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Barbara Kruger: Another Day. Another Night. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao 24 June to 11 September 2025

Akin Oladimeji

Let's start with one of Barbara Kruger's most well-known works in this exhibition, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* (1989), which was created for the Women's March on Washington of the same year, a demonstration tackling restrictions of abortion and reproductive rights in the US. It is a striking black-and-white photograph of a woman's face which has been divided into two, one half printed positive, the other in negative; the work's titular phrase printed on white text over a bold red background. Kruger's poster has only gained further resonance today and, by employing the second person perspective, Kruger draws viewers into the contested laws and social spaces of bodily autonomy, specifically those of women. The lasting impact of the artwork stems from how it continues to address authoritarianism and how it intersects with religion. So effective are Kruger's graphics (she started her career as a graphic designer) that Supreme – a trendy skaters' clothing brand – use her choice of font and layout (which, for unclear reasons, she has never contested in court).

In the late 1960s, Kruger served as a designer and picture editor for various publications where she honed her abilities to attract attention through effective visual composition and clarity. This experience not only enhanced her sensitivity to the circulation of images in consumer culture but also deepened her interest in the art of visual persuasion. During this time, she began utilising sans serif typefaces – most notably

Futura Bold and Helvetica Ultra Compressed – both renowned for their stark legibility and impact. These fonts became defining features of her artwork, enabling her 'to cut through the grease'.¹

The exhibition starts with *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)*, 1987, originally a photographic silkscreen on vinyl. It has been remade numerous times, including in 2019 as a large-scale LED installation over five meters tall complete with animation and sound, where it cycled through – with clanking metal sounds – various phrases such as 'I shop therefore I hoard', 'I need therefore I shop', and 'I love therefore I need'.

The curator, Lekha Waitoller, pointed out that Kruger is playing with ideas of authorship by taking work that she has discovered online that bears striking stylistic similarities to hers and presenting it without comment. There is humour too; for example, in a sound work installed across various corners of the galleries we hear a female voice – in the style of a US reality TV star – uttering the phrase 'I love you'; another, 'Sorry', followed by a rim shot. Similarly, there's a certain absurdity that flows through the video *Untitled (No Comment)*, 2020, which features an animated cat singing a pop hook from Lady Gaga's song 'Shallow' alongside a politically charged speech. The curator describes it as 'both humorous and unsettling'.²

Kruger has covered the floors of the gallery corridors with her well-known phrases in the Basque language. It not only alludes to the linguistic landscape of Bilbao but also acts as a visual link that connects the numerous galleries of the exhibition. Kruger's work overwhelms the senses, dominating the viewer as if to remind us that we are steeped

in the results of political decisions whether we like it or not.

Christian Viveros-Faune argues in the introduction to ‘Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art’ that since the Enlightenment in Europe there have been two overriding ambitions of modern and contemporary art: the trope of the artist as historian and the artist as activist. He analyses activist work by Goya, Turner, Jenny Holzer, Guerilla Girls, Ai Weiwei, Francis Alys and Barbara Kruger to illustrate his thesis, his notion of ‘epoch-defining political art.’³

Now in her eighties, Kruger can still make us care about the trials and tribulations of this world. Through humour, she navigates the intricate web of communication, revealing the threads that connect us and those that separate us.

- 1 “Barbara Kruger Artist Bio,” *The Broad*, <https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger> (accessed 10 October 2025)
- 2 Waitoller described it as such when she took me on a guided walkthrough on the 7th July 2025
- 3 Christian Viveros-Faune *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (David Zwirner Books, 2018) 5.

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Still Mad: Ding Hongdan at MAMOTH London (10 Nov 2024 – 14 Jan 2025)

Colin Mao

Entering MAMOTH Gallery’s ‘Still Mad’, one immediately encounters a vibrant clash of realism and spectacle. The solo exhibition by Ding Hongdan – the culmination of her residency in the gallery’s upstairs studio – is a phantasmagoria of bright oils, larger-than-life figures, and pop-cultural apparitions. Born in Beijing in 1995, Ding trained in oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts under Liu Xiaodong, a renewed socialist realist painter, before relocating to London for MAMOTH residency. Working between Beijing and London, she fuses academic realism with pop-surrealist colour to chronicle Gen-Z diasporic life.

Over several months of in-situ creation, Ding transformed quick sketches and private observations into polished tableaux that pulse with youth-driven energy. The result

is a show that not only displays a new body of works developed during her London residency, but also foregrounds the temporal process behind it. Each canvas carries the imprint of its making: layers of immediacy and duration, private gestures become public performance.

MAMOTH’s residency allowed Ding to paint London life as it unfolded, echoing an almost plein-air energy yet filtered through a distinctly twenty-first century lens. Armed with strong academic training in realist oil painting, she focused on capturing her contemporaries’ lived and psychological states within a new city. But unlike the traditional modes of socialist realism that once shaped Chinese art, Ding’s vision is playful and suffused with pop culture. Whereas socialist-realist painting in the Mao era naturalised state ideology by depicting idealised workers in muted, monumental tableaux, Ding subverts that legacy by saturating her canvases with high-key colour and individual self-curation,