

ART Barbara Kruger merges text and image to provocative effect, writes Peter Hill.

Words for art's sake

HERE'S A LITTLE ART quiz to enjoy over the summer break. The names of which well-known artists can be formed from the following anagrams? (answers at foot of column). I Paint Modern; A Calder Herewith; Such Dare; Most Handmade; Ramshackle Blanc; Nonradical Video; and Anal How Dry.

This sort of playfulness with words — and its translation into graphic image — is typical of the work of Australian artist Peter Burgess. The text is often set inside minimalist rectangles and silkscreen-printed onto small canvases.

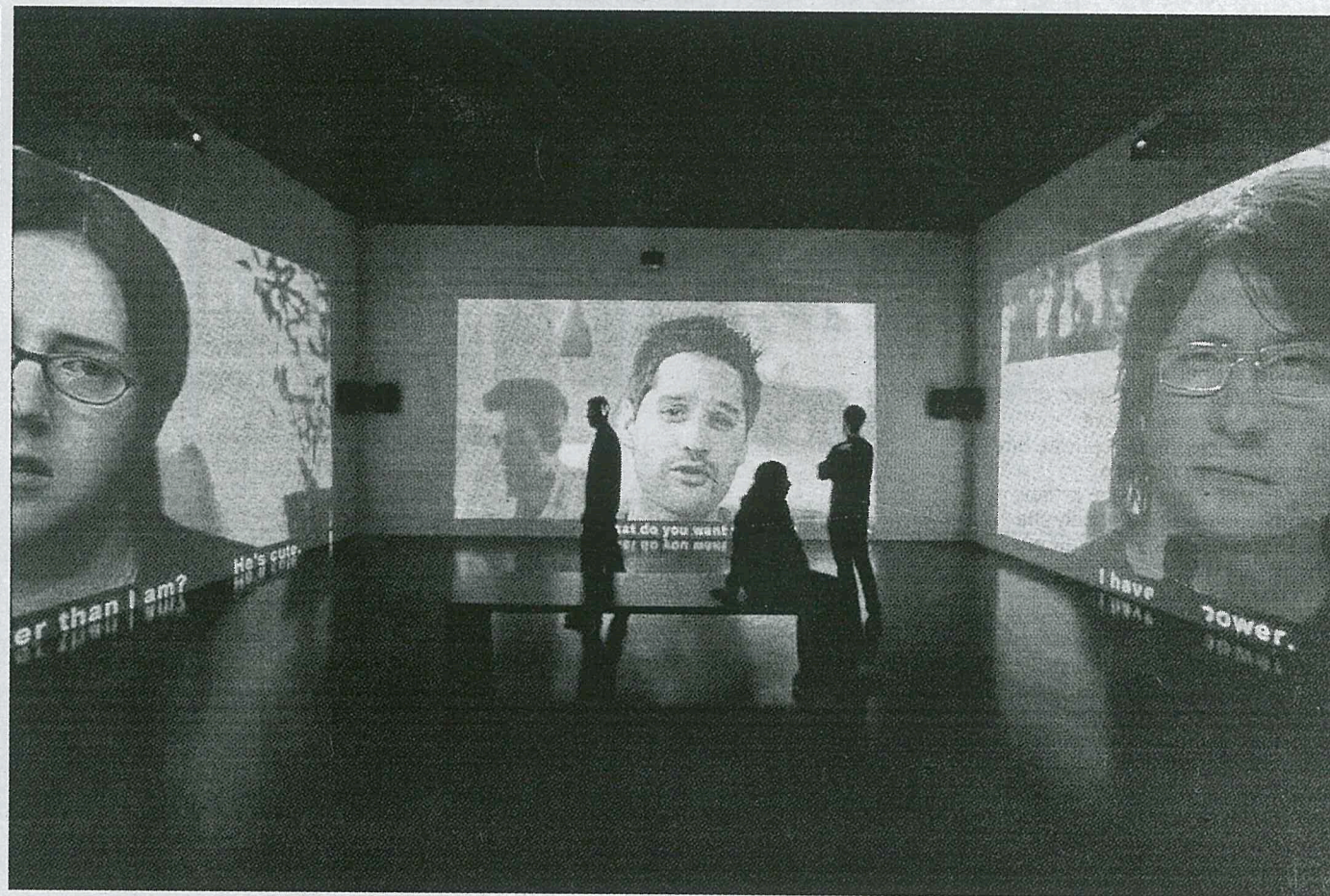
For several decades artists have been combining text and image in just about every way imaginable. Some are close to Burgess in their playfulness, such as Ed Ruscha, who represented America at the last Venice Biennale. Where the former pirates the anagram, Ruscha goes for the palindrome with phrases such as Lion in oil; Solo gigolos; Tulsa slut and Level as a level; painted across white snow-capped mountains and crisp, blue skies.

Others, such as London-based Scot Bruce McLean, do it with painterly expressionism, wild gesture and absurd poetry as in his work *A teacup, a jug, a piece of floor, a certain smile, a new front door* — the marks representing the objects becoming almost indistinguishable from the words that signify them.

From here it is but a short step to graffiti, or the currently fashionable stencil art, decorating back streets and alleyways from Melbourne to Manchester. When he took the street into the white cube of the gallery Jean-Michel Basquiat probably achieved the perfect mix of graffiti and gravitas, taking the big issues of sex and death and burying them in a cartoon landscape. Eventually his tag — SAMO, shorthand for "same old shit" — became his epitaph as the heroin took hold and dealers of both persuasions circled like vultures.

Others took a cooler, more cerebral approach. Some say Joseph Kosuth started it all when as a graduate student in America around 1966 he exhibited a dictionary definition of the word "chair" next to a real chair, and a life-size photograph of the same chair. It wasn't long before the hand of the artist disappeared almost completely from the work of art. Lawrence Weiner employed sign writers to construct exquisite texts, often with anti-nuclear messages, in large blue letters on museum walls. You can see one as you descend the escalators at the Art Gallery of NSW. Curator Tony Bond tells how this was one of the hardest purchases to get past his acquisitions committee. On the one hand they looked at the comparatively high price of the artwork; on the other they saw the very reasonable bill for a day's work from the local sign writer. And they wondered. But that is one of the main functions of art, to make us wonder. As with the time Turner Prize winner Douglas Gordon had the words "Trust Me" tattooed on his arm. Who could trust someone who did that?

Over the past century one of the main outlets for the marriage of text and image has been the magazine and, by extension, the billboard poster. Everything from



hard news to savvy advertising gets locked into the layout editor's grid and we hardly notice the joins. It was pretty much inevitable that at some point this would be subverted by contemporary visual artists. Two American artists (working independently of each other), Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, did it better and sooner than most. Not surprisingly, both emerged from the worlds of publishing, advertising and the media.

You can see a stunning exhibition of the work of Barbara Kruger at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. This is a personal aesthetic, honed over decades, that is by turn universal, subversive and seductive. As recognition of this Kruger was given a Lifetime Achievement award at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

Kruger was born in Newark,

Barbara Kruger's *Twelve* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

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New Jersey, in 1945. She trained in New York but now divides her time between that city and Los Angeles. Having served her time assembling text and image for various Conde Nast publications such as *Mademoiselle*, Kruger began her career as we now know it in 1978 by creating two art projects called *Hospital* and *Picture/Reading*. In the latter, fragments of narrative were superimposed over exterior shots of buildings, telling the story of what might be going on inside those buildings. Poetry, aesthetics, art and the tools of advertising were beginning to coalesce. As Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (and there's a few good anagrams in that mouthful) wrote in *Art in America* in 1997, "Barbara Kruger is the poet laureate of the age of spectacle. Since her signature red, black and white graphics first appeared in the early 1980s, they have become a familiar presence in the world of contem-

porary art as well as on the street. Direct address is her tool, and her target is 'you' — the collective subject created and sustained by mass media. Cutting through the clutter of our image-saturated world, Kruger's work grabs us by the collar and booms, 'Don't be a jerk'. (This is the Krugerian graphic emblazoned on the coffee mug from which I drank while conducting this interview.)"

The beauty of her work is the distance it has travelled since those early days. The constant danger she faces is in being subverted by the very powers she seeks to subvert. It's not just the tacky merchandising (appropriately brought to you by the artist whose best-known catchcry is "I Shop Therefore I Am"), but the totally unethical cannibalism of Madison Avenue, Charles Saatchi, and the dangerous no-person's land between ad-land and the world of contemporary art.

In most of her interviews she mentions at some point the huge costs in creating such installations. Other artists seem to get bankrolled by wealthy dealers or corporate funds. She says she has to raise most of the cash herself. As you walk around ACCA and become immersed in the various spaces that Kruger has created, you realise that this is not work made on the cheap. There is hardware, there is software, and there are production and editing costs akin to those of a small film company.

The major piece *Twelve* comes to Melbourne via Glasgow and New York. This is about as global a triangle as you can plot. Yet it is very local in content. Twelve short scenes are enacted, by paid actors, around a table at mealtime. The themes discussed deal with global politics and all kinds of prejudice — domestic violence, consumerism, objectification, dehumanisation. These enter our consciousness through text scrolling along the bottom of our screens. When this work was shown at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York, David Frankel wrote in *Artforum*, "Some slightly

stiff acting bears out our sense of these people as awkward, injured containers for the forces of their day. Add a tense pace, crackling language, occasional sonic devices to surprise, and we still haven't reached the real coup, the staging: Entering the space, we are invisible parties to a conversation among larger-than-life actors, who talk through us to each other as if we weren't there."

So what separates Kruger's current work from a very elite form of filmmaking which only a handful of people can watch (free of charge, but publicly funded) as opposed to hundreds or thousands shelling out 15 bucks at the local multiplex? It's more to do with the viewpoint of the director, and in Kruger's case the director is an artist who is constantly slipping between media.

"You can just see how certain directors use the conventions of cinema to push your buttons," she said in Glasgow. "But then there are also all these sentiments that you see coming out — you know, in terms of the way we view public events after 9/11. I remember watching TV after Princess Diana died — that was when the pornography of sentiment became so clear and then you saw it leaking out into 9/11 messages. There's a real sense of loss and terror in the world and then there's all this sentiment around."

In addition to *Twelve*, three new works have their world premiere at ACCA. Either you need to spend a long time in the gallery to consume all of this, or — like me — you make several visits and allow the totality of the exhibition to grow on you like a series of skins. And as you walk around, remember Shakespeare's words, as appropriated by Ed Ruscha around the cupola of the Miami-Dade Public Library, "WORDS WITHOUT THOUGHTS NEVER TO HEAVEN GO".

Answers to quiz: Piet Mondrian; Rachel Whiteread; Ed Ruscha; Thomas Demand; Charles Blackman; Leonardo da Vinci; Andy Warhol.