I’m very serious. I’m brilliant and beautiful. Too beautiful for you. I’m looking into the distance, away from you. I’m thinking important thoughts. Things you can’t quite grasp. Someday, you’ll understand.
Barbara Kruger’s work has come to represent a host of negative affects for art historians and critics, and it is in those dark, painful, and discomfiting emotions that the work finds its criticality and deconstructive qualities. So we are told, or perhaps, ironically, indoctrinated — fictions become history, indeed. We understand Kruger’s work to be oppositional, paranoid, skeptical, probing, threatening, refusing, dismantling, denuding, castigating, withholding, chastising, ridiculing, combative, dissecting, extracting, exposing, embarrassing, accosting, and detached. In many activist contexts, these qualities are necessary, but I wonder if they take a toll, if they produce stasis instead of opportunities. I have always thought of Kruger’s use of text as written on the wind, as it were, somewhere between the page and the pen and an untethered gust. Her words and her writings are emissaries of the tradition of melodrama in which the film need not be believed or disbelieved, loved or reviled. The melodrama’s medium is itself belief; it is love and revulsion. Perversely, the application of terms like cool, critical, and detached to Kruger’s work allows the historian or critic to enact their own detachment from empathetic and capacious looking, from the handmade, from the emotionally excessive, from all that might be considered sincere, from a poetics as such that does not require the validation that visuality and criticality provide.

The negative emotions that characterize Kruger’s work might evince more general fears about language, imagination, and how we choose to mobilize them. The “paraliterary” turn, to quote Rosalind Krauss, that accompanied post-structural theory carried.

Love and the Paraliterary: On Barbara Kruger’s Picture/Readings
by William J. Simmons
with it a concern that literary criticism would become
fluffy, insubstantial, anti-critical, and even complicit—
melodramatic, even. Krauss discusses how the literary
qualities of post-structural theory were used to denigrate
it, and this war around criticality is distinctly gendered.
She describes Derrida's famous lecture on Van Gogh's
shoes, in which Derrida speaks in a falsetto, as if he were
"a woman who repeatedly breaks into the measured order
of the exposition with questions that are slightly hysterical,
very exasperated, and above all short." It is hard to not be
reminded of the standard discourse around Kruger's photo-
collages here. Derrida's feminized performance, according
to Krauss, "functions to open and theatricalize the space
of Derrida's writing, alerting us to the dramatic interplay
of levels and styles and speakers that had formerly been
the prerogative of literature but not of critical or philosophical
discourse." The feminized voice (or, considering Krauss's
evocation of theatricality, we might call it a queer voice)
therefore enacts the literary or poetic quality of Derrida's
deconstructive strategy. Yet again, the Other becomes
the un-consenting bearer of intellectual novelty without
receiving serious attention in and of itself, which is a
frequent phenomenon in Krauss's writings. Indeed, Kruger's
work often becomes de-politicized and de-poeticized
insomuch as the artist's feminist activism becomes
subsumed into post-structural generalities that purport
to speak to the subject, even as they obliterate the gendered,
sexed, raced, and classed body in service of a universalizing
decomposition. In any case, why do we always focus
on the shortness, the exasperation, the abruptness, of
Kruger's words and not allow them to aspire to narrative, to
paragraphs and memoirs?

Of central importance is Krauss's assertion that the new
paraliterary texts, like those by Derrida and Roland Barthes,
cannot be reduced to critique: "The paraliterary cannot
be a model for the systematic unpacking of the meanings
of a work of art that is criticism's task." Krauss goes on:
"Nothing is buried that must be 'extracted'; it is all part of
the surface of the text." Her argument does not, however,
engender anti-historicism or anti-poetry. Indeed, the
literary faded away into a clichéd rehearsal of the text's
construction as such, always in service of the dominance of
visuality and the surveillance of critique (not to mention the
while universalizing relentlessly from a place of self-
narration, drenched in the irony that privilege affords. Yet,
to add to a paranoid litany, as is customary in academia, it
must be noted that those who focus on sincerity likewise
miss the point, fascinated as they are by a masculinist,
heteropatriarchal, and paradoxically elitist anything-goes
attitude. I am thinking here of David Foster Wallace's
"E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," which is
perhaps the ur-text for the problematic and revered Quentin
Tarantino or Lars von Trier brand of sincerity, which is often
merely a masquerade for sexist and racist nostalgia.

For these reasons, we might consider Kruger's "Picture/
Readings," a series that necessitates a sustained
engagement with its sentences and stories that precedes
and even precludes our desire to fold them into critique.
Completed in 1978 and self-published, Picture/Readings
combines images, largely of the exteriors of houses in
Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Deerfield Beach, Florida, with
texts of filmic, novelistic, and melodramatic ambitions.
Rather than short bursts of words scattered among images,
Untitled (Free love), 1988. C-Print. 87 1/2 × 51 1/2 in. Courtesy of Sprüth Magers, Berlin / London / Los Angeles.
The woman who lives here is sitting at the kitchen table. Her husband sits across from her. She is about 36 years old. Her eyes are red and she is picking her hands and rubbing her arms. Her husband watches her but does not speak. He gets up and puts on some water for coffee. She has just returned from a checkup at the doctor's office. She has a lump on her breast. She is afraid she is going to die. She starts rubbing the top of the kitchen table. The moisture from her fingers creates greaslike smudges which you can see only when you hold your head at a particular angle. She makes a pattern with the smudges, a grid of six horizontal and vertical lines. She is looking at the inside of her hand. She is looking at the tips of her fingers. She presses her finger on the table, puts her head at a particular angle, and scrutinizes the print. She puts her head on the table sideways, so that her ear is pressed hard against the formica and her left eye is almost level with the surface. The cold, hard press of the table top gives her a kind of relentless comfort. She closes her eyes. Her husband pours the hot water into a mug of instant coffee and places it near the edge of the table. From her position, below the cup, she watches the smoke rise like some kind of signal.
This was a time of the house, so they hired some neighborhood boys to build it up and move over all the new windows, so we went out and figured it was a good way to make a few hours. I brought Marjorie alone because they were doing the main part of the job and the window and all the work still be finished work. After about 2 hours we went to the house and finished the window. Then when we went in, we found she had left the house across the street and just watch the horses. I was there to move to slowly around it with each worker. She would cut herself inside making herself, she in wearing a white shirt which her pressed on a picture of little boys with smiles on their faces coming from flowers to flowers.

She is making French fries for her husband, who is a successful real estate broker. She thinks this is his his favorite breakfast on the floor, but she washes the floor, sets "Frenches," puts his feet around her and kisses her hand on the lips.

The music is on and everyone's up on their feet, although there is a silent understanding that nothing is a step too frightenously anybody else's style. Sharon and Deb are tiring their best. But look below. The Waltz is a statement, but the arts that's a traffic cop on the triangle. Sharon, not to be ignored, is in raving with her gloves, but she is saying, I will not be ignored, she is laughing her eyebrows. She is leaving her shoulders. She is stirring her face around and pointing up and down, without regard to the music, or dancing with a dance, except when she looks at the man sitting next to her, who is laughing and pointing his finger, and when he is laughing, his movements are all well done as to not to display anything interesting, I move where his fingers or close, he is an indifferent dancer. Likewise, her partner boy's hair is really covered in her protection of longness as a remarkable, somehow, his hair has a form of a fork. He is dancing around, laughing and searching with wise eyes and cool expression and white faces, after the mouth, she teases for green shoes. Get as much end of today, or some kind of anything, related upward, like dying apples on a string, who, because of their continuous surface, find it impossible to approximate the timed conclusions, regulated by grace, which we once are call rhythm.

Sall is sitting on the bed and looking at the clock. It is 1:30 in the afternoon. The television is on and she wants to go back in sleep. Sharon works in the garden in town. She is cooking for her 11-year-old son. Sharon works in a store, where is taking out, talking, waiting, talking, etc., with and reads more magazines. She sits on the bed smoking a cigarette, her legs are crossed and her dress has slid down. She is laughing, I will not be ignored, she is showing her shoulders. I am leaving her face around and pointing up and down, without regard to the music, or dancing with a dance, except when she looks at the man sitting next to her, who is laughing and pointing his finger, and when he is laughing, his movements are all well done as to not to display anything interesting, I move where his fingers or close, he is an indifferent dancer. Likewise, her partner boy's hair is really covered in her protection of longness as a remarkable, somehow, his hair has a form of a fork. He is dancing around, laughing and searching with wise eyes and cool expression and white faces, after the mouth, she teases for green shoes. Get as much end of today, or some kind of anything, related upward, like dying apples on a string, who, because of their continuous surface, find it impossible to approximate the timed conclusions, regulated by grace, which we once are call rhythm.
the stories in Picture/Readings are long by comparison to Kruger’s more famous work and unceremoniously formatted in blocks. If one wanted to write a dissertation on “Picture/Readings,” one could certainly argue for the importance of architecture in Kruger’s photo-collages, since they are themselves syntactic architectures made from blocks of text and image building upon each other.2 What is there to be said, however, about Kruger’s words here? They are not declarations, but rather stories or narrative scaffoldings that interweave and become the built environments of a life, a psyche, a series of loves and disappointments, of bodies that come together and disentangle. For us to allow Barbara Kruger to tell a story would change everything.

One scenario in Picture/Readings recalls Kenneth Anger’s Scorpio Rising (1964) and the latently queer film noir from which it emerged. Kruger’s protagonist Gail is listless and beautiful. With nothing to do but smoke and watch TV, she looks outside and considers the nature of the column that adorns the apartment complex. That glamorous, erotic boredom becomes skin to a film: “It was just like Gone With the Wind, having that column outside your window.” Of course, no life is actually just like a movie, even if the movie is Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. Kruger goes on:

She is looking straight ahead at Johnny, who is wearing a gray shirt. His head is buried beneath the hood of a red Mustang. His forearms are tan and full and the veins stick out of them. She loves that about him. She walks up behind him, throws her arms around his waist, and pushes her face hard into his back. She catches him off balance and pulls him to the ground, under the Mustang, and forces him, along with her, to stare at the underside of the car, promising him, that if they stare long enough, it’ll turn into a beautiful set of doric columns.

We might remember Derrida’s feminized, frantic interruption that Krauss relays and suggest that Gail enacts a similar self-insertion into the masculine narrative of her boyfriend who archetypally works at a gas station, in all its David Lynch glory. Laura Mulvey, a longtime theorist of Kruger’s work, and Peter Wollen write in their breathtaking essay on Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo that beauty was an affliction for Modotti, a disability even, that precluded her from attaining critical success on her own, apart from the great men who history tells us enabled her.3 Likewise, Catherine Breillat writes: “For it is not love we crave but the look, and the one who inflicts, looks a little.”4 So too might Gail be afflicted, and upon her we and Johnny look; we inflict. We look and we inflict, just as we do when we undertake a formal analysis of a work of art. When reading Gail’s story though, we might jump immediately from form to content without dissecting and disemboweling her. We might long for a happy ending, for love, at last, to save us from banality and tie us to countless others who have sought difference-within-cliché or oppositionality within complicity. We long for feminist optimism interlaced with lust and despair.

With these possibilities in mind, with the possibility for minoritarian subjects (artists and fictional characters alike) to maintain problematic connections to mass-cultural phenomena, we might release women, queer people, and people of color from perennially bearing the burden of theorizing difference and avant-gardeism. In any case, to call “Picture/Readings” either critical or complicit would miss the point entirely and neglect the constellations of identification between those poles. Sometimes, a stereotype is an action and not merely a gesture, to cite Craig Owens’s foundational essay on Kruger.5 A stereotype might be just appealing enough to get us underneath that car and consider the truths of engines and Doric columns and love. We need not always look under the hood, as it were, since it is all right there before us: it is the muscle car with a handsome, inattentive man beside it, ready to drive us off into the sunset. The cliché, the stereotype, and the melodrama all move, for we are always rearranging ourselves in proximity to them, and within that rearrangement might lie the pleasure of veins protruding from skin or the pleasure of rejecting such saccharine reductions of experience.

Barbara Kruger’s monumental wall work Untitled (Questions) (1990–2018) is on view through November 30, 2020 at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles.

William J. Simmons is a writer, poet, essayist, and curator based in Los Angeles and New York.

2 Ibid. p. 37.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. p. 38.
5 Ibid. p. 39.
7 I gestured toward this argument in my review of Kruger’s exhibition at Modern Art Oxford in Artforum: “From time to time, pasted words might be slightly mismatched, some even coming over the paper’s edge, creating embodied spaces rather than purely linguistic ones.” See William J. Simmons, “Critics’ Picks: Barbara Kruger,” Artforum.com (July 23, 2014) https://www.artforum.com/picks/barbara-kruger-47525.