

CHEIM & READ

4-REMARKS (Continued)

ART | ARCHITECTURE | DESIGN | PERFORMANCE | FILM

Jenny Holzer takes on the CIA
Tracey Emin embroiders the truth
I. M. Pei builds an island in Qatar
Peter Coffin launches a UFO
Brian Dettmer destroys The Book

MODERN PAINTERS

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He did hear planes flying overhead.

He did not see any Americans.



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Jenny Holzer talks to **Benjamin Buchloh** about her recent paintings based on declassified government documents, and what even her art does not have the power to do





TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Jenny Holzer has been wrenching language off the page and into the world since the '70s, when she first garnered attention for her text-based work *Truisms* (1977–79), a series of one-liners such as “Money creates taste.” Whether wheat-pasted or projected, Holzer’s works reveal, in the words of Wislawa Szymborska (whose poems have been appropriated by the artist), that there are “letters up to no good” and “clutches of clauses so subordinate they’ll never let her get away.” But the absence of language can be equally chilling, and lately Holzer has turned her attention to the suppression of words. Her recent “Redaction Paintings” reproduce memos released to the public practically with tongs, much of their information blocked out by censors. At her first major US exhibition in 18 years, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, viewers have the chance to absorb Holzer’s commitment to social justice, unwavering throughout her 30-some years of making art. For behind her cerebral approach, the artist’s primary concern is human welfare. As Benjamin Buchloh points out in his interview with Holzer in the following pages, “No linguistic articulation could claim to be exempt from its participation in ideological interests.” This is largely true, Holzer agrees, but adds: “I think that screaming can come straight from the body. The person screaming might have been hit courtesy of an ideology.” —CLAIRE BARLIANT

Jenny Holzer in front of *For the Guggenheim* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 2008. Photo: Cheryl Dunn.

Monument, 2008. 22 double-sided, semicircular electronic LED signs with text from *Truisms, 1977–79*, and *Inflammatory Essays, 1979–82*, 16 ft. 2 in. x 4 ft. 10 in. x 29 in.



Benjamin Buchloh: If my memory is correct, you started out as a painter at some point?

Jenny Holzer: I began with a little bit of everything including printmaking, conceptual work, assemblage, video, bad sculpture, inscrutable public pieces, and painting. I did try to become a painter proper at RISD.

BB: Would it be correct to suggest that it wasn't language at that time, but rather the shift into public architectural space that was at the forefront of your reflections on how to challenge painting and transcend its traditional parameters?

JH: When I was unable to paint well enough, language returned as a way for me to continue working. I'm not sure that I wanted to challenge painting as much as I just wanted to make something decent for people. I wanted a lot simultaneously: to leave art outside for the public, to be a painter of mysterious yet ordered works, to be explicit but not didactic, to find the right subjects, to transform spaces, to disorient and transfix people, to offer up beauty, to be funny and never lie. I needed to offer something to be able to tolerate myself and to justify trying to become an artist. After some time in New York City, I focused on what traditional painting couldn't do in public spaces and used language to carry the greater part of my content. Eventually, though, I tried to bring part of what appears in, say, a Rothko painting, into architecture and out to the public. I went some distance toward that with the warm amber LED installation in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2001, and with light projections in a number of cities. Text was there along with the light and the light's effect on people.

BB: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, you participated in the activities of a number of art collectives in New York, some of which were cofounded by you, such as the Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince, and Winters. Collectives such as Group Material and Colab followed your example slightly later.

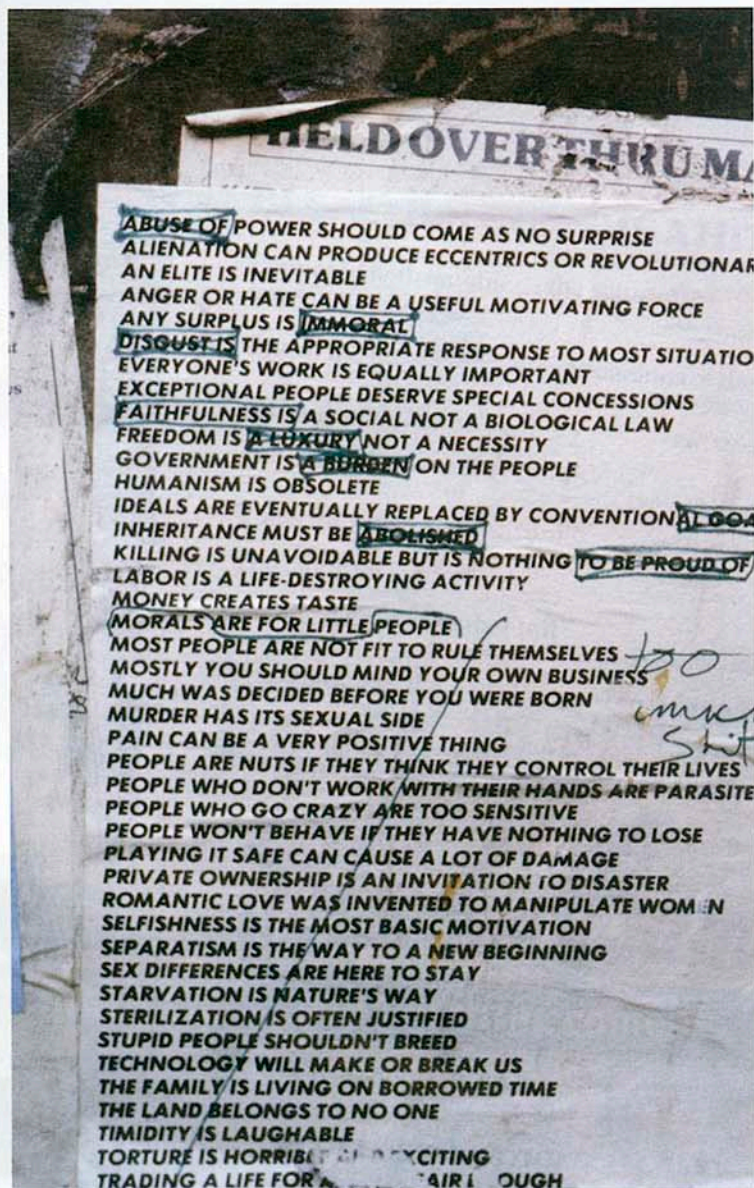
JH: I'd like to take credit for being early, but Colab existed before I joined. I was a founder of the short-lived Offices, which was heavier on concept and absurdity than action. We had business cards and did one show in LA where Peter Fend surprised Frank Gehry, but I'm not sure what else we achieved.

BB: In hindsight, how do you view the extraordinarily utopian and optimistic character of the collectives with which you were involved?

JH: I know the most about Colab, so I'll talk about that. Colab was utopian, optimistic, occasionally squabbling, sincere, and practical. Working en masse or in small units let us realize complicated shows that none of us could have managed alone, when no one else was offering to support this sort of activity. Because we organized the exhibitions—often in spaces no one wanted—we didn't need to be cautious about content. Because most members liked to make and present work with outside-world versus art-referential subjects, it was relatively straightforward to imagine and stage big exhibitions about difficult subjects in public zones. I liked working with other artists because so much of my practice was solitary.

It's hard to measure how socially and politically useful the activity was, but "The Manifesto Show" that Colen Fitzgibbon and I organized was an exercise of free speech and supplied a survey of classic political and art manifestos, as well as fresh visual and written shouts by over 100 people, plus a number of utopian propositions.

BB: One of the most fascinating challenges for me when reading/seeing your work has always been the attempt to situate your language practices within, or rather in differentiation from, the more traditional conventions of language production (poetry, literature, journalism). While you use, in the more recent work, extensive quotations from poetry, literature, or public speech, one would never want to see your work declared as belonging to any of these conventions. Rather, one would want to insist on its affiliation with sculptural practices as a



material intervention in public space. In that sense, your writing seems to occupy a similarly complex linguistic space to that of the work of Lawrence Weiner, whom I personally perceive to be your predecessor in a manner analogous to the way that Jasper Johns, for example, was a predecessor to Andy Warhol.

JH: I'm thrilled to be considered a follower of Lawrence Weiner. I am a longtime student and fan. His writing is almost impossible to classify or describe. Sometimes I get it, and I benefit when I don't.

"The move to electronic technology had to do with my needing to be where people look. I thought I should present many hard germane subjects as well, as large, and as loud as what's done for celebrity gossip." —Jenny Holzer

BB: Like Weiner, who has always insisted on having his work understood as "sculpture," your use of language is not easily identifiable as to its place in the universe of linguistic utterances. Nevertheless, unlike Weiner's work or that of Conceptual art at large, your linguistic interventions have, from the very beginning, claimed language as one of the prime sites where ideology is reproduced in the subject, or rather, where language as ideology produces the subject.

JH: I think that's correct, or at least I believe that language can produce and describe the subjects.

BB: I see your language practices deliberately scrambling and diffusing any identifiable message or activist intervention on behalf of a particular political position so that the reader/spectator actually has to perform the work of critique, discernment, and identification herself in the process of reading. Is this a fair assessment?

JH: There can be a deliberate scrambling, or at least a heaping of many messages. Sometimes the messages are conflicting, and other times the language and the messages will be blunt and to the point. I routinely invite the reader to sort through the offerings and complete the thoughts, and to echo, amplify, or shrink from the feelings the work elicits.

I tie the language to the visuals as an assist, and as a take-away gift.

BB: I had always assumed that your motivation to construct these texts (or at least some of them) in the manner of the citation had been determined in a number of different ways. First, that you follow a model of language that is similar to what Louis Althusser defined as an ideological apparatus, i.e., the conviction that there is literally not a single form of knowledge or of linguistic articulation that could claim to be exempt from its participation in ideological interests.

JH: I imagine that's true of much, but I think that screaming can come straight from the body. The person screaming might have been hit courtesy of an ideology.

BB: This next question concerns the problem of the "distribution form" of your work. Obviously, as had been the case with Conceptual art, your decision to engage language as your primary medium of artistic communication in the mid to late 1970s entailed a transformation of the actual carriers of the messages that your work attempted to disseminate. Thus, you invented a whole new array of devices that served to distribute your textual production.

JH: Maybe it's that I found various things that were right for text? More often than not I chose everyday objects that would look normal until you read the writing.

BB: Initially, these were programmatically modest, such as inexpensively produced stickers and posters, pamphlets and books, and cheaply manufactured metal plaques, among others. These multiplications of textual signs in unlimited editions would aim at a much broader audience than even the Conceptual artists had addressed. Furthermore, all these devices seemed to be defined by the desire to produce objects that could be displayed in any place and position that you or your readers would choose. These strategies thus affected both the aesthetic and economic status and the discursive and institutional location of the object, continuing the Conceptualists' critique of the commodity status of the work of art as much as subverting the restrictions within which the institutional frame had traditionally contained the object.

JH: I liked following the Conceptualist critique, plus I simply distributed the writing in practical, friendly, cheap ways. I needed these sentences to be in daily life on regular stuff available to many people who don't frequent museums.

BB: In a second phase, your work shifted to textual dissemination via electronic devices such as LED signs and complex, often monumentally sized projections. What do you think are the motivations and ramifications of this rather dramatic expansion of means and technologies from the 1970s to the 1980s and on to today?

JH: Initially, it was cheaper and easier to put writing on electronic signs, ones that were already installed in public places, than it was to produce and paste the posters. All that was required was advance art worry and a little programming time. (It was hard work not to be caught in the middle of the night with an armload of posters and a bucket of paste.) Often there was dead space on the big outdoor signs, so I didn't have to pay to exhibit because the operators welcomed content. With those outdoor signs, I was able to work without using any art materials, and the first little LED boards I bought were humble objects. When I began to install site-specific electronics in museums such as Wright's Guggenheim, Gehry's Guggenheim, Foster's Bundestag, and Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie and had to reply to the superb and even competitive architecture, my fabrication complexity and material costs went up. Same expensive story when I wanted to make sculpture with LED arrays that were more intricate and visual. The move to electronic technology had to do with my needing to be where people look. I thought I should present many hard germane subjects as well, as large, and as loud as what's done for celebrity gossip, concerts, products, and the sometimes too-cautious reporting of the news.

In the mid-1990s, it was good to find the projection equipment that could be rented, that didn't have to be purchased. And I very much like that the projected works are immaterial—light only. The projections are a way to deliver feeling and writing by a number of great poets, as well as a means to highlight the natural world and to create sculpture from architecture. Plus, many of the buildings chosen as projection screens have occupants and histories worth highlighting, and projections can invite benign gatherings of people at night.

BB: On that topic, you recently have returned to painting as a process, as a technique of display, and as a distribution form (a singular object on canvas in the most conventional manner). Does this departure from the increasingly complex apparatus of technology that you had developed for the dissemination and display of your work signal a change of attitude on your side, perhaps a certain degree of skepticism with regard to the media optimism of the 1970s?

JH: No, I continue to work with electronics because people turn toward flashing light. Maybe because I am familiar with LEDs, I finally have made something like sculpture from this technology. And LED arrays work especially well for installations in and on architecture. I use electronics to display transcribed declassified documents

OPPOSITE PAGE: *For the Guggenheim, 2008*. Light projection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Text (pictured): "Tortures," from *View with a Grain of Sand* by Wislawa Szymborska, translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh. © 1993 by Wislawa Szymborska. English translation copyright © 1995 by Harcourt, Inc. Reprinted with permission of the author. Photo: Cheryl Dunn.

NEXT TWO PAGES, FIRST PAGE: *As a Parent turquoise, 2006*. One of two canvases, oil on linen, text from US government documents, each canvas 51 x 33 in.

SECOND PAGE, TOP: *Colin Powell green white, 2006*. One of four canvases, oil on linen, text from US government document, 102 x 33 in.

BOTTOM: *Person Fingerprinted 028143, 2007*. Oil on linen, text from US government document, 58 x 44 in.

ONLY WHERE
SOMEONE
WILL COME AT THEM
WANT TO STAND WHO
THAT INTENTIONS.
HAS A CHOICE



September 26, 2003

To Whom It May Concern:

(b)(6)

I am writing this letter for my wife and myself. The purpose of this letter is to appeal to you, as a parent, for relief for my son (1st Lt. [REDACTED] b6-5) in his current situation. I understand that the U.S. Army wants to court martial him and send him to prison. Without getting into the specifics of the charges against him I simply want to appeal to you, as a father, to allow him to resign with an honorable discharge. My son is not the type of person that deserves to be placed in prison. He has never been in any trouble what so ever until these charges.

I know you don't know me, or my son, so if you don't mind please read this letter because it is important to me that you know who I am, and more importantly, who my son is before you make a recommendation about how to treat him.

First, so that you know a little about me and my perspective on young men I have written a little about my background. I have been in secondary education for 30 years. I have been a [REDACTED] b6-2 for 10 years. This June, Florida Governor Jeb Bush appointed me as [REDACTED] b6-2

b6-2 Our school system has 40,000 students and 5,200 employees. My headquarters are located in [REDACTED] b6-2 a small city that is the home to Congressman Cliff Stearns and former Florida governor Buddy McKay. So you understand that I evaluate the quality and nature of my employees and interact with my community's leaders on a weekly basis. I am also heavily involved in activities with our Veteran's groups.

My family is very important to me and all of us are totally involved in our community. My wife recently retired after spending 17 years as the business manager of our 1,000-member church. My two daughters and their husbands are teachers. One daughter recently became our church's full time youth director. We are committed to our city, our county, and our country.

b6-5 My son, [REDACTED] has always been a leader academically and athletically, and has excelled at everything he has attempted. He has been chosen by adults throughout his life to be a leader in boy scouts, chosen as a camp counselor on several occasions, and represented our local VFW and our high school at Boys' State. This will be his first failure.

Quite frankly I find it hard to believe that he is not wanted and needed in our Army. He used to want to be a career officer. He had a great attitude and, I believe, the right morals to make the tough decisions every time. It breaks my heart to know that he no longer feels wanted by a country that he so wants to

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because so much of this material can be stored in the signs' controllers, and I need the active programming that's possible on electronics so that the content is hard to miss and leave.

BB: Is working with painting a decision that recognizes the necessity for a more expressive, if not expressionist, form and format to articulate messages of political protest and opposition at a moment of a seemingly endless war and the erosion of elementary civil liberties in the United States?

JH: Choosing painting had to do with an appreciation of the qualities of paint, and an odd thought that hand-rendered oil grounds were appropriate for silk-screened documents about the Middle East. I was looking at Warhol's "Death and Disaster" works while I was collecting the declassified and other sensitive pages. For the first paintings, I tried flat, somewhat tough and loud colors for the grounds. These were all right, but then I wanted more emotional substrates for first-person accounts—the pages in which a detainee or a soldier says "I was hit" or "I struck." I collected books on Goya's Black Paintings, looked at the colors and layering, and then sampled portions of the skies and landscapes. Later, I took pastel skies from Renaissance works to indicate hope. I also screened many documents in black on white paint to emphasize that the documents are real.

BB: How would you describe your positions in political terms, and who are the writers that you would claim as having provided you with a theoretical foundation for your work?

JH: I don't talk much about my politics because I don't like people to confuse my work and me, and I am old enough that it's not possible for me to reconstruct which readings affected me in different times of my life. I can offer that I think the war in Iraq is a mistake and that the secrecy in advance and after the invasion was and continues to be dangerous and reprehensible. The works with declassified material are from my sometimes frantic (witness the number of paintings) worrying about the war and the attendant changes in American society. There is an unusually close connection between this artwork and my private politics, as there was with the "Lustmord" pieces [about genocidal rape in the former Yugoslavia], for example.

BB: The same complexity, if not even a more difficult set of questions, emerges when one attempts to identify your position with regard to sexual politics. Clearly, your writings articulate a feminist position, but it is one that is far from the purist *doxa* of the feminist theoreticians and activists of the 1970s. That would be evident, for example, in your writings in which the phenomena of sexual and corporeal violence are addressed in terms of the bewildering ambiguities that are so essential to your work.

JH: Perhaps these are accurate, if bewildering? Or, more precisely, there's the concurrent presence of conflicting, or at least wildly varying, beliefs, motivations, and actions in the work—as there is in the world.

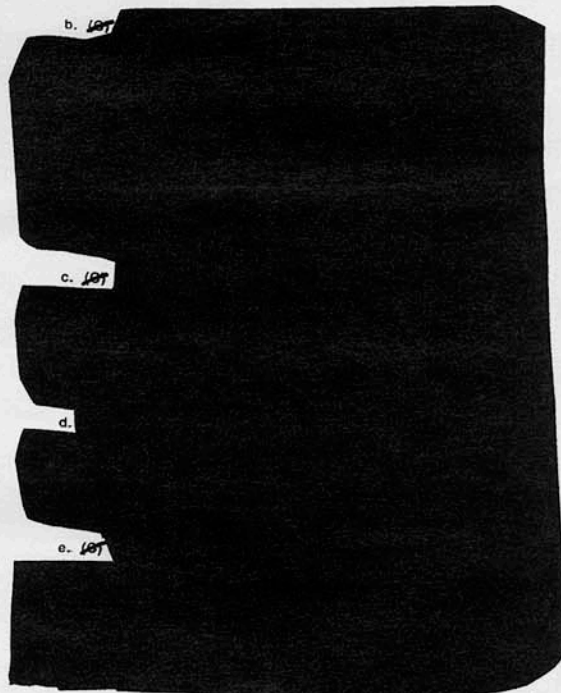
BB: Clearly these writings recognize power relations as a historical formation (of the sexuality of the subject and of social relations at large) whose realities cannot be simply overcome by a feminist emancipatory *doxa*.

JH: So far, nothing has stopped the abuse of women—men won't give it up—and the failure is not that of feminism or art. No sort of artwork is immediately going to change men who abuse and kill their pregnant wives, rape and torture women in war, diminish and sandbag their lovers, assault their girl children or other girls they can catch, refuse to change their sheets, and pay peanuts.

BB: The ambiguities in your work give it at times a pessimistic dimension that would clearly be at odds with any of the radical feminist critiques, if not with any of the political activist projects with which one would otherwise want to associate you.

JH: I don't believe that my artwork is pessimistic. It is realistic, and perhaps the fact of it is encouraging to some women and men. And I wouldn't go to art to stop a man in his tracks. ♦

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