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Jenny Holzer and the Art of Words on Walls

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Last week I was among the lucky ones who heard the American artist Jenny Holzer speak at RMIT's Capitol Theatre. Holzer presented a slide show of her work, which spans thirty years, from its earliest *Truisms* series, through the *Inflammatory Essays* and the *Laments* to the more recent *Redaction Paintings*. She spoke modestly and with humour, often seeming to downplay the impact and intelligence of her formidable artworks. Since last Friday evening, I've found myself thinking frequently about her work and how enormously insightful it is; I was assisted in this enterprise by visiting the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) last night, to see her current [exhibition](#), and to listen to a conversation about her work between Louise Adler and Juliana Engberg, ACCA's art director.

Holzer has become such a colossal figure in contemporary art that it's easy to forget how she first came to public attention: as a street artist, wheat-pasting posters on the streets of New York in the very early 1980s. These posters contained lists of the 'truisms' she became famous for: short statements that sounded sometimes banal, sometimes profound, sometimes sensible and oftentimes directly contradictory. The posters stated, always in upper case, always justified to the left hand side, always in a vertical list: 'ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE', 'TORTURE IS BARBARIC', 'RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY', 'MONEY CREATES TASTE', 'AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE', 'PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT' and many, many more. The *Truisms* were also printed onto T-shirts (and I was the proud owner of one): Holzer said in her lecture on Friday night that she wanted to make 'cheap art'; art that would be 'useful' and that could circulate among people.

She spoke about how she made the *Truisms* series anonymous, because she wanted people to pay attention to the subject-matter, and she related the reactions that her work attracted: sometimes people edited the statements (circling ones that they approved of, crossing out others that they disliked). As she put it: 'that's the thing about working in public: people are immediate and truthful'.

Holzer is rarely included in discussions about street art (one of the few books that I know of which does discuss the importance of Holzer's work for street art, is Cedar Lewisohn's excellent book, [Street Art](#)). But there should be more consideration given to her work as a form of street art; if you do, a number of interesting consonances can be seen.

First, in many of her works, Holzer provides an account of consumer culture and its impact on contemporary society. In this respect, she has much in common with culture-jammers and adbusters who alter billboards or produce counter-images, inviting people to think differently from the ways advertising discourse would prefer. Second, Holzer's fascination with public space aligns her with street artists, who share with her the desire to make an image that can be seen outside a gallery (even if Holzer now tends to make her works in public space on a rather larger scale than the *Truisms* series, projecting words onto the outside of buildings as massive and as monumental as the Louvre and the Guggenheim Museum).

Third, she also shares with some street artists an abiding interest in textuality and the possibilities of the word. One of the things that Holzer's work does superbly is the investigation of the iconic properties of the letter form, and the ways in which words (whether static or in motion, racing crazily across her LED signs or progressing with inexorable slowness across the façade of a building or a body of water) can constitute images in themselves. And when I listened to Engberg talk about the combination of stoicism and poetry in the texts that Holzer uses (sometimes her own, more recently often the work of others), I was reminded of the way that [Laser 3.14](#) writes aphorisms on the walls of Amsterdam (see my earlier [entry](#) on his work). And, of course, the possibilities of the letter form are taken to their calligraphic limit by graffiti writers' wild style innovations (although Holzer would no doubt rightly point out that graffiti writers are not so interested in an accessible experience for the public in general and are engaging in a rather more private conversation).

Another consonance that struck me relates to Holzer's recent fascination with light and projection. Holzer has used lasers to write the text of works such as *Lustmord*, and has created many installations that project words onto buildings, creating an utterly ephemeral image, just as artists such as the [Graffiti](#)

Research Lab have experimented with lasers and LED devices to 'write' on walls.

But finally, and more generally, somehow, the quiet, determined politics of Holzer's art seem to me to share something with street art, at least in its continual refusal to be erased from the streets by municipal zero tolerance. At ACCA last night, Juliana Engberg said that Holzer comments on, but doesn't critique, various phenomena – I would disagree with this, in that Holzer's selection of texts clearly leans towards the indictment of certain issues rather than detachment from them. There's also a fascinating interview on the site *ArtInfo* (which you can read [here](#)) between Holzer and Benjamin Buchloh in which Holzer states quite explicitly her opposition to the war in Iraq, for example. So although her word lacks the didacticism of, say, Barbara Kruger, it actively seeks to communicate a political view.

Take Holzer's recent *Redaction Paintings* series. In these works, declassified government memos regarding the torture of detainees have been screen-printed by Holzer onto large canvasses painted in various sombre and unassuming shades of brown. Last night, Engberg lamented the fact that some critics had opted to focus solely on the words contained in the memos, thus downplaying their nature as paintings. It's a good point: what Holzer is doing requires the spectator to look at those words endorsing the torture of others in the same way that one might look at a landscape or a portrait; in the relationship of contemplation that is thus engendered, the spectator takes in those words of war in a wholly different way. Those words laid bare across the canvas are hung in the gallery next to paintings which contain screen prints of palm prints, prints taken by American soldiers after the death of a detainee, with the black lines of censorship drawn brutally through the whorls and inlets of the dead man's identity.

Works such as these clearly have a lot in common with *Lustmord*, the installation Holzer made in connection with the rape and murder of women and girls in the former Yugoslavia (an installation I wrote about in my book, *Judging the Image*), but also have a long lineage, right back to the *Truisms* of 1981, in which Holzer wrote 'TORTURE IS BARBARIC'. In the *Redaction Paintings*, it is as if Holzer is still saying those three words. Three decades on from the pasted-up *Truisms*, with great patience, Holzer is still telling us that torture is barbaric. When will we heed her words?

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1. vandalog on February 24, 2010

Thanks for this post. Holzer is rarely appreciated and understood as one of the first great street artists, which has led to her not really being recognized by the street art community, and her early work not being recognized by the wider artist community. The Inflammatory Essays are some of my favorite things to have ever graced the streets of NYC, because they cut to the heart of what street art is for me: an experience and a communication between the artists and members of the public which neither party expects to have, but which is an extremely powerful experience for both parties.

2. imagestoliveby on February 25, 2010

Thanks, RJ – you sum it up really well... It was great to hear Holzer talk in her lecture about the Inflammatory Essays, and about the relationship with the public that she was trying to achieve: street art at its best.

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