodies riding on trains in pursuit of work. The images are strong and cannot be easily overlooked; the viewer is forced to imagine the context and left to wonder how hopeless, lonesome and infuriating the plight of an underprivileged and discriminated working class must have been:

Figure 3. *The Migration Series*, Jacob Lawrence, Panel 3, 1940-41.

Panel number 3 (above) displays a crowd of black women and men, some with their heads down, others walking towards the horizon as they follow the flock of birds into the unknown. With them, they carry their belongings in bags and boxes, their faces appear with no distinct eyes, mouth or lips – they are anonymous.

Panel 13 (below) shows a field going to waste – without the efforts of black men and women, the crops have spoiled and there is nothing left to harvest:

Figure 4. *The Migration Series*, Jacob Lawrence, Panel 13, 1940-41.

The painting depicts the dried abandoned fields at the end of the black migration

from the South, and highlights the importance of African-American contribution to farming: since the time of slavery, the American economy relies heavily on the working force of its black population.

Symbolic of the racial and social injustice endured by Black Americans is panel 14 (below), in which two black males stand before a white judge with bulging eyes:

Figure 5. *The Migration Series*, Jacob Lawrence, Panel 14, 1940-41.

As it can be observed, the magistrate and his desk are well above the two men, and the canvas space the magistrate occupies is larger. The atmosphere is intimidating, oppressive: legal authority, as it was often observed by Lawrence during his own life, is not only worthy of respect, but fear, since it often worked against black Southerners. This painting is representative of the injustices of the legal system which, to this day, African Americans endure.

Panel 22, titled *One-Way Ticket*, also addresses the fact that black Americans are overrepresented in prison facilities, a racial issue that remains a serious social problem in the United States (HARVEY, 2004 , p. 37-51):

Figure 6. *One-Way Ticket,* Jacob Lawrence, Panel 22, 1941.

The three African-American men in *One-Way Ticket* stand before a prison's bars, with their heads down, their shoulders low, in a position of defeat. They are wearing street clothes, suggesting that they have been recently arrested, and the painting's title tells the rest of the story: there was no return for them in the system, no life after prison for the thousands of African-American men convicted and submitted to the brutal reality of being forced to work chained to a string of fellow prisoners (the chain gangs, a particularly shameful chapter in American history).

Lawrence's *Migration Series* stands as a reminder of the conditions from which Southern blacks desperately tried to escape when they massively left their homes and lives to find more social equality and economic opportunity in the North.

As for Jacob Lawrence, who was only 23 when he became the most celebrated African-American artist in America, he maintained social consciousness in his work. In his long career as an art professor, he continued to express resistance and enlighten the minds of people about the plea of marginalized communities of color.

5. PABLO PICASSO

During the mid to late-1930s, Spain experienced a civil war between right and left-wing groups. The Spanish Civil War was fought in the context of a world's climate that had many facets, as it encompassed class struggles, religious war and bipolarization between democratic versus dictatorial, communist versus fascist ideals. In many aspects, the Spanish Civil War was considered the preparation for

World War II, a sort of “dress rehearsal,” which included a number of atrocities.

In order to overthrow the left-leaning republic, right-wing General Francisco Franco sought the support of fascist Nazi Germany and allowed Adolf Hitler to test his bombs on the city of Guernica. The attack, which occurred on April 26, 1936, killed hundreds and left thousands injured. The bombing shocked and enraged citizens – including Pablo Picasso – propelling the Spanish artist to depict the event in his artwork.

Perhaps the most famous anti-war painting, Guernica (1937) was a response to the bombing of the small Spanish town:

Figure 7. *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso, 1937.

Asked by the Republican government to produce a work for the Paris World Fair, Picasso initially set out to paint a studio scene, but after the bombing felt compelled to change his theme. The large oil on canvas helped attract worldwide attention to the conflict.

Using a palette of gray, black, and white – possibly inspired by photographs and reports of the incident – Picasso portrayed the forces of good and evil; light and dark. On the left side of the frame, a grief-stricken mother with her head tilted back sobs while holding the lifeless body of her child: a reminiscence of Michelangelo’s Pieta, a reoccurring image of suffering in art.

Mid-center, underneath the bulb, a horse with his mouth ajar seems to suggest an agonizing scream – perhaps an allegory for the victims (GLAVES-SMITH, 2008).

The distorted and exaggerated forms of the characters also add emotional drama and intensity to the scene – the figures are dismembered and look broken beyond repair. The viewer is instantly reminded of the tragedies of war and, most importantly, of man’s inhumanity to man.

In the end, the Nationalists would prevail in Spain, marking the beginning of a 40-year dictatorship under Franco's regime. Yet, to this day, Guernica remains an impactful and consistent reminder of an anti-war message. Picasso's piece indeed transcended its time. In fact, it is still so well understood that Colin Powell refused to take a picture with the work (or be seen near it) when he was trying to make a case for the Iraq war in 2003.

Besides campaigning for world peace, Picasso was a fierce opponent to fascism, and particularly to General Franco and his brutal regime. In *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937), a series of 18 images (arranged in two separate sheets of print of 9 images each), Picasso satirizes Franco by exposing how the dictator's flawed discourse in defense of conservative values and Spanish culture was at odds with all the destruction his actions inflicted to his country.

In 1951, the painter would again engage in openly political painting. *Massacre in Korea* (below), a criticism of American participation in the Korean War, depicts the Sinchon Massacre, in South Hwanghae Province, North Korea, in which civilians were killed by anti-communist forces:

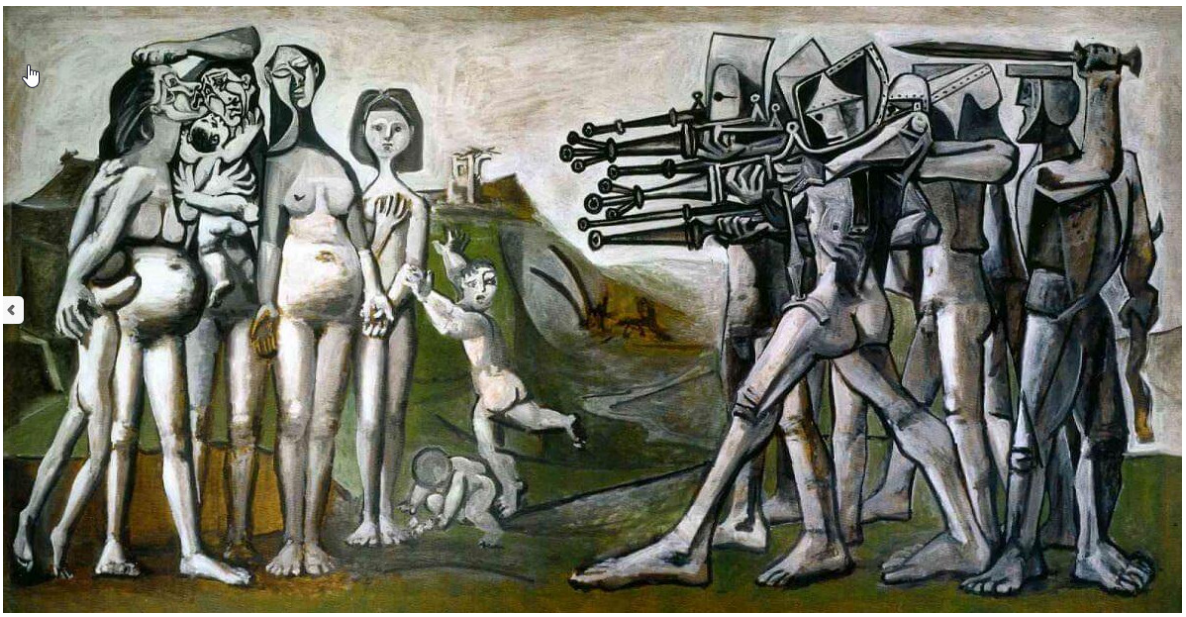

Figure 8. *Massacre in Korea,* Pablo Picasso, 1951.

The expressionist painting was inspired by the atrocities associated with the participation of American troops in the mass killing. The composition is divided into two parts: in the left, defenseless naked women and infants stand, waiting to be executed and fall into the mass grave behind them. The army of strong but castrated and heavily armed "knights" stand in a ready-to-attack position - their condition as destroyers of life contrasting to the fact that the women on the left are pregnant and/or have young children.

Picasso continued painting throughout his long life: always true to his non-conformist spirit and continually innovative styles, he produced around twenty-two thousand works and is considered the most influential artist of the 20th century.

6. BARBARA KRUGER

Having been a commercial graphic designer early in her career and an art director for Conde Nast magazine in the late 1960s, Barbara Kruger is known for effectively combining simple words and images that address broad and controversial topics in her art.

With her background in advertisement, Kruger is able to employ the same strategies used to sell products or ideas to an audience to disseminate messages that challenge the ways we think about gender, politics and consumerism. Kruger's use of collage, appropriation, simplification, blurring of high art and popular culture and rejection of social ideologies have contributed to her classification as a “postmodern” artist (HEARTNEY, 2001).

Using mostly black-and-white photographs (often appropriated from well-known mainstream media) overlaid with white-on-red captions, Kruger's hallmark is to subvert dominant discourse (DROZDEK, 2006). In her works, she often addresses issues of identity, sexuality, reproductive rights and other socially relevant issues.

Figure 9. *Your comfort is my silence*, Barbara Kruger, 1981.

The almost cryptic text in "Your comfort is my silence" is delivered by an image of a male gesturing for the viewer to be silent. On closer observation, two messages are juxtaposed: if read in the order it is presented, the artwork says "your comfort is my silence." However, if the text in the red caption (which stands out) is read first, the text reads "your silence is my comfort." The play on words is also a self-referent statement that highlights the fact that Kruger uses advertising to dispute the very same ideas advertising sells.

That is, magazines and the power structure they represent (in the early 80s, advertising was still a male industry) may openly try to tell female viewers their comfort is what will keep them silent, when, in reality, what that message is concealing is that both men and the advertising industry (representative of the interests of a consumerist society) were more comfortable when women did not manifest their discontent.

On April 26, 1989 the Supreme Court was set to hear a case that many believed would overturn the Roe vs. Wade decision, which gave women the legal right to have an abortion. Made for the Women's March in Washington – that was to be

held before the hearing – was Kruger's untitled piece known as "Your body is a battleground," advocating women's reproductive rights:

Figure 10. *Your body is a battleground*, Barbara Kruger, 1989.

The words "body" and "battleground" pose questions to the observer, who has been addressed with a resounding "your." In this case "your body" encompasses all women's bodies. This way, Kruger highlights the female condition in the backdrop of the political climate. The woman's bisected face represents the divide of her freedom of choice, currently under threat and being fought over – but not by her, since even she has been forgotten, her body itself is but a battleground.

Works such as *Your Comfort is my Silence* (1981) and *Your Body is a Battleground* (1989) highlight the intricate connection between politics and gender issues. Interpreted as pieces of feminist art, these works are art of resistance in its finest hour, for they are art and protest.

Market economy – a central tenet of capitalism – is also a recurrent theme in Barbara Kruger's work. By means of visual language, exploring the Futura text-type she learned to use earlier in her career as a graphic designer and picture editor for magazines (financed by advertisers), she challenges the ways in which advertising influences all of our choices.

One pillar of a market economy is freedom of choice – in theory, shoppers

would buy solely based on their self-interest, able to interfere in the market by the logic of supply and demand and guided by notions of need and convenience. In reality, however, market economy is commanded by the values of society, which, in turn, are usually shaped by the wealthiest and influence our concepts about class, fashion, status, money and success: we are not as free to choose as we would like to think we are.

For this reason, Karl Marx's notion of "Commodity Fetishism" is often explored in the works of Kruger, who takes interest in society's relationship with money and material objects. In an essay entitled "Commodity," by Paul Woods, the author explains this idea further:

> commodity becomes a power in society. Rather than a use value for people, it assumes a power over people, becoming a kind of god to be worshiped, sought after, and possessed. (NELSON & SHIFF, 1996, p. 257)

In Kruger's *I shop therefore I am* (below), she confronts the issues of this power with her viewer:

Figure 11. *I shop therefore I am*, Barbara Kruger, 1987.

With an appropriation and reworking of the famous Rene Descartes idiom "I think therefore I am," Kruger suggests that our thoughts and ideas are no longer what give us meaning and define our existence, but it is the items we are able to purchase that do.

Society has transferred the material worth of the things we own to our own worth as human beings. The "I," at first glance, seems to refer to the artist, which

would remove the viewer from responsibility; quickly, however, we realize we are the "I" because we are bound to the system and constantly being redefined by it. Where all things and people are evaluated not by their intrinsic value, but by values that are socially constructed, "to have" is more important than "to be" – and those who lack competitive advantage are excluded.

Art critic Lucy Lippard has expanded on the talent of Barbara Kruger to use visual art to promote awareness:

> Artists alone can't change the world. Neither can anyone else, alone. But we can choose to be part of the world that is changing. There is no reason why visual art should not be able to reflect the social concerns of our day as naturally as novels, plays and music…The more sophisticated artists become, the more they able to make art that works on several levels. They can make specific artworks for specific audiences and situations, or they can try to have their cake and eat it too, with one work affecting art audiences one way and general audiences another…Art that is not confided to a single context under the control of the market or a ruling class taste is much harder to neutralize. And it is often quite effective when seen within the very citadels of power it criticizes. (DROZDEK, 2006, p. 1)

Whether addressing gender issues and reproductive rights or analyzing the social phenomenon of consumerism, Kruger's art has affected audiences for more than four decades, conveying messages that shake established ideas and revolutionize both the concept of art and the world.

7. CONCLUSION

The art of Gustave Courbet, Jacob Lawrence, Pablo Picasso and Barbara Kruger often extrapolated their context, challenging the *status quo* and stimulating reflections about different facets of human experience. Able to work around the controls of the power structures of their times, these artists produced art that has remained as indelible marks of the time and place in which they were produced.

Moreover, they reflect how those artists sought to deal with the issues that were relevant to them at the moment, constituting true instances of resistance through art expression: Courbet by challenging the power of Napoleon, Lawrence by revealing the cruelty of the treatment blacks received, Picasso by denouncing the horrors of war and Kruger by using the power of publicity to tackle socially relevant issues of her time and promote reflections on the many failures of our society. Each of them redefined the world in their own terms.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRUNA BEJARANO has a Bachelor of Science in Communication - Journalism (2012) and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History (2018), both from Florida International University (Miami). She is currently pursuing a Masters in Art Education at Florida University (Gainsville). Ms. Bejarano has more than 10 years of professional experience as a Mass Communicator, supporting and coordinating a broad variety of activities related to media and marketing/PR efforts at Baptist Health South Florida, KSG Group, GMG Marketing Company, the Rubell Museum and Borboleta Music. She is the Creative Director at Coffee Table Productions and is currently researching on the role of the Arts in Education (learning through art). She may be contacted at: bruna.bejarano@gmail.com. IMDB info: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm9406819/

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