

No. 4100 *Untitled*, 1985
Lenticular photograph
51 x 51 cm

Location: NEW HOTEL, Workshop Floor, Ladies room

WORKS FROM THE
DAKIS JOANNOU
COLLECTION AT NEW HOTEL

BARBARA KRUGER

American conceptual/pop artist Barbara Kruger was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1945 and left there in 1964 to attend Syracuse University. Early on she developed an interest in graphic design, poetry, writing and attended poetry readings.

Kruger's earliest artworks date to 1969. Large woven wall hangings of yarn, beads, sequins, feathers, and ribbons, they exemplify the feminist recuperation of craft during this period. Despite her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial in 1973 and solo exhibitions at Artists Space and Fischbach Gallery, both in New York, the following two years, she was dissatisfied with her output and its detachment from her growing social and political concerns. In the fall of 1976, Kruger abandoned art making and moved to Berkeley, California, where she taught at the University of California for four years and steeped herself in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. She took up photography in 1977, producing a series of black-and-white details of architectural exteriors paired with her own textual ruminations on the lives of those living inside. Published as an artist's book, *Picture/Readings* (1979) foreshadows the aesthetic vocabulary Kruger developed in her mature work.

By 1979 Barbara Kruger stopped taking photographs and began to employ found images in her art, mostly from mid-century American print-media sources, with words collaged directly over them. Her 1980 untitled piece commonly known as "Perfect" portrays the torso of a woman, hands clasped in prayer, evoking the Virgin Mary, the embodiment of submissive femininity; the word "perfect" is emblazoned along the lower edge of the image.

These early collages in which Kruger deployed techniques she had perfected as a graphic designer, inaugurated the artist's ongoing political, social, and especially feminist provocations and commentaries on religion, racial and gender stereotypes, consumerism, corporate greed, and power.

During the early 1980s Barbara Kruger perfected a signature agitprop style, using cropped, large-scale, black-and-white photographic images juxtaposed with raucous, pithy, and often ironic aphorisms, printed in Futura Bold typeface against black, white, or deep red text bars. The inclusion of personal pronouns in works like *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981) and *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)* (1987) implicates viewers by confounding any clear notion of who is speaking. These rigorously composed mature works function successfully on any scale. Their wide distribution—under the artist's supervision—in the form of umbrellas, tote bags, postcards, mugs, T-shirts, posters, and so on, confuses the boundaries between art and commerce and calls attention to the role of the advertising in public debate. In recent years Barbara Kruger has extended her aesthetic project, creating public installations of her work in galleries, museums, municipal buildings, train stations, and parks, as well as on buses and billboards around the world. Walls, floors, and ceilings are covered with images and texts, which engulf and even assault the viewer. Since the late 1990s, Kruger has incorporated sculpture into her ongoing critique of modern American culture. *Justice* (1997), in white-painted fiberglass, depicts J. Edgar Hoover and Roy Cohn—two right-wing public figures who hid their homosexuality—in partial drag, kissing one another. In this kitsch send-up of commemorative statuary, Kruger highlights the conspiracy of silence that enabled these two men to accrue social and political power.

