

Open Source Indicators

Bill Adams, Michael Assiff, John Gordon Gauld, Ignacio González-Lang, JODI, Barbara Kruger
curated by Seth Sgorbati for SPRING/BREAK Art Show. March 2 - 7, 2016.
Room #3102

Open Source Indicators refers to an American research program by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) under the direction of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The program's goal is to parse mass public data as a predictor of significant societal events.¹

Barbara Kruger—an early adopter of the public domain image, as seen here in a pre-digital 1987 'paste up'—curated a 1988 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled, *Picturing 'Greatness.'* On display were 39 black and white photographic portraits of artists from the museum collection, along with floor-to-ceiling wall text by Kruger presented in the middle of the museum gallery. The text acted to demystify the role of the artist as presented in the surrounding pictures: "...others feature the artist as a star-crossed Houdini with a beret on, a kooky middleman between God and the public."²

Roger Kimball wrote a review of *Picturing 'Greatness'*—along with two other concurrent exhibitions³—for *The New Criterion* titled, *Is MOMA Attempting Suicide?* To Kimball, *Picturing 'Greatness'* marked a clear and uncomfortable delineation in the perception of images and their potential structural meaning: "What does it mean that the Museum of Modern Art should cheerfully support an exhibition based on principles that, if taken seriously, would mean the end of its existence as a guardian of high culture and, yes, of artistic greatness?"⁴

At times we realize the world is not seen in the same way that we previously understood. The popularized image is now user-generated and no longer the sole domain of marketers. Meaning is now sourced as a collective understanding through the creation of tacit visual clues, and group acceptance—equally democratized as it is hermetic. Artworks presented here, hint at gradual shifts in the visual perception of imagery and their meaning, experientially modified by digital presentation, open source access, and easily facilitated reproduction.

There is strange specificity to a facial expression that is ambiguous enough to be chosen as backdrop for a popular internet meme. This phenomenon is paralleled by Bill Adams in a portrait that blurs the line between abstraction and figuration. Facial features that move towards desktop icon or emoji are depicted with an economy of color, stroke and shape.

Environmental activism is the underpinning to the work of Michael Assiff. Printed on a vent cover are images relating to American multinational agro-corporation Monsanto, Argentine environmentalist Sofia Gatica, and submerged data cables that are the physical world-spanning connections of the internet. The columns of vents mimic the columns of HTML website programming. Printed onto a real-life object, the images are removed from the digital, humorously juxtaposed with verb "vent." Presented outside of a computer or phone, actual outrage and activism conjure a relationship with imagery of a call to arms. Visually broken up by the perforations in the molded vent cover, and seen cohesively from only one angle, a feeling of permanence and transience is depicted.

John Gordon Gauld—whose practice is defined in part through contemporary still-life painting—sees the artistic act of choosing what objects and images to group and depict as a vital condition of contemporary digital life as much as it was in the 16th through 18th centuries. This reinforces a cyclical understanding of image as symbol or icon. Here, he reproduces Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *Le Sèrail du Doguin* (1734) shifted slightly on the prepared support. The various meanings of painted iconography—satirizing the political entanglements of the Ottoman, Persian, Spanish and French empires—are lost without specific knowledge, what is left is a painting of dogs and cats, one that is easily copied, posted and shared.

Ignacio González-Lang pairs internet images with fragmented, yet cohesive texts culled from archived clippings of the New York Post's *Weird but True* column. The texts, composed through 'the cut-up technique' also used by the Dada artists, are 'big data' at arms length, suggesting with absurdist humor, a more profound understanding of the world through randomized connections. The images and texts are then etched by a laser onto clay panels. Embodied through these works are various printing techniques used to record information: marks on clay (ancient), newsprint (increasingly outmoded) and laser (present and future technology).

The ongoing process of simplification and readability of the desktop icon and purity of user experience of a Mac OS X desktop is upended by net art pioneers JODI. What appears to be an operating system highjacked by a computer virus, is in actuality the recorded frenetic movements of the computer user. Created is the chaotic opening and closing of windows and the repetitive typing of nonsense text. The actions all narrated by disorienting text-to-speech audio. There is, of course, anxiety underlying all of this.

1. The IARPA description of the Open Source Indicators (OSI) Program is as follows:

Many significant societal events are preceded and/or followed by population-level changes in communication, consumption, and movement. Some of these changes may be indirectly observable from publicly available data, such as web search queries, blogs, micro-blogs, internet traffic, financial markets, traffic webcams, Wikipedia edits, and many others. Published research has found that some of these data sources are individually useful in the early detection of events such as disease outbreaks. But few methods have been developed for anticipating or detecting unexpected events by fusing publicly available data of multiple types from multiple sources.

IARPA's Open Source Indicators (OSI) Program aims to fill this gap by developing methods for continuous, automated analysis of publicly available data in order to anticipate and/or detect significant societal events, such as political crises, humanitarian crises, mass violence, riots, mass migrations, disease outbreaks, economic instability, resource shortages, and responses to natural disasters. Performers will be evaluated on the basis of warnings that they deliver about real-world events.

Required technical innovations include: development of methods that leverage population behavior change in anticipation of, and in response to, events of interest; processing of publicly available data that reflect those population behavior changes; development of data extraction techniques that focus on volume, rather than depth, by identifying shallow features of data that correlate with events; development of multivariate time series models robust to non-stationary, noisy data to reveal patterns that precede events; and innovative use of statistical methods to fuse combinations of time series for generating probabilistic warnings of events. If successful, OSI methods will "beat the news" by fusing early indicators of events from multiple publicly available data sources and types.

This text can be found at: <http://www.iarpa.gov/index.php/research-programs/osi/baa>

2. Kruger's full text reads:

Picturing "Greatness"

The pictures that line the walls of this room are photographs of mostly famous artists, most of whom are dead. Though many of these images exude a kind of well-tailored gentility, others feature the artist as a star-crossed Houdini with a beret on, a kooky middleman between God and the public. Vibrating with inspiration yet implacably well behaved, visceral yet oozing with all manner of refinement, almost all are male and almost all are white. These images of artistic "greatness" are from the collection of this museum. As we tend to become who we are through a dense crash of allowances and denials, inclusions and absences, we can begin to see how approval is accorded through the languages of "greatness," that heady brew

concocted with a slice of visual pleasure, a pinch of connoisseurship, a mention of myth and a dollop of money. But these images can also suggest how we are seduced into the world of appearances, into a pose of who we are and who we aren't. They can show us how vocation is ambushed by cliché and snapped into stereotype by the camera, and how photography freezes moments, creates prominence and makes history. —Barbara Kruger

A press release for the exhibition can be found at: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6496/releases/MOMA_1987_0114_117.pdf?2010

3. Exhibitions included: *Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art* curated by Deborah Wye and *Vito Acconci: Public Places*

4. Kimball's passage on *Picturing 'Greatness'* from the article, *Is MOMA Attempting Suicide?* published in *The New Criterion*, Volume 6 April 1988:

At first blush, we seem to have returned to normalcy when we walk upstairs to the Edward Steichen Photography Center to see "Picturing 'Greatness.'" Unlike "Committed to Print," "Picturing 'Greatness'" is a quiet exhibition. Drawn entirely from the museum's own collection, it presents "Greatness" is a quiet exhibition. Drawn entirely from the museum's own collection, it presents thirty-nine photographic portraits of various well-known artists by distinguished photographers. Many of the images are familiar. Among the best known photographs on view are Robert Capa's portraits of Matisse and Picasso, Man Ray's portraits of Cocteau, Duchamp, and Picasso, Hans Namuth's of Jackson Pollock, Edward Steichen's of Rodin and Brancusi, and Alfred Stieglitz's of his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Demuth. It's all perfectly staid and, in fact, a bit boring—until one contemplates the curatorial considerations that inform the exhibition.

For while the content of "Picturing 'Greatness'" is unexceptionable, the context (to use that word currently so favored by the museum) is every bit as inimical to traditional aesthetic values as "Committed to Print." Once again, the title of the exhibition is revealing. Much is expressed by those surprising quotation marks around the word "greatness." They are meant to call into question both the idea that there is such a thing as superlative artistic achievement and the contention that a Picasso or a Matisse or a Brancusi might legitimately be said to exemplify such achievement; above all, those knowing quotation marks are meant to call into question the notion that there is such a thing as aesthetic quality that cannot be explained as a sociological datum or reduced to a coefficient of external social forces. The artist Barbara Kruger, whom the Museum of Modern Art invited to act as guest curator for the show, is an old hand at insinuating this sort of corrosive irony into art. No doubt her tenure in the art department at *Mademoiselle* magazine taught her how to combine everyday images and catchy verbal tags to

capture attention. But now, instead of selling make-up, panty hose, and the dream of endless adolescent romance, she is selling pre-packaged feminist denunciations of a world populated by such terrible things as money, advertising, and a male-dominated art world—not to speak of make-up, panty hose, and the dream of endless adolescent romance. What she peddles as art are still advertisements—photographs with clever legends informing us, for example, that “We Won’t Play Nature to Your Culture”—only now her price is much higher and her exhortations more strident.

Given Miss Kruger’s talents and proclivities, it was only natural that she should hit upon the idea of mounting an ironic exhibition of photographs of great modern artists; and it was likewise to be expected that it would be an exhibition in which the quality of the photographs—though it happens to be high—is subordinate to the ideology that gave birth to the idea. The aim of the exhibition is not to provide the public with a display of photographic art; still less is it to memorialize or pay homage to the artists on view. On the contrary, Miss Kruger has drawn upon the aura of these great photographers to help undermine the idea of artistic greatness and subtly erode the stature of the artists they pictured. The sensibility governing “Picturing ‘Greatness’” is summed up in the wall label that Miss Kruger provided to accompany the exhibition. “Though many of these images exude a kind of well-tailored gentility,” we read near the beginning of the text,

others feature the artist as a star-crossed Houdini with a beret on, a kooky middleman between God and the public. Vibrating with inspiration yet implacably well behaved, visceral yet oozing with all manner of refinement, almost all are male and almost all are white. These images of artistic “greatness” are from the collection of this museum. As we tend to become who we are through a dense crush of allowances and denials, inclusions and absences, we can begin to see how approval is accorded through the languages of “greatness,” that heady brew concocted with a slice of visual pleasure, a pinch of connoisseurship, a mention of myth and a dollop of money.

Considered simply as a piece of exposition, this passage invites comment: for example, is it true that the photographs on view “exude” the qualities Miss Kruger enumerates? What does it mean to describe Picasso, say, as a “star-crossed Houdini”? Or as a “kooky middleman between God and the public”? Is this the effect of the photographs in question? Or is talk of star-crossed Houdinis and kooky middlemen merely a way of casting aspersions on some of the most sensitive character portraits of these great artists we possess? I believe it is. And consider the implications of Miss Kruger’s chiding observation that all the photographs come from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art; clearly it is meant as a criticism; but why should possession of these photographs be something the Museum of Modern Art is ashamed of? The answer is that for Miss Kruger the artists

pictured here form a kind of rogues’ gallery of established taste that, precisely because it is established, is suspect.

And the lessons of Miss Kruger’s exhibition go far beyond photography. Not only is there the suggestion that the development of modern art has involved a sexist and racist conspiracy—“almost all [the artists on view] are male and almost all are white”—but there is the more basic suggestion that “artistic ‘greatness’” itself is a function of social approval, of a convergence of societal forces that colludes to elevate certain individuals to the pedestal of artistic success while maliciously passing over other worthy souls. The place of talent, of vision, of personal artistic accomplishment is nowhere included in Miss Kruger’s formula for deriving “greatness.” Perhaps the habit of seeing every genuine cultural accomplishment in quotation marks—of reducing, that is, cultural achievement to the product of ideological prejudice—dulls one’s ability to appreciate or even register true greatness. But the question remains: What does it mean that the Museum of Modern Art should cheerfully support an exhibition based on principles that, if taken seriously, would mean the end of its existence as a guardian of high culture and, yes, of artistic greatness?

The full review can be found at: <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Is-MOMA-attempting-suicide--5996>