

FRIEZE

Barbara Kruger's Teaching Legacy: "She Always Cut Through the Bullshit"

To mark Kruger's retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, artist Math Bass reflects on their former professor

BY MATH BASS AND CHLOE STEAD IN OPINION | 14 FEB 22

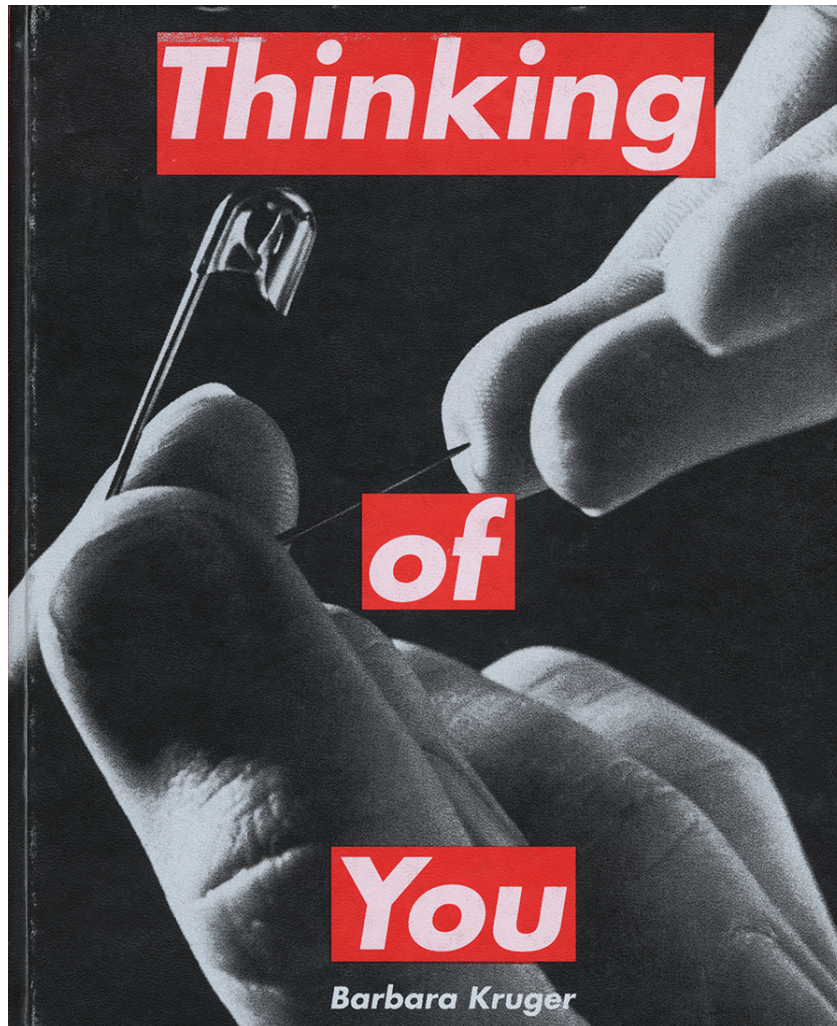


Main image: Barbara Kruger, 'THINKING OF YOU / I MEAN ME / I MEAN YOU', 2021, exhibition view, Art Institute of Chicago. Courtesy: the artist and the Art Institute of Chicago

I studied at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) from 2009 to 2011, which feels like a million years ago now. I was in the graduate program, so it was pretty hands off in a lot of ways. Students could do a lot of academic coursework if they wanted to, or they could just focus on studio time, which is what I did. Before I got into the program I was really scraping by, working random full-time jobs that didn't always leave me much time and energy to focus on my practice. When I started at UCLA, my work was centred largely around performance and video but, as my studies progressed, the props and performance objects I had been making for my videos began to step forward. With more time in the studio, I became very interested in them as objects off screen and started to address them as sculptures within my practice.

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Cover of Barbara Kruger, *Thinking of You*, 1999.
Courtesy: MOCA, Los Angeles, MIT Press and Sprüth
Magers, Berlin/London/Los Angeles

During my time at UCLA, Barbara was more of a roving faculty member. I don't think she was connected to a specific department, but I would do tutorials with her, and she was one of the first professors I met when I arrived. There weren't many pictures of her on the internet at that time, so it was only when I met her in person that I discovered she had such presence. I was a huge fan, of course. In fact, the first art book I ever bought was a monograph of Barbara's, *Thinking of You*, that was published by MOCA in 1999. I was introduced to her work by a girlfriend I met on the internet. I was 15 and lived on Long Island; she was in Upstate New York. Her mother was an artist, and she was savvy in a way that I just wasn't back then. It was

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at a time when you could mail order books so, after this girl asked me if I knew Barbara's work, I got my mom to order a catalogue for me. I remember being really struck by the juxtaposition of text and image, which I thought was so smart and badass. I still have the book, although it's completely beat up now.



Math Bass, *Legs*, 2020, oil on linen. Courtesy: the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles

The first time I met Barbara, she came into my studio, looked around and said: "What are you doing here? You don't need to be in school." I loved it. It was the biggest compliment I'd ever gotten from anyone in my entire life. It meant a lot to me that she could see that, even as a young person, I already had a defined voice. After that, we worked together periodically: she would come by my studio, and she was on my thesis committee. What I remember best about her teaching style was how clear and concise she was. She always cut through the bullshit. One time, I

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made this video and Barbara saw it and said: "Your work is usually so coherent, but I just don't understand what's going on here." I loved the way she just put it out there. She didn't soften anything that didn't need to be softened. Some of the best advice that she offered me was to keep things simple. I think she saw this as one of my strengths and really encouraged me to keep in touch with a pared-down and concise language, which is something that I continue to do. There were some professors whose opinions I could discount because they didn't necessarily understand what I was working on, but I really trusted Barbara's opinion. I haven't seen her that often since I graduated but, when I do run into her at a social event, she's always so supportive. To me, she will always be a punk-rock legend.