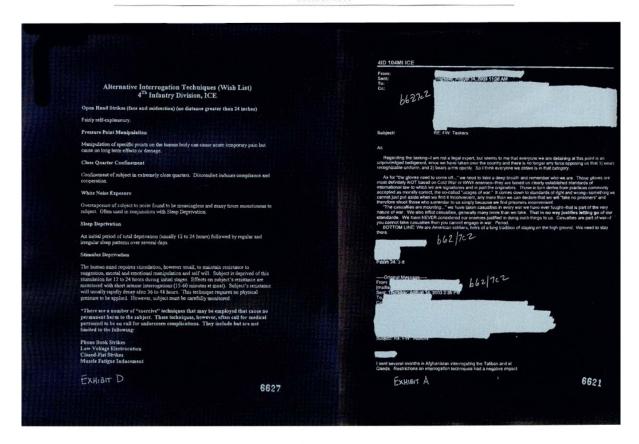
CHEIM & READ

Art in $\operatorname{America}$

October 2006



Protect Us From What We Don't Know

In two recent gallery exhibitions, Jenny Holzer used declassified government documents and contemporary poetry as sources for her artworks, including an unprecedented display of oil paintings.

BY CATHY LEBOWITZ

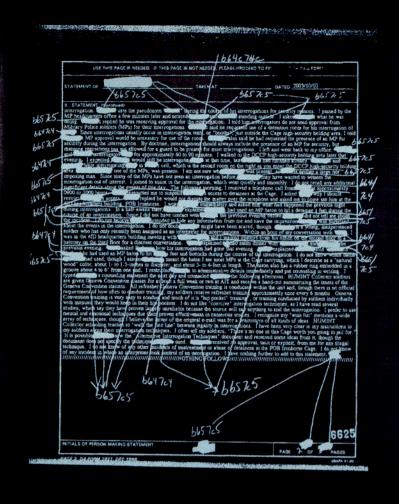
162 October 2006

amiliar to many people for her scrolling L.E.D. texts that often explore authoritarian rhetoric, Jenny Holzer recently presented two new bodies of work in concurrent New York gallery exhibitions. Photographs at Yvon Lambert documented the temporary light projections that she has done in public places around the world from 1996 to 2005, focusing on the multipart "For New York City," a project organized by Creative Time in the fall of both 2004 and 2005. More surprisingly, at Cheim & Read, 15 oil-on-linen works were the first canvases that Holzer has shown in her career.

Since 2003, Holzer has been using declassified government documents as a source for her text-based artworks. She obtains the information from the National Security Archive (NSA), a research institute and library at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., working with the archive's director, Thomas Blanton. The NSA collects and publishes materials made available through the Freedom of Information Act, as well as from resources such as presidential papers collections, concentrating on data that pertain to economic, foreign relations, intelligence and national security policies of the United States.

Approximately the proportions of letter paper, enlarged to 33 by 25½ inches or 103½ by 80 inches, the works (all 2006) in the exhibition titled "Archive" at Cheim & Read reproduced e-mails, memos, handwritten letters and court testimony culled from the NSA. By choosing to make paintings, Holzer inserts these works

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into a long tradition of political pictures, from those of Géricault and Goya to Picasso and Georg Grosz. Two notable contemporary examples are Andy Warhol's Death and Disaster works of the early 1960s (particularly the Race Riot paintings) and Gerhard Richter's Baader-Meinhof cycle (1988). Like Warhol's series, Holzer's works are photo-silkscreens printed in a range of colors. She often stays with black on white (like an ordinary typed document), but at other times chooses designer backgrounds (turquoise, periwinkle, kelly green) or evocative combinations, as in Jaw Broken Brown, whose red letters over a variegated ocher, umber and black ground suggest smoke and fire damage. However, in terms of intention, Holzer's work resembles Richter's more than Warhol's. Like Richter, she purposefully selects her subject matter as a calculated political act and, it could be said, as a means of facilitating historical memory.

Ordinarily the texts Holzer employs are relatively independent of their medium; indeed, the words are altogether disembodied. Here however the archival documents are physical objects with specific visual qualities. The format, the mistakes, the handwriting, etc., all add to the effect of the words. Perhaps the most significant visual aspect is the final redaction by government censors before releasing the material. Names and identifications are usually blacked out; large sections of information are often eradicated as well. The censorship in these circumstances has a collateral effect: the creation of abstraction. The four-panel

Above, Jenny Holzer: Wish List (Black), 2006, oil on linen, four of 16 panels, 33 by 25½ inches each. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. All works this article © Artists Rights Society, New York.

Ball of Blossom, 2006, black-and-white pigment print, 43% by 55 inches; documenting a projection of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Love Lies Sleeping" at the Bethesda Fountain, Central Park, New York. Photo Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy Yvon Lambert Gallery, New York/Paris.



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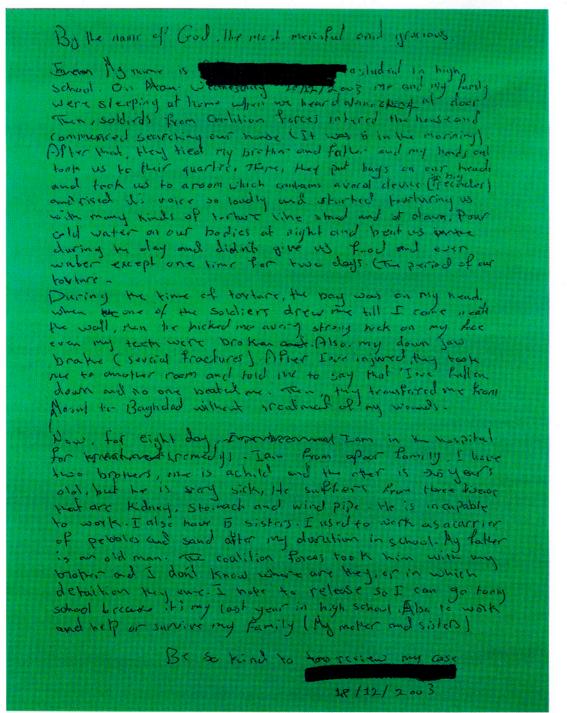
Colin Powell (Green White) reproduces a memo that Powell, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, sent the secretary of defense on Dec. 3, 1990. The entire contents of the memo, save the author and subject (which is Powell's commentary on the Defense Intelligence Agency's reorganization proposal), have been blacked out, creating shaped fields

of black on a green-tinted white. *Big Hands (Yellow White)* consists of four panels, reproducing an arrest record and a hand- and fingerprint card from the department of defense (DOD). Each panel contains the indecipherable acronym "DODDOACID" on the lower left. The censors have inked out the traces of individual identity, leaving blocks of black on a yellow-tinted white ground. The individual's handprints become generalized angular shapes of a left and a right hand. Ironically, the big blocky hands suggest child's play.

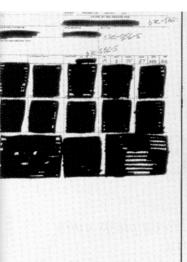
Aside from outright censorship, numerous other forms of obfuscation exist in the documents, such as acronyms, euphemisms and jargon. Despite the multifarious attempts to conceal, the heart of an event often emerges quite clearly. With other letters on a black ground, the 11-panel

Herder (Black), 2006, refers to the Feb. 28, 2004, shooting of a handcuffed Iraqi cow herder in Kirkuk. The fact that the man was shot while in flexicuffs prompted the investigation that led to the creation of these documents. The texts of the first three panels are silkscreened onto the canvas slightly off center and crooked, as if in haste. Among witness testimony and FBI reports, Holzer provides two sworn statements by the soldier (a private first class) who shot the cow herder. A picture emerges of the wartime soldier as an overamped killing machine. In his initial testimony, the private claims that he was not aware the farmer was cuffed. About a month later, he gives the following statement: "The adrenaline was affecting my perception of the situation. I remember seeing BLANK putting flexicuffs on him and I saw him with his arms behind his back as I pointed my rifle at his head. I had to know he had on flexicuffs before I shot him, but it just did not register in my mind at the time." Summing up "the fog of war" almost too well, the soldier states: "It is everything combined between the pressure of the raid, the new rules of engagement, the Iraq resisting his detention, and the whole situation in general that caused me to not be react like I normally would" [sic].

Like Herder (Black), the 16panel, turquoise-on-black Wish List (Black) also offers multiple viewpoints on a situation—specifically the bureaucratic preparation for instituting torture. The bright letters on a dark ground recall Holzer's light works. The first canvas is a list enumerating

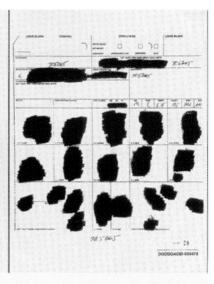


By the Name of God (Green), 2006, oil on linen, 33 by 251/2 inches. Courtesy Cheim & Read.









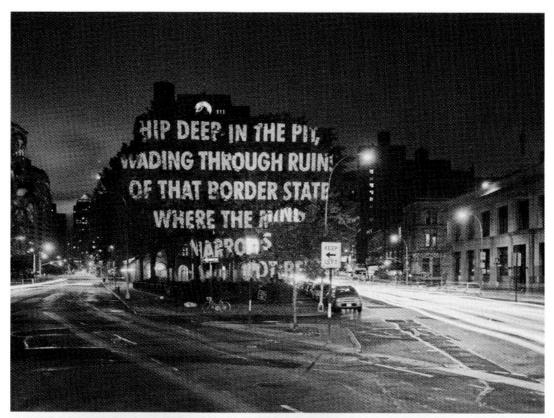
Big Hands (Yellow White), 2006, oil on linen, four panels, 1031/2 by 80 inches each. Courtesy Cheim & Read.

ways of inflicting physical or mental discomfort without leaving any sign of abuse—"Open Hand Strikes," "Pressure Point Manipulation," "Sleep Deprivation," etc. The piece also includes three pages of e-mail exchanges throughout the day of Aug. 14, 2003. One response reveals an officer who agrees that the "gloves need to come off" and that "restrictions on interrogation techniques had a negative impact on our ability to gather intelligence." Another person expresses an opposite opinion: "Bottom line: We are American soldiers, heirs of a long tradition of staying on the high ground. We need to stay there." Also among the panels are witness testimony and seven pages of detainee-abuse incident reports.

A particularly revealing and noteworthy work in the exhibition reproduces the so-called Phoenix memo. The black on white, sevencanvas painting presents an FBI document sent from the Phoenix. Ariz., office to the counterterrorism division dated July 10, 2001, two months before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. At the top and bottom of each page the printed word SECRET has been crossed out with a marker. As indicated in the document, the purpose of the memo was "to advise the Bureau and New York of the possibility of a coordinated effort by USAMA BIN LADEN (UBL) to send students to the United States to attend civil aviation universities and colleges." Although parts of the memo are blacked out, plenty remains to give the viewer a glimpse into the workings of the FBI and the type of behind-thescenes information available to intelligence agencies. The Phoenix memo's prescience about 9/11

and the document's prolonged life in the news media make the painting especially resonant.

single saturated green canvas, By the Name of God (Green) reproduces a handwritten letter of appeal by an Iraqi high-school student asking to be released from detention to care for his family and return to school. The broken English and the intimacy of the handwriting make the account movingly personal. The boy tells how his father, brother and he were taken from their home and tor-continued on page 231



Hip Deep, 2006, black-and-white pigment print, 43 by 55 inches; documenting a projection of Henri Cole's poem "To the Forty-third President" at Cooper Union, New York. Photo Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy Yvon Lambert Gallery.

Holzer

continued from page 165

tured for two days. He recounts: "During the time of torture, the bag was on my head." This detail brings to mind the now-iconic image of the anonymous Abu Ghraib prisoner in a hood, reproduced so many times in the media. This image has also recurred in the work of various artists, most notably Richard Serra. Does the Warholian issue of the numbing effect of repeated exposure to gruesome pictures come into play here? Repetition has inevitably dulled the public's initial response to the hooded prisoner. What about these documents? Perhaps the boy's handwritten account, by keeping us close to his subjectivity, decreases our susceptibility to remoteness. In a sense, his words bring the viewer inside the hood with the victim.

Most of the works on view relate to 9/11 circumstances, but Holzer provided historical perspective by including a painting of a 1954 intelligence memo about the alleged Communist activities of the artist Alice Neel. With this exhibition, Holzer exploits painting's status as a luxury commodity by embedding content critical of the U.S. government into the art market. Moreover, since the redaction paintings will likely appear on the walls of museums in the future, she ensures the issues they raise a place in our cultural heritage.

At Yvon Lambert, the 29 black-and-white pigment prints of Holzer's "Xenon" projections were almost all taken by Attilio Maranzano. The large pristine photographs show white block letters cast onto building facades, plazas and even breaking waves on a beach. To create the projections, Holzer runs giant film through an industrial projector equipped with a 6,000-watt bulb. (She actually no longer uses xenon bulbs, as she did at

first.) In addition to Holzer's own writing, many of the photographs on view feature either texts by contemporary poets or archival documents. At the Jewish Museum Berlin, letters and diaries from that institution's archives were presented in light on the building. The Creative Time project in New York City consisted largely of poetry. In late October 2004, just before the presidential election, Holzer projected poems onto the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, the Hotel Pennsylvania and Cooper Union. In one shot of the south facade of the Cooper Union building, we can make out the opening lines of Henri Cole's 2004 lament "To the Forty-third President," before the words start to break up: "Hip deep in the pit,/ wading through ruins/ of that border state." On the Hotel Pennsylvania, words from "Children of our Age," a poem by 1996 Nobel prize recipient Wislawa Szymborska, can clearly be read: "To acquire a/political meaning/you don't even/have to be human./ Raw material will do,/ or protein feed,/ or crude oil." From Sept. 29 to Oct. 9, 2005, the buildings at Rockefeller Center and the New York Public Library were also illuminated with poetry selections. One photo shows simultaneous projections on the two buildings of Rockefeller Center's arcade, juxtaposing Allen Ginsberg's 1958 poem "My Sad Self" and Galilee-born Mahmoud Darwish's "He Embraces His Murderer" from Unfortunately, It Was Paradise (2003).

Increasingly, Holzer has stepped back from authorship of the texts displayed in her artwork. Instead, brilliantly exploiting her stature as a major artist, she makes choices—bringing the writing of international poets literally to light and giving extended lives to significant historical documents.

"Jenny Holzer: Archive" was on view at Cheim & Read, New York [May 12-June 17]. "Night Feed" was at Yoon Lambert Gallery, New York [May 12-June 17]. "Jenny Holzer: XX" appeared at MAK Museum, Vienna [May 17-Sept. 9].