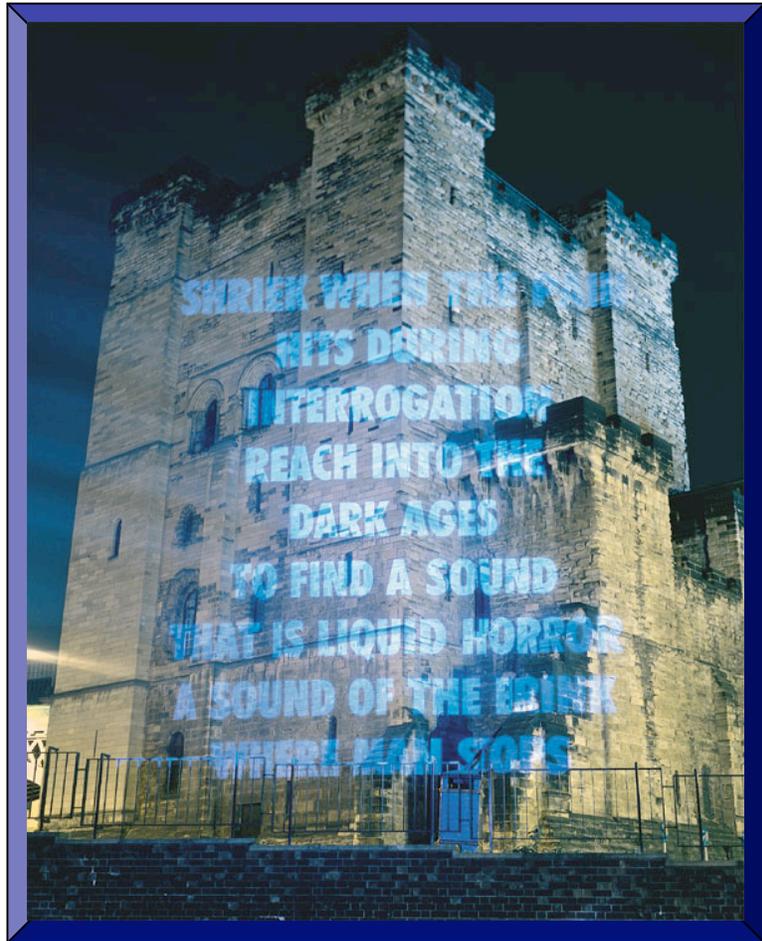


Jenny Holzer



Language as Art

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James Geary, in his history of aphorisms, tells the story of a German controversy that began when Jenny Holzer was accused of being morally offensive:

In 1993, the German daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published *Lustmord* by Jenny Holzer in its *Magazin* section. *Lustmord* is set during the Balkan wars and describes a rape from the perspective of the rapist, the victim, and an observer. The story is told in brief installments, each of which is written in red, black, or blue ink onto human skin. A card was attached to the front cover of the *Magazin* that read, "I am awake in the place where women die." The red ink in which this text was printed contained a small amount of blood taken from female volunteers, including some from the former Yugoslavia. The mixture of blood and ink caused an uproar in Germany...(192-3)

Meriam-Webster defines aphorism as "a concise statement of a principle; a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment ("aphorism")." Jenny Holzer's aphorisms journey from the page to the environment and seem to get under people's skin. She has used aphoristic text in her art since 1977 when her *Truisms* were first made public:

She printed them anonymously in black italic script on white paper and wheat-pasted to them to building facades, signs, and telephone booths in lower Manhattan. Arranged in alphabetical order and comprised of short

sentences, her *Truisms* inspired pedestrians to scribble messages on the posters and make verbal comments. Holzer would stand and listen to the dialogues invoked by her words (“Jenny Holzer – Biography & Art”).

From Art:21 interviews, it is clear that political awareness and motivation for change are components of Holzer’s artistic intent (Art:21). Her aphorisms are concise statements of her sentiments. The topics range from the scientific to the personal and include “thoughts on aging, pain, death, anger, fear, violence, gender, religion, and politics (Chadwick 382).” Jenny Holzer may assume the authoritative voice of mass culture but it is still up to the individual viewer to determine the degree of personal truth in Holzer’s statements. Whether *Truisms* strike a chord of harmony or of discord, they still strike a chord that initiates thought—a process that begins consideration of personal values and that may facilitate social evolution. Jenny Holzer has created paintings, prints, marble sculptures, electronic signboards, Web sites, museum installations, and monumental environmental projections to subvert political norms, to challenge the *status quo*, and to promote positive change. Her art has “added to conceptualism a socially informed, feminist perspective (Heartney et. al. 12).”

On July 29, 1950 an aphoristic performance artist—an American Neo-Conceptualist—was born (Geary 194, “Jenny Holzer – Biography & Art”). Jenny Holzer was born in Holzer Hospital that was founded by her grandparents in the town of Gallipolis, Ohio. She entered the world in the middle of the century...in a mid-sized town...in the Midwest. She seemed to be a restless student with her Duke University, University of Chicago, and Ohio University course work leading to her 1972 BFA. Her 1977 MFA in painting was completed at the Rhode Island School of Design. Within a year of her graduation, she was part of Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program, where painting was frowned upon, and where her *Truisms* became, as she said, “almost a table of contents” for what came later in her career (Heartney et. al. 144-148). The central theme of Jenny Holzer’s art is aphoristic text. Some is her writing while more recent installations and outdoor xenon projections are collaborations with authors of the projected text.

As Jenny Holzer began her art career, she was a resident of lower Manhattan. She came to know and admire a number of the politically oriented artists who worked in the area—among them John Ahearn, Colen Fitzgibbon, Justin Ladda, Tom Otterness, and Kiki Smith—and teamed with them as part of the artists' group Collaborative Projects (Collab).

Her real breakthrough came in 1982, when she worked on a project for the Spectacolor sign in Times Square. This was the first time she used an electronic sign to display her texts. The signs have since allowed her to reach a larger audience than she previously commanded. By programming them to run at varying speeds and in different typefaces, colors, and patterns, she is able to evoke nuances of meaning from seemingly matter-of-fact statements (Waldman and Holzer 18-19).

A note of interest is that Holzer's choice of typeface, in her early works, was Futura Bold Italic (sans-serif) and Times Roman Bold Italic (serif)—easily read and difficult to ignore. Her signage brought her disquieting messages to a new height of subversive social engagement.

Her strategy—placing surprising texts where normal signage is expected—gave Holzer direct access to a large public that might not give *art* any consideration, while allowing her to undermine forms of power and control that often go unnoticed (“Guggenheim Collection”).

Jenny Holzer has amassed a body of work that spans more than thirty years. Exhibitions on five continents share her text-based work in respective native languages. “In numerous interviews, Holzer has indicated that the ambiguous tone and often-contradictory content of her messages are intended to elicit the strongest possible response from her viewers (Heller 212).” She certainly succeeded in her German publication of *Lustmord!* Whether writing in blood on human skin or scrolling outdoor text on castles with xenon projections, the central theme of Jenny Holzer's artwork is the text—confrontational aphorisms or collaborative poetry—that lights the fire of intellectual and sensory response.

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