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2007

Textual Apparitions: Power, Language, and Site in the Work of Jenny Holzer

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Recommended Citation

TEXTUAL APPARITIONS:
POWER, LANGUAGE, AND SITE IN THE WORK
OF JENNY HOLZER

BY
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SUBMITTED TO POMONA COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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APRIL 20, 2007

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Acknowledgements

It would be impossible to concisely express the sheer magnitude of the intellectual debts that I have run up to my remarkable first reader Juliet Koss. This thesis simply would not exist without her guidance, knowledge, and seemingly endless supply of sarcastic and pity rejoinders to my nagging questions. She has pushed me to academic heights that I never thought possible, and for that I will remain forever grateful.

My second reader, Frances Pohl, has also been a wonderful mentor to me during the past few years. Her warmth, generosity, and steadfast belief in my abilities have been powerful sources of inspiration that I hope to carry with me long after graduation.

I would also like to acknowledge Alexi Piasecki, Ashley Seidlitz, and Devin McClain, three of my fellow art historians in Claremont. The ruthlessly stratified social make-up of these campuses makes it difficult to meet new people and form friendships with them, particularly by senior year. However, one of the highlights of my senior year has been the opportunity to bond with these women and get to know them outside of the discipline. Their grace, humor, and sorely needed emotional and academic support have been invaluable.

Introduction

When the postmodern work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence.

--Craig Owens[1]

Jenny Holzer's text-based projects have attracted the attention of critics, historians, and curators from Des Moines to Dresden. She has translated her projects from English into German, Italian, Japanese, and French, and they have been displayed in museums, on street corners, and in print magazines. She emerged as a major artist after the success of *Truisms*, her first major project that consisted of several mock-clichés printed on posters pasted all over lower Manhattan in the late 1970s. Holzer later re-tooled and re-presented selected truisms throughout the 1980s and 1990s in a variety of different guises: printed on golf balls and t-shirts, written in light on a billboard above Times Square, engraved on stone benches in a gallery, and projected in Xenon on the banks of the Arno. She simultaneously produced separate projects that also garnered widespread critical acclaim; in 1990 she became the first woman artist to win the prestigious *Leonoe d'Oro* award at the Venice Biennale. Commissions began to pour in from banks, arts organizations, and museums across the globe.

Despite this avalanche of recognition and commendation, Hozler's place within the annals of contemporary art history tends to rest upon the legacy of the first

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[1] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2" [1980] in Scott Bryson et. al., eds., *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1992), p. 85.

incarnation of *Truisms*. Historians have situated this project as almost inextricably

related to the practices of other women artists of the time: Barbara Kruger, Sherrie

Levine, and Louise Lawler. In a chapter from *Art Since 1900* dedicated to art and theory

from the year 1984, Hal Foster focused on the introduction of French critical theory into

the American art world, and positioned the work of these four artists as visual examples

of these theoretical concerns.[2] Apart from this reference, Holzer is absent from the other

chapters that discuss art from 1977 onward.   Indeed, despite the celebrity Holzer

garnered during the 1980s, she is no longer as widely exhibited in America as she once

was. Instead, she often installs her work overseas, primarily in Germany and, most

recently, in Italy. How could an artist once deemed so revolutionary and avant-garde fall

so precipitously out of the American art scene? It is necessary to rigorously examine the

most pervasive influences on critics and historians in order to discuss both Holzer's

ascent to fame in the American art world of the 1980s and her subsequent relative

disappearance.

Holzer's current high profile abroad and the absence of her later projects from the

most recent art history texts illuminate certain debates that extend beyond her oeuvre.

Discussions of *Truisms* reveal the ways in which the very act of criticism, particularly in

relation to the visual arts, has undergone significant transformation in the twentieth

century. For many, the critic is in a special position of judgment; he or she has the

authority to declare whether or not an exhibit or a film is good, bad, engaging, or bereft

of artistic merit. Yet as Foster's brief historicizing comments suggest, there has not been

such interest in categorizing the work of Holzer or her peers as simply good or

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[2] See Yve-Alain Bois et. al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*
(New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 598.

aesthetically pleasing. Rather, the task has been to explicate the critical and subversive

qualities *inherent* to *Truisms*. But if a work of art is explicitly predicated upon the

project of criticism, particularly the criticism of language and linguistic systems, then the

art critic must do more than simply point out these properties in order to stay relevant.[3]

Issues pertaining to the act of criticism, particularly as they manifest themselves

in responses to *Truisms*, also call into question the split between modernism and

postmodernism that was widely theorized and discussed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Descriptions of *Truisms* and work by Kruger, Lawler, and Levine almost invariably

include the label "postmodern." No term has been more disputed within the realm of art

and cultural criticism than this one, primarily because to define it would depend upon a

singular definition of modernism, an ostensibly impossible task. Holzer's engagement

with text (in lieu of the more accepted artistic media of painting or sculpture), the

Western notion of authority, and socio-political concerns are generally taken to be

incongruent with the tenets of modernism and thus become indicators of *Truisms*'

postmodern tendencies.

In 2006, the art historian Gordon Hughes re-evaluated long held assumptions

about *Truisms* and some of Holzer's other projects by positioning her work in relation to

the historical moment in which it was produced and initially received. This thesis seeks

to take up and expand upon this challenge through an exploration of the connections

between French linguistic theory, the pre-eminent art critics of the period, and their

reactions to *Truisms*. In addition to addressing Hughes' concerns, this thesis also seeks to

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[3] Or face a career of, in the words of David Joselit, "produc[ing] little more than
sophisticated press releases." See "An Allegory of Criticism" in *October* 103 (Winter,
2003), p. 5.

trace the relationship between Holzer's work and the discourse of site-specificity in an attempt to re-inscribe discussions about modernism and postmodernsim in relation to Holzer's work. The ways in which American critics of the 1980s applied certain ideas from French theory to Holzer's work presented a useful but ultimately narrow, almost exclusively linguistic framework within which to interpret *Truisms* as well as her later projects. Critics, largely influenced by the idea of the "sign" from structuralist linguistics and the idea of the "Death of the Author," viewed *Truisms* as a vehicle that visually rendered these theoretical ideas. They did not dedicate a lot of space to the exploration of site—whether defined physically or discursively. As a result, several questions linger: What relationship did the *Truisms* posters have to SoHo, the neighborhood in lower Manhattan where they first appeared, in the 1970s? Does *Trusisms* fit into the larger history of public and site-specific art in New York? How does the issue of gender run through criticism about Holzer?

The first chapter examines and connects the major influences on art history and criticism in the late 1970s and early 1980s in order to make clear the complex relationships between art, history, and criticism. Postmodern theory, which emerged from the lessons of structuralist linguistics as originally taught by Ferdinand de Saussure and expanded upon by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, gained currency within American humanities departments at this moment and had a significant impact on influential critics. The most important ideas critics employed in discussing *Truisms* were the idea of the "sign," which not only repudiated the notion that meaning could be permanently fixed, but also the belief that the meaning of an artistic product had to be directly connected to the intentions or biography of the artist. Foster, who only

quickly mentioned Holzer in the same sentence as three other artists in 2004, was one of Holzer's earliest and most vocal proponents. His peers Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Owens, and David Joselit also found (post)structuralist ideas useful for discussing contemporary art, though each had their own distinct set of ideas and concerns.[4].

As a point of departure from the firmly entrenched linguistic model that has been deployed in writing about Holzer, chapter two adds a lens of site-specificity in order to expand the field of interpretation in which discussions of *Truisms* are carried out. Using Miwon Kwon's three categories of "site" within site-specific art making as a critical framework, *Truisms* becomes more than an exemplar of textuality as all three categories relate to the original position of the project in and around the New York neighborhood of SoHo. *Truisms* also has a place within the overlapping discourses of urban redevelopment (particularly in New York City), spatial politics, and public art installations. A comparison with two works by Richard Serra, *T.W.U.* and *Tilted Arc*, reveal the gendered conditions of art production in the late 1970s and early 1980s that early applications of postmodern theory found secondary to discussions of language and power. This discussion of site and gender reveals an important assumption in American applications of postmodern theory, namely that this country's understanding of modernism depends more upon the critic Clement Greenberg's assertions than the genesis of modernism in Europe.

Chapter three shifts focus to one of Holzer's later works, 1993's *Lustmord*, in order to create a critical dialogue between *Truisms* and *Lustmord*. By the late 1980s, critics charged that not only did Holzer's later work merely repeat the structuralist

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[4] Buchloh was also an editor of *Art Since 1900*; his chapter on 1984 made no mention of Holzer.

linguistic lessons of *Truisms*, but it also evinced a naïve understanding of site. Furthermore, her well-documented success and visibility in the art world led people to suggest that Hozler had exhausted her relevance; in short, her radicalism had been co-opted by the nefarious institutions of the art world. Her position as the United States' representative to the Venice Biennale inspired at least one critic to charge that Holzer's particular brand of art making had no place at such a high-profile competition. *Lustmord* not only explores a unique subject for Holzer, specifically both historic and contemporary violence against women, but also addresses these criticisms of naïveté and the notion that there are appropriate and inappropriate venues for her projects.

An understanding of the complex interplay between language, gender, power, and site within Holzer's work demonstrates how a singular interpretive approach is insufficient for discussing the multitude of meanings her projects produce. Perhaps most significantly, a fresh analysis of Holzer's work and critical reactions to it challenges the story of modernism and postmodernism and the relationship between these two terms.

Chapter One:
Contests of Meaning

You would do anything. That is what is wrong with the twentieth century.
                                    --RISD painting professor chastising Holzer for a video work[5]

IN SOME INSTANCES IT'S BETTER TO DIE THAN TO CONTINUE. STUPID

PEOPLE SHOULDN'T BREED. TEASING PEOPLE SEXUALLY CAN HAVE UGLY

CONSEQUENCES. In 1977, posters bearing these blunt, concise declarations began to

appear on buildings all over lower Manhattan. They, along with dozens of other similarly

worded pseudo-clichés and axioms, formed the basis for Jenny Holzer's first major

project, *Truisms*. The very title of this project suggests an uneasy relationship to the idea

of a singular, monolithic truth; a truism approaches or simulates this idea, but never fully

achieves it. Holzer wrote and printed her aphoristic sentences onto large, white sheets of

paper in all-capital, black lettering. She then anonymously wheat-pasted the posters onto

the exterior surfaces of buildings in the SoHo section of New York, many of which

already featured advertisements and posters and graffiti. Passersby even took the

opportunity to scrawl personal responses to the *Truisms* [Fig. 1]. Soon enough the

posters were painted over or lost amid the flurry of other broadsheets vying for

spectators' attention. This first incarnation of *Truisms*, which Holzer produced until

1979, became known as one of the most important artistic endeavors of the late 1970s.[6]

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[5] Holzer as quoted in Joan Simon, "Interview" in David Joselit et. al., eds., *Jenny Holzer* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 21.
[6] Most surveys of post-war American art include at least a reference to *Truisms*; in addition to *Art Since 1900*, see H.H. Arnason and Marla Prather ed., *History of Modern*

Art historians have celebrated Holzer for her exploration of the connections between language, the media, power, and the individual, as well as her engagement with Conceptualist art and the traditions of modernism.

Contemporary audiences who did not have the privilege of seeing the posters in the late 1970s now only know of the project either through photographs or the multiple institutional reappearances that Holzer has overseen. The once anonymous *Truisms* has become one of the most widely cited examples of advanced art from the 1970s and 1980s and is the benchmark to which all of Holzer's subsequent projects have been measured. *Truisms* has been exhibited and written about time and time again since the late 1970s, but the project's ostensible simplicity still resonates today. Even the most jaded viewers will find that their arsenal of critical theory and art historical knowledge dissipates in the presence of Holzer's simultaneously benign and outrageous one-liners. They leap off of the poster, page or light-emitting diode and into one's consciousness, occasionally popping back into one's mind long after leaving an exhibition or turning the page in a textbook. It is difficult to say how or why these pronouncements carry such weight. Tracing the meaning of the project through interviews with Holzer does not yield a concrete answer, but her elusive answers point us in the direction of a critical framework.

Holzer conceived of *Truisms* while a student at the Whitney Independent Study Program, which she entered shortly after completing her MFA in 1977 at the Rhode Island School of Design, where her primary focus was monochromatic, carefully executed abstract painting. Her saturated canvases may not visually resemble *Truisms*,

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Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography [4th ed.] (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998) and David Joselit, *American Art Since 1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

but the tendency towards order and the exactitude in her earliest work is still evident in

her better-known projects.   Holzer has often said that she wanted to reach a broader

audience with her work in New York, and that text and language were perfect vehicles

for such a goal; such a medium could not be immediately categorized as "art" or

"literature." Tellingly, she has wavered when it comes to explaining to what extent art

history and criticism figures into her work; in an interview of 1985 she named only two

artistic influences and professed only a superficial knowledge of art history and its

seminal figures:

> Dada influenced me. I particularly liked that the Dadaists were, in their
> way, grappling with the conditions that led to the war….I like [John
> Heartfield's] work very much, but I didn't know about it when I started. I
> had kind of a sketchy art history education. The only other art influence
> was a copy of *The Fox* that a friend gave me when I was at RISD.[7]

Holzer mentioned only two art or art-historical influences in the genesis of *Truisms*. One

of them, Dada, was famously "anti-art"; its proponents advocated the destruction of

traditional aesthetics and culture through theatre, literature, music as well as visual art.

She found Dada influential while conceiving *Truisms* because its practitioners were

wrestling with the aftermath of World War I, not just aesthetic or art historical issues.

Holzer treated the important Conceptual art journal *The Fox* almost as an afterthought, a

magazine that an anonymous friend tossed on top of her assigned reading list. This

suggests that even though the journals of the art world were the first to pick up on

Truisms, it was not Holzer's intent in 1985 to situate her project within the discourse of

art or art criticism. She envisioned *Truisms* as an exploration of several ideas or concepts

that were not solely grounded within contemporary or historical art production.

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[7] Jeanne Siegel, "Jenny Holzer's Language Games" in *Arts* 60, No. 4, (December 1985),
p. 65.

It would be unrealistic to expect artists who have been interviewed as frequently

as Holzer to tell a consistent story about their artistic genesis in every conversation, but in

subsequent interviews she has noticeably diverged from her initial story. In an interview

of 1992, she presented herself as more knowledgeable about the history of art:

> I was just starting to visit New York [in the mid-1970s]. I was relatively
> unaware of the most contemporary movements. I had advanced to Johns
> and Rauschenberg in undergraduate school, and I was starting to see
> things like Allen Shield's painted carousels, Linda Benglis' knots, and
> Dennis Oppenheim's pieces…Also, John Miller, now artist and critic, then
> fellow student, gave me a copy of *The Fox*. He was always up on the
> latest. That was when the political and conceptual work entered my
> thinking.[8]

A far cry from the woman who held only a "sketchy" background in art history, Holzer

demonstrated her knowledge about trends in contemporary art before and during the

production of *Truisms*. She also more clearly articulated her debt to *The Fox* for

introducing her to issues of politics in art, conceptualism, and "the dematerialization of

the art object."[9] Yet just two years earlier, she had insisted, "…my art history

background was so bad that I didn't really know about conceptual art."[10,11] This

information raises important questions not only about Holzer's work, but also about

larger critical debates going on at the same time *Truisms* began to appear. Holzer's

revised autobiography does not reflect a desire to appeal to vastly different readers, as her

claims have appeared in publications targeted to the same well-educated audience.

Although Holzer tends to tell a slightly different story of her influences and

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[8] Michael Auping, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe, 1992), p. 73.
[9] Auping, p. 74.
[10] Paul Taylor, "Jenny Holzer: I Wanted to Do a Portrait of Society" in *FlashArt* 151 (March/April, 1990), p. 117.
[11] Holzer mentioned later that she visited several European museums after graduating from college. See "Interview" with Joan Simon in Joselit, p. 17.

understanding of art history from interview to interview, she consistently counts the

reading list of the Whitney Program as one of many inspirations for *Truisms*. She was

assigned a wide variety of texts about art, literature, Marxism, psychology, social and

cultural theory, criticism, and feminism. After engaging with this exhaustive study of

modern Western cultural history, Holzer maintained in 1990 that she "was dying to get

this information out where maybe it would be useful to somebody."[12] In an interview

with Diane Waldman, the curator of Holzer's retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum

in 1989, she similarly claimed, "I wanted to see if I could make anything that would be of

use or have some kind of meaning for a very general audience, somebody on their way to

lunch who didn't care anything about art."[13] The resulting collection of terse, concise

statements could be read as Holzer's intended cacophony of conflicting discourses:

MANUAL LABOR CAN BE REFRESHING AND WHOLESOME; PRIVATE PROPERTY

CREATED CRIME (Marxist); AWFUL PUNISHMENT AWAITS REALLY BAD PEOPLE;

IF YOU LIVE SIMPLY THERE IS NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT (Judeo-Christian);

RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY; FATHERS OFTEN USE TOO MUCH FORCE

(feminist); and THE WORLD OPERATES ACCORDING TO DISCOVERABLE LAWS;

MEN ARE NOT MONOGAMOUS BY NATURE (scientific).

The original installation of the posters, however, contained no trace of individual

authorship nor did it display the project's title. Divorced from Holzer's genealogy, the

sentences had no specific meaning or origin fixed upon them. Thus the viewer is

confronted with a barrage of questions: Who wrote these sentences? Did more than one

person write them? Is each sentence as important or grave as the other? To what extent is

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[12] Taylor, p. 118.

[13] Holzer as quoted in Diane Waldman, "Interview" in Waldman, *Jenny Holzer* [exh. cat] (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1989), p. 15.

it possible to evaluate writing without knowing who produced it? The history of aphorisms, a term that has its roots in the Greek word for to define or delimit, stretches back centuries across many cultures. Viewers may have been reminded of sayings passed down from their parents or grandparents or of ideas whose origin or source would be difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint. The concise, unadorned, almost kitschy language found in *Truisms* also speaks to Holzer's upbringing in rural Gallipolis, Ohio. Holzer has often mentioned how mid-westerners are especially economical with language and communication.[14] In the world of academia, however, Holzer's terse statements signaled something much more pressing.

Seismic shifts in the fields of linguistics and literary theory during the 1970s and 1980s encouraged critics and art historians to read *Truisms* as a project dedicated to exposing long-held, Western assumptions of language, writing and the figure of the author. While Holzer insists that she "didn't read much of the French stuff"[15] from her Whitney reading list, the contributions of French academics to the study of art and literature in both Europe and America during the 1970s and 1980s had an immense impact on Ron Clark, the director of the Whitney Independent Study Program during the 1970s, as well as on Holzer's earlier critics. A basic understanding of the primary concepts of structuralist linguistics, its subsequent applications and repudiations, and the nebulously defined phenomenon of postmodernism allows for a richer understanding of the most well-known responses to *Truisms.*

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[14] Walter Kalaidjian, "Mainlining Postmodernism: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and the Art of Intervention" in *Postmodern Culture* 2, No. 3 (May, 1992). Available Online: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v002/2.3kalaidjian.html
[15] "Interview" in Joselit, p. 22.

Structuralism, as first articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure during his tenure at the University of Geneva from 1906-1913, posits a "science" to understanding literature; it proposes a systematic model of analyzing all narratives in relation to their structural units (sentences).[16] Thus, as the sequential combination of words in a sentence allows for the production of meaning, it is possible to read a narrative in a sequential or integrative manner. From the 1950s onward, French theorists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida interrogated traditional humanistic methods of interpretation in their own work through a variety of methods based in the methods of structural linguistics. Barthes, for example, applied this "scientific" theory to folk tales and argued that certain repetitive sequences (e.g. story endings with a happy marriage or a malevolent figure bent on preventing such a union) convey the same ideas from story to story only in slightly different guises.[17] By the dawn of the 1980s many in the American academy had enthusiastically embraced the ideas of Barthes, Derrida, and their peers, whose treatises on repetition and the associative nature of language (which suggests meaning is gleaned only though reference and association to other words and narratives) figure prominently in early discussions of Holzer and *Truisms*.

The most salient feature of Structuralism is the articulation of the sign, which, according to Saussure, consists of a signifier (a sound or a mark) and a signified (a concept or idea). This relationship, however, is completely "arbitrary"—that is to say, not intrinsic—and dependent on time, place, and the specific linguistic system in which it operates. The connection between the word "chair," the idea or conception of a chair,

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[16] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 22.
[17] Roland Barthes [trans. Richard Howard], *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), p. 114-5.

and the physical object referred to as a chair is not a universal, timeless relationship, but an agreed-upon convention. Thus, Derrida argued that the very notion of "meaning" can never be fixed and is perpetually, purely relational: there cannot be a "transcendental signified," or a sign whose meaning is completely self-contained.[18] This declaration partially informs the foundation of the critical approach now known as Deconstruction, which, in its most general terms, seeks to disrupt such traditional oppositions or binaries as man/woman, truth/fiction, or right/wrong. Through this disruption, deconstruction casts doubt upon all discourses (logical, scientific, humanistic) that claim to provide direct access to a final, stable meaning.

Critics who employed this scientific approach to the study of language inevitably found fault with the traditional discussions of the relationship between the work and its author. In 1967, Barthes published "The Death of the Author," which argues against analyses from capitalist societies that foreground the author as the center and origin of a piece of literature or art. Barthes, along with Michel Foucault and Derrida in other important essays, viewed this filial author-work relationship as a way to oppress proliferation of meaning. Because meaning has no origin and cannot be permanently fixed, the deified position of the author is no longer valid, thus the famous conclusion that, "the birth of the reader must come from the death of the Author."[19] This led Barthes to develop a theory of the text as a product of pre-existing discourses, codes, and other texts, supplanting the idea of the work as the offspring of an author whose "true" meaning is only known to him or her. The theory of the text marks an important shift

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[18] Jacques Derrida [trans. Allan Bass], *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp 278-9.
[19] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" [1967] in Stephen Heath, ed. and trans., *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

between structuralism and poststructuralism; structuralists cast off the figure of the author

only to demonstrate how a text is constructed from its constituitive elements. Barthes

and other theorists of the text extended their focus on to show how shifting the primacy

of the author to the reader results in a plurality of meanings.[20]

The de-centering of Western metaphysics challenged the traditional

methodologies and presuppositions of art history as a discipline. Deconstruction not only

shifted critical focus to the political forces that shape art and the individuals who interpret

it, but also considered the ways in which images and objects function within their

respective cultural contexts. The video artist Dan Graham considered *Truisms* as an

exercise in deconstruction in an article of 1981:

> Unlike the false homogeneity (the single, closed idea) of other nearby
> wall-posters, Holzer's statements, in their exposure of multiple
> contradictions, opened up a heterogeneous array of viewpoints to those
> reading other messages in the vicinity….Unlike most "political" art, which
> a priori begins with a worked-out belief and then employs a methodology
> to prove it, Holzer's statements deconstruct *all* ideological (political)
> assumptions.[21]

For Graham, the other posters surrounding *Truisms* assumed the impossible status of

transcendental signified through their denial of the associative nature of language.

Whether these other posters were advertisements, art, or public transportation schedules,

their meaning was, ostensibly, fixed and obvious for every viewer. The *Truisms* posters,

on the other hand, disrupted these incidences of "false homogeneity" by articulating

myriad different, contradictory viewpoints. Viewers could then contrast the other posters

with *Truisms* and realize that the idea of a single, immovable truth is not only

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[20] This shift represents one aspect of the transition from structuralism to
poststructuralism; for a more complete discussion see Culler, pp. 23-27.
[21] Dan Graham, " Signs" in *Artforum* 19, No. 8 (April, 1981), pp. 38-9.

preposterous but also dangerous; if these other posters perpetuated the illegitimate notion of universal truth, then this would inevitably lead to the formation of dogmatic political ideologies. Thus, according to Graham, deconstruction itself could be a radical, politically motivated critical approach.

Benjamin Buchloh also positioned the work of Holzer and some of her contemporaries within the discourse of deconstruction, explicitly connecting their deconstructive tendencies to a trajectory that Barthes had already outlined in 1957. Buchloh wrote in 1982: "…the languages of television, advertising, and photography, and the ideology of 'everyday' life, were subjected to formal and linguistic operations that essentially followed Roland Barthes' model of a secondary mythification that deconstructs ideology."[22] Barthes' theory of mythification asserts that bourgeois society constructed stories or myths to assert its ideology upon others through *signification*. He applied this theory in several examples, perhaps most famously with the social function of wine in France. A picture of a bottle of wine, a signifier, yields its expected signified, the human conception of a bottle of wine. The French bourgeoisie take this signified and then turn it into a signifier with a new signified: a healthy, relaxing pursuit integral to French culture and identity.[23] Thus, according to both Graham and Buchloh, *Truisms* used language to deconstruct bourgeois cultural ideals that have been subtly perpetuated through various media. The project was art as much as it was criticism, which complicated the role of critic within the institution of art. The ways in which critics recognized the link between a work of modernist art and its referent, the transcendental

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[22] Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art" in *Artforum* 21, No. 1 (September, 1982), p. 48.
[23] Roland Barthes [trans. Annette Lavers], *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 58-61.

source or origin, would be inadequate for postmodern/allegorical art that is already self-consciously critical. The "allegorical procedures" of this art required a new view of the critic. Where could one locate functional boundaries between critical theory, art criticism, and artists whose work takes criticality as its foundation? Do the tenets of structuralism and deconstruction seek to define such boundaries, or erase them altogether?

It is crucial to emphasize chronology in order to understand America's encounters with structuralism and its implications for contemporary art criticism. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was not widely available in English until the early 1970s. It was also around this time that Barthes and Derrida's writings from the 1950s and 1960s, heavily based in Saussure's teachings, were translated into English. To complicate matters, Barthes and Derrida began to move away from structuralism with their respective theories of the text and deconstruction in the 1970s. Once American academics embraced their earlier work, translators had reason to produce English-language versions of their contemporary work as well. Thus, within a relatively short time span, American audiences were faced with the daunting task of reading and understanding Saussure, the early works of his disciples, and their more recent ideas. Rosalind Krauss, a critic and historian of modern art, found structuralist ideas useful in explaining the work of Minimalist sculpture from the 1960s and 1970s. She co-founded the journal *October* in 1976 in order to expose American audiences to the recent developments in French intellectual culture and provide a forum for critical debate. The journal's title, meant to echo Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic recreation of the October Revolution of 1917, signified the political and critical radicalism inherent to the task of

deconstruction. *October* set the benchmark for art criticism during the 1970s and '80s, and all of the critics discussed in this chapter contributed important articles to the journal.

During this time, Krauss also taught at the art history graduate program at the City University of New York, where one of her students was Hal Foster, who quickly rose to prominence as a critic and historian in his own right. While an associate editor at *Art in America*, Foster published an article discussing the relationship between recent critical theory and the practice of several contemporary artists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Allan McCollum, and Louise Lawler. This relationship was strongest in the work of Holzer and Barbara Kruger, whose posters of appropriated images juxtaposed with ambiguous, usually ominous text, were as visible as *Truisms* in the early 1980s. Both artists, though engaged in different tactics, shared the same concern of revealing the fallacies of ideology. Foster wrote:

> Each treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which he or she intervenes as both a target and a weapon….[Thus] the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular. This shift is not new…yet it remains strategic if only because even today few are able to accept the status of art as a social sign entangled with other signs in systems productive of value, power and prestige.[24]

Foster expanded upon Graham and Buchloh's arguments to argue that Holzer, along with several of her peers, not only deconstructed the tenets on which ideology is based, but also positioned the idea of art as a collection of socio-cultural signifiers and signifieds.

Foster closely aligned his description of new, advanced art with both Barthes and Derrida, particularly with the suggestion that Holzer, Kruger and others were no longer

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[24] Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs" [1982] in *Recodings: Art, Specatcle, Cultural Politics* (New York: New Press, 1999), p. 100.

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producing "art objects," even though the article contains photographs of objects attributed to each artist. As stated earlier, Barthes' "Death of the Author" challenged the Western conception that the meaning of a work of art was inextricably bound to its author. The text, free from a singular legitimating source, would be an amalgam of previous texts and signify different things for different people. Holzer and her peers recognized this phenomenon and no longer sought to produce individual "works" that would privilege their individual unconscious. Their projects were not creative, but critical. If Holzer was more of a rogue manipulator of signs, covertly pasting her posters to the sides of buildings in order to critique aspects of contemporary culture for her audience, then where does Foster fit in? *Truisms* presented the same predicament for Foster as it had for Graham or Buchloh—does critical theory still allow for an impenetrable membrane between critic and artist? Would it even be worthwhile to uphold such a separation?

Holzer's intervention in language, according to Foster, illustrated the Barthesian imperative that "language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist."[25] Her texts then continue to demonstrate how we can undo this fascism; here is the simultaneous weapon and target from the beginning of his article. Citing Graham's argument that *Truisms* deconstructs all ideological assumptions, Foster argued that, "[Holzer's] texts often function as a dictionary of received ideas to deplete our ideologemes, to rob them of the 'fascist' power to compel."[26] While critics of deconstruction have labeled it a nihilistic enterprise, *Truisms* offers hope and liberation: viewers can understand how meaning is constructed through

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[25] Barthes as quoted in Foster, p. 108.
[26] Foster, p. 108; if an ideology is a system of beliefs, then an ideologeme is the structural unit with which an ideology is constructed.

language and find a way to situate themselves within it. Meaning is always relational, as structuralism demonstrated; those who try to inscribe it in absolute terms would be tyrants. "Only through contradiction," Foster wrote, "can one construct a self that is not entirely subjected."[27] This proclamation, which followed Owens and Buchloh's theories of allegory, described a purely contradictory relationship between the truisms.

Yet to what extent do Holzer's *Truisms* actually contradict one another? Holzer wrote over two hundred and fifty truisms, and they are all often exhibited together today, but her early posters only contained un-alphabetized groups of thirty to forty sentences.[28] Presented in the same typeface and size, there is no clue as to the sentences' origin, nor is there a discernible relationship between them. Upon closer examination, no glaring instances of incompatibility appear: SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON SELF-IMPROVEMENT IS ANTI-SOCIAL; RECLUSES ALWAYS GET WEAK; OLD FRIENDS ARE BETTER LEFT IN THE PAST; YOUR ACTIONS ARE POINTLESS IF NO ONE NOTICES; THE MOST PROFOUND THINGS ARE INEXPRESSIBLE; IT'S JUST AN ACCIDENT THAT YOUR PARENTS ARE YOUR PARENTS. These truisms do not seem to be in dialogue with one another. Of course it is highly unlikely that a viewer would agree with every truism equally, and it would be impossible to find even one truism with which every viewer would agree. This is precisely the point of *Truisms*: The meaning and context of these sentences are contingent upon an individual viewer with his or her own sets of ideas and knowledge. No sentence is a direct quotation from somebody; furthermore, no sentence is inextricably connected to any particular discourse *in situ*. One may not be able to imagine a person who would espouse all of these ideas and

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[27] Foster, p. 109.
[28] "Interview" in Joselit, p. 23.

believe them equally, but it is only at the moment where a viewer puts them in the mind of a potential speaker that they become contradictory. Each viewer must use their individual set of knowledge to activate a context for these sentences.

Yet even if the truisms are not literally in contradistinction to one another, critical questions linger. If this project still reveals language to be an inherently "fascist" system, to use Foster's term, with contradiction as the only salvation, how could Graham, Buchloh and Foster have praised it without implementing contradiction in their own writing? If the posters that surrounded *Truisms* on various Manhattan buildings perpetuated a false insularity from their surrounding environment, then the self-contained articles and essays from *Artforum* and *Art in America* are surely guilty of the same strategy. While deconstruction promised liberation from the strictures of post-Enlightenment thought, it also complicated the position of the autonomous critic within discourse. This apparent contradiction is central to the project of art criticism in the 1980s.

Critics of those who incorporated French intellectual theory into their writing were interested in exploring the shifting boundaries between critic and artist. The historian of art and professor of philosophy David Carrier was particularly critical of Foster and other academics connected with *October*. He rebuked them for failing to see the complexities in representing ideas *about* the ever-shifting nature of representation, and that those who paraphrase the ideas of French intellectuals miss their point that form and content are inseparable:

> This problem occurs frequently in the texts of *Octoberists* like Hal
> Foster….Though [Holzer and Kruger] are said 'to call language into
> crisis,' that crisis is confined to their work, whose nature Foster's
> language can clearly describe…. The effect of supplementation of such

artwork texts is to remind us that Kruger and Holzer are artists, that their special use of language can be explicated by being placed within the context established by the non-artistic use of language as in Foster's commentary.[29]

Carrier argued that Foster cannot simultaneously advance the lessons of *Truisms* and write as if he did not learn them. Even if Holzer's texts revealed "the censorious circularity of our idiolects," as Foster suggested, they still depended upon the English language and do little to repudiate its conventions or propose an alternative. Both Graham and Foster's reading of *Truisms* lamented "false homogeneities" in signs, but their cohesive, logical arguments appear to diminish their insights. If language and ideology threaten to co-opt the individual self, and contradiction remains the only weapon available to combat this process, how did this affect art criticism in the 1980s?[30]

Those who had embraced structuralist theories also found fault with the way some had chosen to apply them. That postmodernism had failed to learn from the social and political accomplishments of modern feminism was particularly specious for Owens, a colleage of Foster's at *Art in America*, who contributed an essay addressing this issue to an anthology of thought on postmodernity Foster edited and published in 1983. Owens returned to Buchloh's discussion of Barthes' *Mythologies* in relation to contemporary women artists as symptomatic of this problem:

> Buchloh does not acknowledge the fact that Barthes later repudiated this methodology—a repudiation that must be seen as part of his increasing refusal of mastery from *The Pleasure of the Text* on. Nor does Buchloh grant any particular significance to the fact that all these artists are

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[29] David Carrier, "Suspicious Art, Unsuspecting Texts" in *Arts* 60, No. 3 (November, 1985), p. 33.

[30] Carrier's critique of Foster and the other "*Octoberists*" is partly related to his graduate education in philosophy under Arthur Danto at Columbia. Danto's interest in German philosophy and aesthetic theory ran counter to Krauss' focus on French linguistic theory.

women; instead he provides them with a distinctly male genealogy in the dada tradition of collage and montage.[31]

Owens viewed Buchloh's analysis of Holzer and her peers as another example of how critics have ignored the gendered nature of any inquiry pertaining to authority or tradition within the parameters of artistic production. Certain applications of postmodern theory ironed out difference, particularly sexual difference, in discussions of contemporary art. Yet the very existence of feminism as a political movement and theoretical approach directly opposes this urge to avoid incorporating gender into discussions of power and representation. Historical and political realities demonstrate that women have not had equal opportunities to shape and contribute to discourses of power and language. Owens' argument shed light on the critical tendency to skirt issues of gender in contemporary art.[32]

One of the better-known American theorists of postmodernism, Frederic Jameson, also contributed an essay to Foster's anthology in which he linked postmodernism to the developments and trends of late capitalism, or what has since come to be known as globalization. He did not set out to outline a "definition" of postmodernism, as the very nature of postmodernism denies the possibility of a strict definition. Instead he relied on feelings and a general sense of the cultural climate in order to explain why the tenets of modernism no longer have currency:

> The great modernisms were…predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your

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[31] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), p. 72.

[32] Owens' characterization of dada collage and photomontage as inherently masculine practices conveniently left out the work of Hannah Höch and other women artists such as Sophie Täuber and Beatrice Wood.

own body….If the experience and the ideology of the unique self is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing. What is clear is merely that the older models—Picasso, Proust, T.S. Eliot—do not work any more (or are positively harmful), since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer.[33]

Here again is an echo of Barthes' "Death of the Author." Jameson argued that artists and writers could no longer claim their unconscious mind as the origin of their creative products because that author/work model is obsolete. In the age of globalized capitalism, nobody lives in a vacuum; everyone and everything must acknowledge their relationship to ideas and traditions of the past. This paradigm shift created a general feeling of uncertainty and anxiety, a characteristic central to postmodernism but impossible to quantify or support with tangible evidence. Although Jameson depended on feelings and other assertions not firmly grounded in logic in order to make his point, this approach anticipates Carrier's objections to the ways in which Foster and his peers expressed the ambiguities and uncertainties of poststructuralism in a logical, coherent manner.

This purposefully frustrating approach leads Jameson into a discussion of "pastiche." Because postmodernism assumes that there is no possibility for new styles and takes the poststructuralist assertion that all texts are merely quotations of ones that came before, cultural products are forever referencing the already-said or the already-done. The past becomes nothing more than a history of styles or tropes, ready to be mined by "postmodern" artists. Photography and written text, which were never exhibited in museums or thought of as fine art, are of particular interest to postmodernist artists and critics who seek to deconstruct the binaries of copy/original and

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[33] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 114-5.

authentic/fake. Photographs and text are endlessly reproducible, and they do not

privilege the expressive gesture of the modernist painter or sculptor. Kruger's

juxtapositions of appropriated images with text, the appropriated photographs of Levine,

and Holzer's eye-catching epigrams fulfill Jameson's criteria of postmodernism.

In a survey of Holzer's *oeuvre* published in 1998, the art critic and historian

David Joselit uncovered a vaguely postmodern vision of authorship in *Truisms* without

relying quite so heavily on specific references to literary theory. He wrote much later

than Graham, Foster and Buchloh, and their influence is evident in Joselit's argument:

> Certainly the point of Holzer's earlier, and perhaps best known work, the
> *Truisms*, whose alphabetized list includes astounding contradictions, like
> AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE followed by ANY SURPLUS IS IMMORAL, is
> meant to loosen any unilateral tie between author and text….I think the
> *Truisms* remain exemplary of Holzer's particular model of authorship.
> The *Truisms* impersonate clichés. They are not *linguistic* readymades—
> Holzer wrote them herself with great effort—but their effect is that of
> conceptual readymades….They are instances of authorship turned outside
> in and inside out.[34]

Again, there is the recurring theme of contradiction, this time with an example. A viewer

may doubt that the same person would not espouse both statements, but conditions of

immorality and inevitability are not mutually exclusive. Only when one situates these

statements within specific, competing discourses (capitalism and communism, or fascism

and Marxism) could they become contradictory; the sentences on the posters are isolated,

stripped of inherent or associative meaning. There is no transcendental signified for

either of these statements.

Joselit's approach to Holzer's work diverges from those of Foster, Graham, and,

especially, Buchloch in one significant way. The very introduction "I think..." to a

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[34] "Survey" in Joselit, pp. 45, 48.

paragraph emphasizes his own discursive position—he makes a distinction between opinion and fact. His writing is just as elegant, well-supported and solidly constructed as that of his predecessors, but he does not take his status as critic or historian to mean that he is outside of discourse. This is perhaps the primary lesson of *Truisms*, which earlier critics recognized intellectually but did not apply to their own writing. Joselit's explanation of Holzer's view of authorship echoes Barthes and Derrida, but his distinction between appropriating a concept versus language demonstrates a break with poststructuralism. Rather than advancing the purely linguistic model of text as made up exclusively of quotations from other sources, Joselit aligns himself more closely with Jameson's idea of a general feeling of familiarity and repetition in the postmodern age. Even the very term "readymade," with its evocations of the work of Duchamp as well as that of such Conceptualist artists as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, acknowledges contemporary critical struggles with meaning without directly mentioning theorists or theoretical jargon.

Joselit's approach to art criticism demonstrates a crucial shift in the application of structuralist theory. Subsequent critics have explored how earlier responses to *Truisms* grounded in structuralism perhaps relied on a too-narrow application of such theory. In an essay published in the *Oxford Journal of Art* in 2006, the art historian Gordon Hughes took both the "*October*ists" and Joselit to task, casting doubt on their purely "textual" reading of *Truisms* as well as their preoccupations with language, power and, especially, the notion of contradiction:

> For beginning with the *Truisms*, rather than destabilizing meaning by
> depriving language of its original context, Holzer *begins* with a language
> that is, by careful design, already unstable—she begins with a language
> that is free-floating, polysemous and inherently ambiguous. This textual

language is then placed within a set of specific material and contextual contingencies that narrows and articulates meaning, transforming Holzer's textual language into contextual language.[35]

Hughes argued that only when Holzer's statements are imbued with ideological context and understood in relationship to their physical context can they be said to operate against one another. Still, he resisted the term "contradiction" and opted for a vision of "antagonistic positions," which allows for incongruity without total and complete opposition. Because Holzer's language has no pre-established value, her statements do not follow the structuralist idea that all meaning is relational or associative. A truism such as OLD FRIENDS ARE BETTER LEFT IN THE PAST does not gain or lose meaning when placed next to ROMANTIC LOVE WAS INVENTED TO MANIPULATE WOMEN, because the two cannot oppose each other without a context.

Responding indirectly to Owens' exhortation, Hughes returned to Joselit and chastised him for ending a key quotation from Holzer with the sentence "I find it better to have no particular associations attached to the voice in order for it to be perceived as true," and omitting her next sentence: "Yet, I do want my voice to be heard and, yes, it's a woman's voice."[36] How can Holzer simultaneously render her voice neuter while hoping its true gender will somehow reach the reader? Hughes tackled the paradox by contrasting the cool, logical, ordered appearance of *Truisms* to the traditional role reserved for women in art history (as well as in society):

> Geometric solidity within a foundation firmly grounded in the structure of reason has historically been cast as masculine. Women, by contrast, have been cast in the role of the formless, ungrounded, irrational, devoid of shape, clarity, truth. The collapse of structure and structural values does

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[35] Gordon Hughes, "Power's Script: or, Jenny Holzer's Art after 'Art After Philosophy'" in *Oxford Journal of Art* 29, No. 3 (October, 2006), p. 426.
[36] Cited in Hughes, p. 438.

> not spare feminism…but the *idea* of structure has historically been conceived as a phallocentric position that excludes the threat of feminine difference.[37]

Hughes established difference as central to the function of *Truisms*, arguing that the very core of structuralist linguistics—structure—has been a traditionally masculine enterprise. Women have never been associated with the quest for logic or "truth," he claimed, and Holzer's project turns this phenomenon on its head. Yet, at the same time, Holzer's particular vision of authorship would render a New York City pedestrian unable to project a gender onto the anonymously displayed posters. Once her gender identity was revealed through the presentation of *Truisms* posters in museum and gallery spaces, her project also raises another important question pertaining to gender: what claims do women have over the organization and structure of urban space? What has been their historical role within these spaces? To what extent have constructions of sexual difference prevented women from disseminating information in the capacity as men? Although Holzer's tactics work to frustrate traditional ideas of authorship, her covertly placed posters that were eventually ripped down or painted over also speak to the position of women in the city. They are part of the city, yet they do not own it; they can navigate public space, but are always aware of (and susceptible to) the phallocentric power structure that finds female mobility vaguely threatening.

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[37] Hughes, p. 438.

Chapter Two:
Truisms, Site, and the Construction of Public Space

Once Holzer's gender was revealed through the presentations of *Truisms* posters in museum and gallery spaces, her project sparked other important questions: What claims do women have over the organization and structure of urban space? What has been their historical role within these spaces? Although Holzer's tactics worked to frustrate traditional ideas of authorship, her covertly placed posters that were eventually ripped down or painted over also speak to the position of women in the city. They are part of the city, yet they do not own it; they can navigate public space, but are always aware of (and susceptible to) the phallocentric power structure that finds female mobility vaguely threatening. Hughes called attention to the narrow application of French theory and begged for a reconsideration of the first *Truisms* in relation to the environment in which they originally appeared: wheat-pasted on buildings around Lower Manhattan. (Post)structuralism has offered several crucial ideas that have helped explicate the strength and meaning of *Truisms*, but the ways in which earlier critics applied it to Holzer's project de-emphasized *Truisms*' material presentation. While issues of gender and urbanism may not have been especially important to critics in 1982, subsequent art historians have paid close attention to these issues in discussions of contemporary art.

The early critics of *Truisms* who used structuralist linguistics as a framework for interpreting the art-critical properties of Holzer's project were certainly aware of the problem of site in contemporary art. Yet the *October*ists tended to think about site solely in relation to scultpure. In an article of 1979, Krauss sought to expand the traditional definition of sculpture in order to include the disparate categories of earthworks,

Minimalist sculpture and site-specific projects.[38] She introduced these practices as

"postmodern" because they demonstrated knowledge of the continuously evolving

oppositions between cultural ideas of object, function, and, especially, site. While the

*October*ists frequently discussed *Truisms*' radical, postmodern vision of the art object and

its function within discourse, they often resisted discussing the project in relation to

downtown Manhattan, its initial site of display. The labels of "site-specific" or "public"

artist, so often associated with such figures as Richard Serra, Daniel Buren and Robert

Smithson, have not usually been used to describe Holzer. To situate *Truisms* in relation

to the conceptual concerns of these artists tells a different story of modernism, stylistic

lineage and the gendered conditions of artistic production during the 1970s and early

1980s.

Hughes found a thread of site-specificity within *Truisms*, but he dismissed the

idea that the work's site could be physically defined: "…the site-specificity of *Truisms* is

not so much the street—they could be on any street in any city—as it is mass media, or

[Hal Foster's idea of] 'public discourse.'"[39] Those first posters could have conceivably

been plastered across any American city, as basic literacy would be the only prerequisite

for viewing, but they were not posted in just "any city." Had they been wheat-pasted on

to buildings in Houston, Portland or Miami, would they have received the same degree of

attention in the art world, which at the time was based in New York? *Truisms* was more

closely connected to the streets and art institutions of New York City than Hughes

suggests. Although Holzer's rise to fame as an artist has allowed her to work all across

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[38] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 31-42.
[39] Hughes, p. 422.

the globe, her celebrity would not have been so easily cemented had she not started by working in Manhattan.

Holzer first started pasting her posters on buildings in the neighborhood of SoHo in downtown Manhattan, an area that received its name in the early 1970s. With its nineteenth-century workshops, warehouses and factories that had fallen into severe disrepair since the end of World War II, the district was slated for destruction by city planners. In the 1960s, Mayor John Lindsay attempted to bring to fruition Robert Moses' vision of two elevated highways that were to cross right through the area in order to connect Manhattan to the outer boroughs. The plan was abandoned after the efforts of community activists like Jane Jacobs, who argued for the preservation of the historical buildings. After this unlikely victory, artists began moving in and snatching up the expansive loft spaces at extremely low rents. Marhsall Berman recounted the aftershocks of this migration:

> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of artists moved in and, within a few years, turned this anonymous space into the world's leading center for the production of art. This amazing transformation infused SoHo's dreary and crumbling streets with a unique vitality and intensity. Much of the neighborhood's aura arises from its interplay between its nineteenth-century-modern streets and buildings and the late-twentieth-century-modern art that is created and displayed inside them.[40]

The phenomenon of artists flocking to dilapidated areas was, at the time, unique to New York City. Artists moved to SoHo because the loft spaces were ideal to work in: they were large by New York City apartment standards, had high ceilings, and had large windows that let in an abundance of natural light. Yet those who lived in SoHo during

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[40] Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 337-8.

the 1970s did so in a technically illegal way: the buildings were zoned for industrial and commercial use, not residential purposes.[41]

The redevelopment of SoHo, along with the rest of "downtown" (i.e., south of 14th street) Manhattan, also had an effect on the character of the Whitney Independent Study Program, which Holzer attended in 1977. At this time, the art history/museology component of the program was taught at the Whitney Museum on the Upper East Side while the studio component (which Holzer attended) was located on Reade Street, a few blocks west of SoHo's border at Lafayette Street. This distance was more than just a geographical separation, as the curatorial studies program espoused very different ideas of art and institutions than those found in the work of the downtown artists. When the two components were joined in one building (located at 384 Broadway) in 1981, it was not a harmonious meeting.[42] The distance between uptown and downtown, at least in terms of New York art production, had never been so pronounced as it had been during the 1970s and early 1980s. Downtown and SoHo were more than just geographical markers; they signified crucial divergences in the conception of art's possibilities at the time.

Within the environment of SoHo, *Truisms* took on this current of urban (re)development and illegal occupation. Although Holzer displayed the posters in her own neighborhood, they did not seem to "belong" to their environment; in fact, viewers would be hard-pressed to think of the proper environment for posters broadcasting such outrageous, blunt statements. Yet the transformation of an industrial district into a

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[41] For a more complete discussion of zoning laws in SoHo, see Richard Kostelanetz, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists' Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 14-17.
[42] See Howard Singerman, "A History of the Whitney Independent Study Program—In Theory & Practice" in *Artforum* 42, No. 6 (February, 2004), p. 115.

geographically bounded neighborhood can be seen as a parallel attempt to grapple with the structuring of urban space. Berman saw a dialectical relationship between the factories' "old" mode of industrial production and the "new" modes brought by artists who had their own relationship to raw materials.[43] The mass production of Holzer's posters certainly echoed the former purpose of the buildings that had been transformed into artists' lofts. The subtle yet unmistakable integration of *Truisms* into its urban environment was only possible with the influx of artists into SoHo.

Berman did not mention Holzer or *Truisms* in his discussion of SoHo's development in relation to contemporary art, but he wrote at length about a sculpture by Richard Serra. Installed in a small triangular plaza just below Canal Street in 1980, three years after *Truisms* first appeared, *T.W.U.* honored the contemporaneous strike of the Transit Workers' Union [Fig. 2]. Like the modernist sculptures of the '60s and '70s, *TWU* was massive, colorful, and unmistakably in the style of the commissioned artist. Berman focused on the ways in which the denizens of New York interacted with Serra's sculpture:

> Sometimes [viewers] inscribe their names or beliefs on its sides—"NO
> FUTURES" was recently inscribed in letters three feet high; in addition,
> the lower facades have turned into something of a kiosk, decked with
> innumerable pleasant and unpleasant signs of the times…The accumulated
> layers of signs, [have been] periodically torn or burned off (whether by the
> city, by Serra himself, or by solicitous spectators, I cannot tell).[44]

That a group of concerned citizens was responsible for removing the detritus of TriBeCa from the sculpture is unlikely; Serra or his gallery, Leo Castelli, were probably responsible for the constant removal of graffiti. Although Serra wanted to create a

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[43] Ibid., p. 338.
[44] Berman, p. 339.

monument nestled within the environs of the city, he did not want passersby to alter *his* work in any way.

Berman's description of *T.W.U.* illuminates the type of site-specificity contained within *Truisms*. Holzer did not have such expectations for *Truisms*: her anonymous posters in an "anonymous" neighborhood were left to the residents of the city. Pedestrians were free to scrawl on the posters, rip them down, or paint over them. She never stated that her posters were meant to stay in the environment in which she initially placed them. Serra, on the other hand, made it a point to install his immobile sculpture in one particular location. The numerous cleansings that *T.W.U.* received demonstrate that Serra did not want anybody to interact with the sculpture in any way that *he* did not deem acceptable or appropriate. The relationship between the artist and the work's site becomes particularly important in discussions of contemporary public art, particularly in an age where the author was already said to have died.

Within the context of American public art projects, Holzer's engagement with her chosen site of display was remarkable; however, because *Truisms* was not a sculptural installation, it has been left out of discussions of the genealogy of public art. According to Miwon Kwon, public art commissions of the 1960s and 1970s were, for the most part, limited to "modernist abstract sculptures that were often enlarged replicas of work normally found in museums and galleries."[45] These sculptures were more examples of art-in-public-places rather than an artistic practice that took the surrounding environment as more than a mere site of display. Holzer's project, however, was not commissioned or approved by any external agency, nor did she publicly voice her intention to create a

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[45] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 60.

work of public or site-specific art. The notion of authorial intent, central to critical

histories of *Truisms* from the early 1980s, remains important to the public nature of

Truisms. Within this context, the debate shifts from the author's ostensible ability to

endow his or her work with a singular meaning to the author's attempt to impose a

singular definition of utility onto public space.

Earlier critics located the crisis of authorship in *Truisms* within the simulated

character of Holzer's sentences. The sentences, although written in the same typeface on

the same poster, do not appear to belong to the same author; some are funny, some

serious, and none of them appear to have any relationship to one another. Yet positioning

Truisms as a public or site-specific project, expands this authorial crisis. As Kwon

demonstrated, the agencies providing financial support for sculptures by Alexander

Calder, Isamu Noguchi, and others were able to act as legitimators of public art. For

example, Noguchi's sculpture *Red Cube*, a red, steel cube with a cylindrical hole through

its center, was placed in the Marine Midland Bank Plaza at the Bank's behest in 1968. It

was, as Kwon described, an instance of art-in-public-place. Yet because a corporation

commissioned it as a public art piece, it could earn the label public art. *Truisms*, absent

from individual or organized declarations of purpose, was thus not viewed in relation to

other public art projects.

Perhaps the most famous example of public art in New York during the late 1970s

and early 1980s was another work by Serra, *Tilted Arc* [Fig. 3]. He installed his large,

imposing sculpture into Lower Manhattan's Federal Plaza, home to various municipal

buildings, with a grant he received from the General Services Administration in 1979.

The curved chunk of steel cut through the square plaza, obscuring the path of pedestrians

trying to traverse it. It was met with such outrage and controversy that hearings were

convened in 1985 to decide whether or not to relocate the sculpture. Serra responded to

this debate with the now infamous pronouncement that was reproduced in a collection of

documents meant to chronicle the "destruction" of *Tilted Arc*:

> I don't make portable objects; I don't make works that can be relocated or
> site adjusted. I make works that deal with the environmental components
> of given places….As [the] phrase implies, site-specific sculpture is one
> conceived and created in relation to the particular conditions of a specific
> site, and only to those conditions. To remove *Tilted Arc*, therefore, is to
> destroy it.[46]

Despite the well-documented critical interest in poststructuralist ideas of the function of

the author and authorship, several art critics and scholars rallied to Serra's defense:

Douglas Crimp, Krauss, Buchloh and Abigail Solomon-Godeau spoke in favor of leaving

Tilted Arc intact. Serra and his supporters lost the case, however, and the object was

removed in 1989.

Serra's pronouncements, along with the publication of *The Destruction of "Tilted

Arc"*, illuminate an important, circular relationship between site-specific practice and the

modernist tenets that it negated. Serra may have *intended* to critique or subvert the

Greenbergian idea of a closed relationship between works of art and their viewers, in

which viewers stand directly in front of a painting or sculpture in order to let the work

wash over them, but he transferred the character of this relationship to that between the

artist and his chosen site. As was the case with *TWU*, Serra privileged his position as the

author within his vision of a closed relationship between the artists who identifies a site

and then enters into it. Based upon this logic, according to Juli Carson, "A transcendent

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[46] Serra as quoted in Martha Buskirk and Clara Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of
"Tilted Arc": Documents* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 38.

dialogue is then presumed to take place between artists and site, one unhindered by any possibility of the cacophony of other voices that might contradict the artist's projection that a site ontologically exists a priori to his engagement with it."[47] This ostensible negation of modernism's claim of transcendence actually works to re-inscribe this transcendence by claiming a concrete relationship between work and physical site. Furthermore, the transcription of the GSA hearings in *Destruction*, a response to the New York City government's disavowal of Serra's paternal view of his project, sought to preserve the monument after its removal from Federal Plaza. Yet these debates and their subsequent publication[48] demonstrate that *Tilted Arc* was not merely an object that existed outside of discourse solely on Serra's terms. The "written" *Tilted Arc* fulfills Foster's conception of art as a "sign" enmeshed within larger cultural systems and discourses; Serra's *Tilted Arc* gets caught in a complicated theoretical transition, as Carson puts it, "One in which the minimalist claim against authorial intentionality is undercut by the inherent intentionality of such a claim."[49]

That the controversy surrounding *Tilted Arc* evinced multiple, competing conceptions of "site" in site-specific art is crucial in discussing *Truisms* as a site-bounded project. Only among the "cacophony of other voices," to use Carson's phrase, could *Truisms* work as an aesthetic endeavor. The production of meaning was contingent not only upon the multiple viewers and their individual sets of knowledge, but also upon the presence of other posters and signs found in an urban setting. And although there were

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[47] Juli Carson, "1989" in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, eds., *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 338.
[48] Martha Buskirk and Clara Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of* Tilted Arc*: Documents* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991)
[49] Carson, p. 341.

no official hearings regarding the presence of *Truisms* in New York, the project still managed to straddle different ideas of site. Earlier critics may not have seen an explicit connection between *Truisms* and its urban locale, yet they did assert that the project intervened in language and the constructions of ideology.

But how could one describe cultural ideas or phenomena as a site? In order to understand this approach, one must return to the set of terms that Kwon outlined. She claimed three distinct yet often competing paradigms of site to which a work could be oriented: a solely physical site; a set of social or institutional beliefs and conditions; and a more "discursively" defined site or field of knowledge and cultural debate.[50] Although she traced the chronological development of these categories, she also emphasized how these definitions overlap and compete with one another throughout the end of the twentieth century.

Kwon reserves this last category primarily for artists of the 1990s, though it is just as useful as the first two in discussing the *Truisms* posters from the 1970s. If, as Hughes has argued, Holzer's sentences do not possess any pre-established value or origin, then they are more concerned with the structuring of Western culture than anything else.[51] Rather than reject ideology, or cast written language as inherently "fascist," the posters did something quite different. The combination of material presentation, public space, and the sentences themselves, implored the reader to position him or herself within these discourses. Had *Truisms* initially been displayed within a museum, neatly framed with a didactic exhibition label displaying pertinent information, then the whole project could

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[50] Kwon, pp. 13, 26.
[51] "Culture" is defined here as "shared conceptual maps." See "The Work of Representation" in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, UK: Open University Press, 1997), pp. 15-19.

have rested on the laurels of institutional approval. Even if viewers took umbrage with

certain sentences, there would be no space for critical response, and the origin of these

epigrams would be too easily located within the author. But, on the streets of New York,

there was no apparatus present to bestow the posters with the institutional label of "public

art," as had often been the case in the 1970s. Their presence asked viewers to draw their

own connections between idea, speech, written text and action through a variety of

lenses: personal, historical, or social.

Holzer's approach to urban space contrasts not only with Serra's, but also with the

rhetoric of local and federal governments at the time. Rosalyn Deutsche argued that the

growth in public art commissions during the 1980s takes as its foundation that the "new

public art" should work in concert with urban (re)developers to create beauty and

cohesion out of strife and conflict.[52] Deutsche refers to the massive redevelopment of

Manhattan that came shortly after the SoHo phenomenon, when federal agencies often

commissioned art in order to impose singular definitions of "the" public and the "proper"

use of urban space.   *Truisms* was public in terms of display and access but stopped short

at trying to impose a monolithic definition of 'the' public or public space onto the city.

Holzer's epigrammatic statements, seemingly taken out of their proper "context," reveled

in the simultaneously polysemous and ordered experience of the metropolis. She

presented this cacophony in a stark, extremely ordered fashion: each sentence, no matter

how outrageous, was set in the same typeface and size, always in black on white paper.

Perhaps *Truisms*, in its many subsequent guises, continues to suggest how power is coded

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[52]Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City" in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 64-68.

within language, but from an urban perspective the project offered a view of quotidian life in New York as a perpetual amalgam of enforced order and individual expression.

Holzer's radical conception of public art was more or less forgotten by the critics and scholars of the 1980s who debated such issues. *Truisms* both intervened in and became a part of the urban landscape without an explicitly stated purpose or utilitarian function. The posters' floating sentences only gained currency through their interactions with their site and audience, the three components existing through reciprocal relationships in which one component is not prized above another. *Truisms* illustrates the critical frustration with the lineage of artist/author, ontological work, and secondary context so prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. The collision of these issues demonstrates the critical imperative to distinguish between the text of *Truisms* and *Truisms* as a text. For within the project there are the collections of printed words, the text which Holzer wrote, and the aggregate of those words, the "work" that should now be conceived of as a "text." Since Holzer primarily used written language, critics narrowed their analytical approach to *Truisms* because it seemed to illustrate Barthes' view of meaning and text. Although this distinction may seem like semantic hairsplitting, in fact it is crucial to understanding why the modern chronology of public art in New York tends to start with *Tilted Arc* rather than *Truisms*.

Kwon recognized how early site-specific enterprises emerged from a traditionally masculine conception of art making. Tellingly, she focused almost exclusively on male artists in her summaries of the first two approaches to defining site. The one female artist she did describe at length was Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose "maintenance art" performances consisted of Ukeles scrubbing the floors and steps of the Wadsworth

Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut. She wrote, "Ukeles posed the museum as a hierarchical system of labor relations and complicated the social and gendered division between the notions of the public and the private."[53]   Ukeles had to quite literally get down on her hands and knees in an art museum about 100 miles away from Manhattan in order to demonstrate her devalued status of "woman" artist. Artists like Robert Smithson, Barry Le Va, and Richard Serra, on the other hand, did not have to clean up after themselves. In response to this gendered tradition of authority and site, Holzer harmoniously integrated *Truisms* into its physical site (New York) while harshly intervening in its more discursive site (the conception of culture on mass and individual levels). *Truisms* shows that transience and subtlety need not be equated with impotence.

Though Hughes chided Joselit for purposefully avoiding the issue of gender, Joselit did in fact discuss the matter later in his essay, in relation to the influence of Conceptual Art on *Truisms*:

> This differing attitude towards the intersection of language and authorship [between Holzer and Conceptualist artists] is due in great part to gender. It must have seemed natural to male conceptual artists working in the late 1960s and 1970s that the discourse they produced *belonged* to them— culturally and legally. But a number of feminist artists working in the 1970s began to understand the 'possession' of language as a profoundly gendered privilege….In Holzer's art each of these feminist strategies— dispossession from patriarchal authority and pluralizaion of political perspective—is deployed.[54]

According to Joselit, although male conceptual artists took ideas pertaining to language and the art object as their targets, it has been men who have historically had the most opportunity to shape and participate in those intellectual discourses. Holzer responded to this gendered hierarchy through repudiating the very idea of singular authorship in

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[53] Kwon, p. 19.
[54] Joselit, "Survey," p. 46.

Truisms. The various political perspectives used in her work serve to undermine patriarchal authority; she places the fiery rhetoric of several political viewpoints on the same piece of paper, denying the masculine invention of hierarchy. These disavowals placed authority within the viewer, eliminating the modernist relationship between work and viewer. "By holding authorship in suspension," Joselit wrote, "Holzer forces the viewer/reader into the position of evaluating and adjudicating often contradictory points of view."[55] This conclusion provides an astute, concise response to Owens' exhortation to consider gender in relation to postmodernism. What, then, are the implications of gender with regard to Holzer's *Truisms* as a public or site-specific art production?

The subversive character of the type of public space presented by *Truisms* lies in a careful distinction between power and authority. Hannah Arendt famously proclaimed that authority had disappeared from the modern world, leading to "the loss of worldly permanence and reliability."[56] Authority, as articulated first in Ancient Rome, asserted that every political initiative had to, without violence or external coercion, recognize and affirm the presence of a sacred foundation or beginning. Holzer suggested this loss of authority in the public sphere through the democratic presentation of her sentences. Her sentences could be termed contradictory in this instance not because they directly respond to one another, but because they address several disparate subjects and ideas. They do not build upon each other in order to impose a singular view of spatial utility or to forecast the landscape of a city in the midst of redevelopment.

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[55] Ibid., p. 48.

[56] Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 91.

The intellectual cacophony present in these posters performed a similar function to that of an urban project by the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. Deutsche wrote that his *Homeless Vehicle Project* "reclaim[s] space for social needs against space organized for profit and control."[57]   The production and display of *Truisms* was also in tune with the politics of urban space. Holzer's sentences expressed outrageous ideas or sentiments pertaining to human action, but they were neutralized by their cool, stark appearance. Any attempt to locate a foundational origin in statements like YOU CAN'T FOOL OTHERS IF YOU'RE FOOLING YOURSELF or IT'S BETTER TO BE LONELY THAN TO BE WITH INFERIOR PEOPLE would be in vain, because they have no pre-established value; only once a reader situates or contextualizes them do they begin to mean anything. Holzer's focus on the viewer suggests that power reigns supreme in an age devoid of authority. Power, according to Arendt, is the human ability to act *together* in order to convince or coerce others in the public realm.[58] Only the combined efforts of people could implement, discredit or *authorize* the ideas presented in *Truisms*. The posters had no legitimate claim to authority over their urban landscape because they reflexively constituted their power.

This affirmation of political power in the modern age is of course in stark contrast to the site-specificity of *Tilted Arc*, a project that Deutsche characterized as floating "above its urban site"[59] rather than embedded within it. In his testimony to the General Services Administration, Serra theorized his authority by negating the practice of modernist sculptors and asserting the presence of two, and *only* two, artistic languages:

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[57] Deutsche, p. 106.
[58] Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 200-203.
[59] Deutsche, p. 62.

that of the site and that of the work.[60] Carson situated his argument within the

phenomenon of logocentrism, a term that describes the ways in which Western thought

tends to locate the center of a text in "logos," an Ancient Greek word denoting pure

presence or voice that pre-exists signification—the "transcendental signified."[61] She

wrote,

> Ostensibly he attempts to speak *for* himself and the work, but, as we see,
> he unwittingly contradicts himself, breaking ranks with his own
> tautological assertions by speaking *instead* of [Clement] Greenberg by
> negation…He thus begets, again, the Father in the space of modernism
> *through* his very attempt to denounce him/it.[62]

Serra's claims to authority reverse the order of Socrates' story, as the influential art critic

Clement Greenberg can only take on the Father position if Serra positions himself *first* as

a son. Serra's argument demonstrates that his claims to authority actually have no

currency because he ends up reauthorizing the modernist tradition that he saw as

antithetical to his practice. His attempts to prevent the "other" from interfering with his

work, whether that "other" is a pedestrian wandering through Federal Plaza or the

government of New York, actually violate Arendt's conception of authority; what he

views as his God-given authority is actually a form of tyranny.

This distinction between authority and tyranny also illustrates the dichotomies of

rural/urban and rich/poor that informed both *Tilted Arc* and *Truisms*. Critics of Serra's

sculpture almost invariably referenced the needs of the "average" person or the "average"

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[60] Serra as quoted in *The Destruction of* Tilted Arc, p. 12.

[61] Derrida located this tendency within Socrates' fable about in the invention of writing, in which the king or God directly begets speech in order to convey his word. Logos, or the Origin, takes the position as Father, whereas speech is his/its "Son." Writing, the transcription of speech, is the "Orphan" because it is immediately severed from at birth from is father. It makes its Father's presence obsolete by recording it.

[62] Carson, p. 338.

municipal worker from the outer boroughs of New York as in stark contrast to those of the wealthy, urbane members of the Manhattan art world.[63] While Holzer originally placed her aphorisms in an urban environment, the history of such rhetoric is firmly rooted in an agrarian, consanguineous past.[64] This is not to say that viewers would wax nostalgic about a *Little House on the Prairie*-esque childhood, but Holzer's style begs viewers to ponder the differences in authority between concise morsels of information or knowledge passed down from family or friends and those disseminated through mass media outlets.

Within these discussions of authority and authorial intent one discovers the historical tendency to trace creation and meaning in a paternal fashion. Men, predominantly, preside over political matters and, therefore, over the entire public realm. To endow God, or logos, with a masculine gender excludes women from the process of creation at the very beginning, because of the fact that of the two sexes, only women are able to give birth. These historical and cultural patterns have directly informed the discourse of art history and thus, by extension, critical reception of *Truisms.* To repeat Owens' claim, postmodernist histories or analyses of artistic practice should address issues of gender as central, rather than peripheral, cultural forces. The "geometric solidity within a foundation firmly grounded in the structure of reason"[65] that Hughes

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[63] See Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 147-50. Also Casey Nelson Blake, "An Atmosphere of Effrontery" in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears eds., *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 282-286.

[64] Richard Hoggart, *Everyday Speech and Everyday Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), pp. 159-162.

[65] Hughes, p. 438.

saw as a historically masculine phenomenon in art history is inextricably bound to the tenets of Greenbergian formalism.

One could characterize the vague, multivalent character often associated with postmodernism as a reaction to the rigid, logical nature of "modernism." However, the type of modernism on which theorists like Jameson base a tangible break is unique to the United States. In 1993, the Conceptual artist Adrian Piper offered a succinct explanation of the course modern art took in mid-century:

> There are four interrelated properties of Euroethnic art that are central to understanding the development of modernism, and in particular the development of contemporary art in the United States within the last few decades: 1) its appropriative character; 2) its formalism; 3) its self-awareness; and 4) its commitment to social content. Characterized by its repudiation of content in general and explicitly political subject matter in particular, Greenbergian formalism gained currency as an opportunistic ideological evasion of the threat of cold war McCarthyite censorship and red-baiting in the fifties.[66]

Piper frustrated the uniquely American definition or conception of modernism as a cultural force that repudiated the European tradition of art as a medium of political and social engagement. With this argument she also calls into question the ideas of postmodernism and postmodernity.

Foster selected the work of Holzer and Kruger as representative of a postmodern artistic practice for some of the very characteristics that Piper positioned as inextricably intertwined with European art from late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each artist engaged with some form of appropriation: Kruger took previously published photographs and Holzer's terse sentences simulated cultural clichés, or as Joselit termed

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[66] Adrian Piper, "The Logic of Modernism," in *Callaloo* 16, No. 3 (March, 1993), p. 574.

them, "conceptual readymades."[67] The "self-awareness" that Piper espoused is a version

of the nascent criticality Foster found in the artistic products of the late 1970s and early

1980s. Both *Truisms* and Kruger's posters evinced an understanding of the subjectivity

of art history and cultural practice through their confusion of authorial voice and the

relationship between text and context.   The combination of these elements leads to

Piper's fourth category, "social content." This label does not suggest that *Truisms* was an

attempt to deal with pressing social issues of 1977, but rather that it followed Minimalism

and Conceptualism in reasserting the importance of the idea, or subject matter, in relation

to the form of the work of art. Yet by engaging with this content in an innovative,

aesthetic manner reaffirms the work as art rather than something commonplace.

Considering the curious alignment of *Truisms* with European modern art, how do

we account for its supposed "postmodern" credentials? This tendency lies, as Piper

stated, within Greenberg, who, in a career spanning several decades, established himself

as one of the pre-eminent art critics of the twentieth century. His clout, particularly

during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, was second to none in defining the course of

American art. His influence upon subsequent generations of art historians is immense

and demonstrates an important lineage of ideas and strategies within the discourse of art

history: One of Greenberg's disciples, the critic Michael Fried, was in graduate school

with Krauss at Harvard in the 1960s. Krauss then taught Foster at CUNY in the 1970s,

and Foster taught Kwon at the Whitney Independent Study Program in the 1980s and at

Princeton in the 1990s.

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[67] Joselit, "Survey," p. 48.

Greenberg not only influenced how people thought about art, but he also defined

the function of the critic within the institution of art. For example, he promoted

contemporary abstract painting by positioning this style as a fulfillment of an inescapable

historical tendency: "Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the

limitations of the medium of the specific art…The purely plastic or abstract qualities of

the work of art are the only ones that count."[68] This capitulation to the flatness of the

picture plane would be found in the work of the predominantly male Abstract

Expressionist painters of the 1940s and early 1950s, who wrestled with the formal and

material properties of the medium. The job of the critic, then, would be to offer the

aesthetic justification for work that seemed completely devoid of aesthetic principles.

Greenberg's advocacy of the New York School remained popular because, according to

Piper, it was a way to avoid the ideological use of art for cold war propaganda by the

American government.

Thus to label Holzer and her peers "postmodernist" artists perpetuates a very

narrow view of modernism whose enshrinement was premised on the deeply reactionary

politics of 1950s America. European modernism, according to Piper, took as axiomatic

that art was a "medium of social engagement."[69] Greenberg, on the other hand, bristled

at the thought of explicitly political content entering the aesthetic realm. Acknowledging

the bifurcated story of modernism in America places *Truisms* in a precarious position: if

her art is really a critical rebuttal of Greenbergian formalism, and fulfills the criteria of

"Euroethnic" art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on what basis could the

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[68] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön" in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 566.
[69] Piper, p. 574.

term postmodern be used to describe *Truisms*? Both Krauss and Owens used the term in

a strict chronological sense to describe a set of cultural practices that came *after*

modernism. The reproducibility of *Truisms* delegitimates Greenberg's focus on the

transcendence of a single, self-contained work of art; Holzer printed hundreds of posters

that do not immediately appear to be examples of advanced art. Yet the site-specific

critique of the art museum also relates to the category of postmodern art. If museums

were intended to display the sort of art Greenberg prized so highly, then postmodern art

must have an antagonistic relationship with these institutions. To what extent might

postmodernism simply be a useful term for the project of reconciling what Joselit terms

the "criticality" of contemporary art and its accompanying institutionalization?

Kwon detailed the issues that arise from the museum and gallery displays of site-

specific work, a genre whose origins are grounded in the assertion that the institutions of

the art world are not longer adequate for displaying advanced art. She writes,

> The very process of institutionalization and the attendant
> commercialization of site-specific art also overturn the principle of place-
> boundedness through which such works developed their critique of the
> ahistorcal autonomy of the art object….But even if the efficacy of site-
> specific art from the past seems to weaken when it is re-presented, the
> procedural complications, ethical dilemmas, and pragmatic headaches that
> such situations raise for artists, collectors, dealers and host institutions are
> still meaningful.[70]

She referred primarily to controversies surrounding "recreations" of works by Serra and

Judd, instances where traveling exhibitions from the 1990s featured reproductions of

ostensibly un-repeatable projects and installations. But these issues heavily informed the

fate and function of *Truisms* in the 1980s and beyond. The ways in which Holzer

simultaneously melded and disavowed traditions of site-specificity and signaled the

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[70] Kwon, pp. 38, 43.

crucial significance of spatial politics in public art *avant la lettre* are nowhere to be found in a museum setting. After her posters' attention-grabbing stint on New York City streets, Holzer installed slightly modified versions of the posters in the alternative New York exhibition spaces Printed Matter and Fashion Moda in 1979.[71] Many museums in North America and Europe now hold *Truisms* posters in their collection, including the Walker Art Center, the Seattle Art Museum, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, Poland, and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark. No longer susceptible to the natural rhythms of urban life, the posters will not be painted over or covered up by future flyers and advertisements; their permanence is guaranteed.

Yet as Kwon suggested, it would be incorrect to write off these phenomena of reproduction and repeatability as mere capitulations to the demands of late capitalism, which require several versions of the same project to display in museums all across the increasingly gloablized art world. In the case of *Truisms*, the repeated instances of exhibition and acquisition may diminish the "critique of the ahistorical autonomy of the art object," as Kwon put it, but they also highlight the curious relationship between artistic and monetary value, originality, and reproduction. In direct opposition to these concerns, Serra approved exact re-creations of his *Splash Piece: Casting* of 1969-70 for two exhibits of 1990 at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, both of which were "destroyed" at his behest after the exhibitions ended. His conceptions of authority and the art object clearly had not changed following the

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[71] To this day Printed Matters offers many pieces of Holzer's art for sale through its website, including a 1978 *Truisms* poster currently offered at $500.00; see http://www.printedmatter.org/, Retrieved 4 March 2007.

Tilted Arc controversy.[72] Although Holzer has produced *Truisms* posters for countless

exhibitions, they have never been the same as the initial run of "cheap offset street

posters in Lower Manhattan."[73] In fact, the project has become more polished and

expensive looking with each gallery presentation. The posters for the Fashion Moda

exhibit were extremely large (95 x 36 inches) red, yellow and blue colored Photostats, or

photocopies. For the 1982 installation in the lobby of New York's Marine Midland Bank

(now the HSBC Bank), Holzer presented all of the truisms alphabetically on double-

sided, silver photocopies—this time mounted on windows instead of walls [Fig. 4]. Yet

the *first* incarnation of *Truisms*, which one would expect to be more valuable because it

marked the start of Holzer's career, exists only in photographs from the past. Even if one

were to purchase Printed Matter's rare first-run poster, to hang it on a wall in a home or a

museum would be an attempt to recapture the force and meaning of a project that was

predicated upon an anonymous exploration of site, text and context.

To situate *Truisms* within site-specific discourse is not to disavow the work of

those critics who focused upon the linguistic properties of Holzer's project, as critical

theory is essential to both approaches. Rethinking *Truisms* in terms of site and location

allows one to bring the structuralist ideas of Graham, Buchloh, and Foster into relation

with issues of urbanism, gender, and public space. Those critics' discussions of *Truisms*

in relation to French theory laid the foundation through which to articulate the project's

spatial politics. Perhaps most importantly, this expanded interpretive scope reveals how

Truisms' engagement with both linguistic *and* political authority challenges Greenberg's

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[72] In fact, his stipulation of destruction guaranteed that his works would remain in the Son
category from Derrida's view of logocentrism, rather than become Orphans.
[73] Holzer quoted in Simon, "Interview," p. 26.

assertion that every artistic medium has its undeniable "essence," which can only be discerned through an insistence on "purity," the focus on properties related solely to one specific medium. The contradictions in *Truisms* are not immediately accessible; the viewer must work in order to tease them out. As much as *Truisms* critiques the position of the author, it also challenges the viewer to be more than a passive spectator who waits for the transcendental experience to wash over him or her. Furthermore, the project demands that viewers situate the posters within the environment and recognize that the seemingly disparate concepts of site and language are actually intertwined.

The sheer multitude of critical responses to *Truisms* demonstrates the global artistic celebrity that Holzer found in the 1980s. She continued to produce a variety of text-based projects throughout the decade, including *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-82), *Living* (1980-82), *Survival* (1983-85), and *Under a Rock* (1986). She also continually re-presented *Truisms* in various guises during this time; she inscribed them on stone benches, broadcast them from Times Square via Light-Emitting Diodes (LEDs), and adapted them for television spots in America and Italy. In 1989 she was the subject of a major retrospective specifically tailored to the architecture of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and became the first woman chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, where in 1990 she won the *Leone D'Oro* award for best pavilion. As a result of this in interest in Holzer's work, several critics began to cast doubt upon her viability as an artist. They believed that Holzer was continuously engaging with the same socio-linguistic issues that Graham and Foster had already pointed out; in short, her subsequent projects constituted a failure to do or say anything new. This idea of failure

in thinking about revolutionary or avant-garde practice is central to re-thinking Holzer's

later work.

The difficulty of maintaining relevance and credibility throughout an artist's

career, especially after grabbing the attention of the art world and its institutions, is

evident throughout the history of art. Yet after a decade of celebrity, the United States

felt that Holzer was still important enough to warrant her nomination to design the

country's pavilion at the art world's most renowned competition. Many of the glowing

notices her work received from the popular press through the 1980s clearly troubled

Thomas Hoving, the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In a rather

pithy article of 1989 he wrote,

> Inexorably, the critics pronouncements began to sound like Holzer's, like
> this one: "As with aspects of contemporary life that range from political
> elections to the conduct of museums, public space is being relentlessly
> privatized. Holzer's public signs are gravely chattering to a public world
> that has nearly vanished." What does that mean?...Soon Jenny Holzer will
> be formally enshrined, in an official pavilion and throughout the streets
> and piazzas of Venice, that museum of museums…In choosing her for the
> pompous Biennale, perhaps they are trying to destroy Jenny Holzer.[74]

For Hoving, Holzer and her work belong anywhere other than the Biennale, a site that

appears to represent the epitome of artistic selling out and cashing in. Holzer was and

should remain nothing more than a "creator of witty, deliberately confusing, and random

sayings intended to be encountered unexpectedly in unlikely and modest places."[75] The

quasi-sacred space of the Biennale would neutralize the random, witty qualities of her

original work. Yet it is curious that he depicted Holzer as a helpless, vulnerable pawn

whose work has been hijacked by nefarious critics and funereal museums by consistently

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[74] Thomas Hoving, "Inflating Jenny Holzer: The Hype that Kills," in *Connoisseur* 219
(June, 1989), p. 121.
[75] Ibid., p. 121.

placing her *and* her work as the object of questionable institutional machinations. The subtitle of his article, "the hype that kills," along with the concluding sentence, evince an unusually strong conviction as to the consequences Holzer's work would suffer were it removed from its proper context.

Within the framework of urban spatial politics, *Truisms* reflects the largely separate spheres that men and women occupy in the city; the placement of the posters provoked viewers not only to think about their position within language, but also within space. Hoving, along with other critics, chose instead to focus on the space where Holzer's work *belonged*. Although in 2006 Hughes implored his audience to consider the "material contexts" in which Holzer presented *Truisms*, critics in the 1980s denied a relationship between form, content and place in Holzer's later projects. Donald Kuspit wrote, "Disruption, structurally as well as conceptually, is the aim of Holzer's art. Disruption becomes an end in itself—it *is* the revolution (and an old one at that)."[76] Similarly, Marjorie Welish wrote, "…First inspired by the subject matter of [Holzer's] polemics to create a text, language is then applied to stone benches as though these were electronic signs, so that form remains format."[77] For Kuspit and Welish, meaning was not re-inscribed through formal experimentation; Holzer simply used tired ploys and tricks that are merely echoes past traditions whose usefulness has already been exhausted. Neither discusses the changing ideas of public space or the nature of producing art specifically for an institution as demonstrated in these material shifts. These approaches to Holzer's later work provoke many important questions: when does a "new" tactic or

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[76] Donald Kuspit, "Crowding the Picture--Notes on American Activist Art" in *Artforum* 26, No.9 (May, 1988), p. 114.

[77] Marjorie Welish, "Who's Afraid of Verbs, Nouns, and Adjectives?" in *Arts* 64, No. 8 (April, 1990), p. 84.

idea become old or no longer applicable? Are Holzer's experiments with form and display evidence of a failure to repudiate the author figure, or do they point to a desire to explore new artistic and intellectual terrain through methods that were previously unavailable to her?

Chapter Three:
Lustmord

If a singular meaning can no longer be imposed upon an experience or a work of art, then surely that idea would carry over to thinking about site in site-specific practice. *Lustmord*, a multi-media and multi-locational project that Holzer first presented in 1993, does not favor one definition of site or location over another; rather, it continues the critical project of *Truisms*. *Lustmord* seeks to yoke together the seemingly contradictory categories of spatial, physical, and intellectual experiences in order to show that human response can (or should) encompass all three dimensions. And while violence against women remains the most prominent theme in discussions of the project, Holzer's careful selection of sites and contexts also answers the criticisms of Hoving and others who have said that Holzer's brand of language only belongs on posters. *Lustmord* demonstrates that the use of text does not solely connote poststructuralist ideas of arbitrary linguistic systems and the death of the author. As with *Truisms*, the writing in *Lustmord* should not be taken as Holzer's singular voice, but the presence of various forms of media signals an important shift in Holzer's practice. Any inquiry into the organization and meaning of this controversial project must take both critical responses to Holzer's *oeuvre* and the relationship of *Lustmord* to *Truisms* as important sets of interpretive contingencies.

Holzer once again relied upon text and language in *Lustmord*,[78] yet the initial display of the project marked a significant change from her past tactics. *Lustmord* first appeared in the magazine section of the Munich daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

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[78] A rough English translation would be "sexual murder," although the German word "Lust" also denotes desire that is not necessarily sexual in nature.

[*Southern German Newspaper*] on 19 November, 1993, where it sparked a great deal of controversy. The project, partly inspired by the disastrous events that accompanied the break-up of the former Yugoslavia during the early 1990s, garnered a great deal of attention. Unlike her previous projects, *Lustmord* existed in many forms almost all at once, rather than over the course of several years. Readers of the magazine found a note card on the cover of each issue that featured three excerpts from the project inside. She mixed the donated blood of several German and Yugoslav women with ink to spell out DA WO FRAUEN STERBEN BIN ICH HELLWACH [I AM WIDE AWAKE IN THE PLACE WHERE WOMEN DIE] in red letters on the front of the card [Fig. 4]. Inside read DIE FARBE IHRER OFFNEN INNENSEITE REIZT MICH SIE ZU TÖTEN [THE COLOR OF HER INSIDES IS ENOUGH TO MAKE ME KILL HER] and SIE FIEL AUF DEN BODEN MEINES ZIMMERS SIE WOLLTE BEIM STERBEN SAUBER SEIN ABER SIE WAR ES NICHT [SHE FEEL ON THE FLOOR IN MY ROOM. SHE TRIED TO BE CLEAN WHEN SHE DIED BUT SHE WAS NOT. I SEE HER TRAIL].   Only after touching the note card would readers discover that the first excerpt was written with this mixture of blood and ink.

Although the note cards sparked a great deal of controversy, the contents of the magazine and subsequent exhibits featuring the project were no less disturbing. Inside readers found several close-up photographs of various un-identifiable body parts with similarly ominous and gruesome statements scrawled upon them in both English and German with varying colors and handwriting. The photographs were also simultaneously exhibited at the Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland. When she first presented the project in America at her gallery in New York the following year, Holzer engraved excerpts from *Lustmord* onto silver clasps that were fastened around female bones that were displayed

on tables in rows. She also hung the set of photographs and added LED displays

containing text from the project.

The undeniable connection with the plight of scores of Bosnian women

transformed *Lustmord* into her most haptically-oriented project yet. The photographs of

anonymous bodies tattooed with ink remain unsettling today, evoking associations with

corporeal violence and mutilation. The use of blood in the note card texts only

accentuates the viewer's understanding of the body as a site upon which art, violence and

disease have performed, both historically and contemporaneously. This was perhaps the

most controversial element of the project: *Time* reported that many people found it "too

sensational" and Peter Heimer of the German Red Cross found the tactic "repulsive and

absurd."[79] Tabloids and newspapers ran countless stories about *Lustmord*, a major press

conference was held and, according to Holzer, there was "talk in some regional court of

impounding the magazine—public health menace."[80] This response to Holzer's project

may seem hyperbolic today, but it was firmly grounded in the time of a calamitous,

uncertain new epidemic that was sweeping America and Europe.

The questions raised by the burgeoning AIDS epidemic, which irrevocably altered

discourse on global medical practice and human sexuality, intrigued not only Holzer, but

also a new generation of American artists.   By the end of the 1980s, AIDS emerged as a

significant public health crisis. The physical realities of this syndrome (cancerous

lesions, incurable pneumonia, wasting), along with widespread public fear of contagion,

contributed to the intense fascination with and aversion to "bodily fluids." Several artists

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[79] As quoted in Joan Simon "No Ladders; Snakes: Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord*" in *Parkett* 40/41 (June, 1994), p. 82.
[80] Quoted in Ibid., p. 82.

responded to this discourse of the diseased body and its constituent elements, including

Kiki Smith and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Smith's *Untitled* (1987-90) is comprised of a

dozen silvered water bottles engraved with the name of a different bodily fluid: urine,

milk, vomit, blood, and others. Gonzalez-Torres' stacks of paper and piles of candy,

meant as portraits of friends and lovers, sought to reclaim physical pleasures in an era of

sexual alarmism. Conservative attacks on the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose

work several curators attempted to display using federal funds from the National

Endowment for the Arts, were mostly based upon fears of AIDS and sexuality.[81]

Critics often related *Lustmord*'s visceral imagery to contemporaneous events and

atrocities, yet its title harkens back to Weimar Germany. Some critics have simply

offered an English translation of the title, while others have focused on its connotations to

the ears of native English speakers. Patricia Johnson wrote that "The German title alone

is redolent of horror: *Lustmord*, an ugly word that identifies an uglier action, sex

murder."[82] Yet *Lustmord* is more than just a German word that stands for an incidence of

molestation or rape followed by murder. It has a distinct genealogy and specific uses

within art history. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Austrian psychiatrist

Richard von Krafft-Ebbing singled out *Lustmord* as distinctive from other types of

murder due to the assailant's pathological obsession with the body's interior.[83] Both

during and after World War I, several male German artists began to produce paintings

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[81] For a comprehensive account of cultural politics during this period, see Richard Bolton ed., *Culture Wars: Documents From the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992).

[82] Patricia Johnson, "*Lustmord* Horrifies but Intrigues" *Houston Chronicle* (July 11, 1997). Retrieved March 15, 2007, from <http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=1997_1423736>

[83] Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, *Psycopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study* [trans. Harry Wedeck] (New York: Putnam, 1965), p. 545.

and drawings that depicted scenes of *Lustmord*. Preeminent among them were George

Grosz, who worked with pen and ink, and the painter Otto Dix. These works were rather

explicit in their presentations of mutilated female bodies, yet earlier, Marxist

interpretations tended to position these works as Leftist critiques of metropolitan

bourgeois culture rather than discuss implications for historical and contemporaneous

ideas of gender, violence, and power.

Startling works such as Grosz's *Lustmord in der Ackerstrasse*, (1916-17) [Fig. 5]

or Dix's *Lustmord* (1922) [Fig. 6], the latter a gift for the artist's wife, still retain their

ability to shock today. They are intricately detailed tableaux with mutilated, sprawled out

female corpses occupying their respective centers. Grosz's drawing presents a typical,

urban, bourgeois interior with a murdered woman lying on the bed in the foreground.

Her head is nowhere to be found, and the killer is calmly washing his hands in the upper

right corner. Naked or semi-naked women figure prominently in much of Grosz's

oeuvre, but almost always as murdered prostitutes or housewives. Dix's canvas shows, in

great detail, a hideously mauled woman whose lower half has been ripped open. Again,

this figure is in curious contrast to the otherwise ordered, unremarkable, bourgeois

interior of an early twentieth century German interior. Dix depicted similar scenes in

many other paintings and etchings, and much of his post-war activity focused on

violence, destruction and resurrection. These scenes almost always took place in a city,

an environment that was inextricably entwined with prostitution, drug abuse, and

degradation.

Although Krafft-Ebbing noted cases of *Lustmord* during the nineteenth-century,

Grosz and Dix imbued the term with the physical and emotional havoc wreaked by World

War I. The harrowing experience of World War I, in which over two million Germans perished, reverberated throughout Europe in all spheres of life. The changing status and visibility of women in society, particularly within an urban context, were shifts few men were able to easily accept. Dix wrote in a diary: "Money, religion, and women have been the impetus for war, but not the *fundamental cause*—that is an *eternal law*. Actually, in the final analysis *all* war is waged over and for the vulva."[84] Thus the ways in which Dix and his peers agonized over the force of female sexuality in the modern age demonstrate more than a repressed desire to carry out such gruesome crimes, though one could easily speculate that such yearnings lurked in their sub-conscious minds. While their ideas of sexuality and the often violent relationships between men and women are as old as civilization, it was the experience of World War I in particular that irrevocably altered their views of the human life cycle, sexual desire, and the gendered power dynamics of early twentieth century Berlin.

In an attempt to understand the historical implications of Holzer's title, one must not only situate Holzer's *Lustmord* in relation to the practice of early-twentieth-century artists, but also to the ways in which such work was received in both Germany and the United States. The initial critical reception of the *Lustmorde* of Grosz, Dix, and others in Germany, however, did not focus upon issues of gender or power. In a 1920s review of Grosz's works, the critic Theodor Däubler was more fascinated with formal elements than anything else: "Grosz also painted many a Lustmord…. The red of the blood stains

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[84] Dix as quoted in Maria Tatar, *Lustmord* (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 74.

and marks intertwines with the arabesques of the imitation Genoese damask carpet."[85]

This observation, while certainly legitimate and demonstrative of Grosz's considerable

skill as a painter, avoids mentioning the more prominently displayed female corpse and

suggests a lack of interest in discussing the role or function of mutilated female bodies in

this painting as well as in other contemporaneous works.

      This analytical approach to German avant-garde art continued long after Däubler

wrote, a trend that disturbed the art historian Beth Irwin Lewis, whose 1985 graduate

seminar "Violence against Women in 20th-Century German Art" set out to change

traditional thinking about these paintings. She wrote about the opposition she met from

colleagues who frowned upon her investigation into the sexual politics contained within

these works:

> The infrequent treatment of the images in catalogs managed to contain
> them fully within the formalistic mode of composition and colors….When
> I presented [a paper focusing on the gendered conditions of this violence],
> a distinguished art historian accused me of voicing an interpretation that
> was dangerously congruent with National Socialist attacks on German
> avant-garde art and artists. Instead, he argued, these disfigured and
> dismembered bodies should be read as part of the symbolic vocabulary of
> political dissent raised by left-wing artists against a corrupt society.[86]

The opinions of this distinguished art historian[87] demonstrate how Marxist thought

functioned as a useful antidote to the totalitarian politics of the Nazi regime. It is thus not

particularly shocking that an art historian would suggest that a social reading of these

Lustmord works would be "dangerously congruent" with Nazi ideals of art and beauty.

Although critics who chose to concentrate on the formal aspects of Grosz and Dix's work

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[85] As quoted in Beth Irwin Lewis, "*Lustmord*: Inside the Windows of the Metropolis"
(1990) in Katharina von Ankum , ed., *Women in the Metropoils: Gender and Modernity
in Weimar Culture* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1997), p. 206.
[86] Lewis, p. 202.
[87] It was most likely Otto Karl Werckmeister, according to Frances Pohl.

certainly did not take the "wrong" approach, Lewis points out that there had still been a gross oversight in the refusal to accept these works as evidence of violent sexual politics from an historic period. Her reading does not necessarily deny the ideas or achievements of past critics; it seeks to expand the field of critical interpretation.

Responses to *Truisms* from the early 1980s tended to focus on content and language, owing in large part to the influence of French thought. In 2006 there was a challenge to reassert the primacy of the context and site of those first posters, perhaps due to a renewed critical interest in site-specificity and the art of the late 1960s and 1970s. Critics who wrote about Holzer's post-*Truisms* production not only saw failure in her linguistic approach, but also a lack of understanding of form or site. Yet *Lustmord* demonstrates that Holzer's understanding of language, place, and space is nothing other than complex and precise. The project, in its many incarnations, raises a variety of important questions. How does an understanding of both historical and contemporary events enrich an understanding of *Lustmord*? What does it mean for a quintessentially American artist to first display a project overseas and then retool it for American audiences? How does intentionality continue to figure into criticism about Holzer and contemporary art more generally?

Holzer's engagement with a wide range of historical, social, and political concerns highlights the issues raised by the ostensibly postmodern, endlessly nomadic character of *Truisms*. The gendered history of public and site-specific art, the production of urban space, and the early-twentieth-century traditions of Dada and socially-engaged art practice all informed the seemingly simple act of taping a poster to a concrete surface. Speculation about the extent of Holzer's art historical knowledge and her intent does not

reveal "the" meaning of *Truisms* or *Lustmord*, but it does maintain that the figure of the

artist is still relevant to art historical analysis. Ideas of chronology, an artist's *oeuvre*,

even the very label of "artist," are all constructions, as structuralism has pointed out. Yet

the sole fact these ideas are constructions is not enough to completely delegitimate them;

in fact, one must rely on them in order to thoroughly examine the historical and critical

circumstances from which *Lustmord* emerged. Holzer's words, her progression as an

artist, and the corpus of criticism focused upon her work all inform the context of

Lustmord.

      Historical context is crucial in understanding the divergent critical responses to

the *Lustmorde* of Grosz and Dix and Holzer's project. Her *Lustmord*, unlike its German

antecedents, does not depict any scenes of death, dismemberment or gore. It does not

have any explicit connection to the experience of the urban nor does it reproduce the

sexual politics of Weimar or contemporary Germany. The texts clearly allude to sexual

violation, yet they do not go into specific detail with vulgar language or lengthy

descriptions. So why did Holzer's project ignite such controversy in the 1990s while

Grosz and Dix's *Lustmorde* were celebrated in the 1980s and 1990s as powerful critiques

of the rise of Nazism? The note card on the cover of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, according

to Simon,

> Brought forward fears archetypal and immediate: of blood, of women's
> bleeding, of the unclean, ill or wounded, of death itself, and of the
> unknown. Here also were reckonings of the past compounded by
> problems in the present: ethnic cleansing and the "pure blooded"; blood
> tests; AIDS transmission; the war in ex-Yugoslavia; and the scandal in
> Germany over HIV-infected blood supplies.[88]

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[88] Ibid., p. 82.

The fact that Holzer chose to display this card on the cover of a popular magazine turned her gesture into something sinister and threatening, perhaps even more so than Grosz's frenzied drawings. Although people may have accepted images of the Yugoslavian conflict as simply part of the news, this small note card brought that horror closer to home because readers would touch and handle it. While the process through which the blood and ink were mixed neutralized any blood-borne contagions, the alarm over "bodily fluids" at the time obscured such a fact.

That Holzer chose a German magazine for her project's debut is also crucial; not only is *Lustmord* a German concept, but Germany's own history of ethnic cleansing and racial purification during World War II certainly mirrored the course of events in Serbia and Bosnia. Thousands of Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Albanians were forced to flee their homes throughout Yugoslavia as part of nationalist, racist campaigns against specific ethnic, racial and religious groups. Germany's interests in Yugoslavia date back to the Nazi era, when Hitler invaded Croatia and Bosnia in 1941. These invasions resulted in virulently nationalist governments that ruthlessly campaigned against Serbs, Jews and Roma (Gypsies). Many Germans who occupied this region were sent to Soviet labor camps after Hitler was deposed. The images of tattooed skin, within the context of German history, recall the numbers that the Nazis forcibly imprinted on Jews and other groups persecuted during the Third Reich. Holzer's chosen venue not only echoed Germany's past and Yugoslavia's present, but also demonstrated how those realities are not mutually exclusive. Wolfgang Joop, a German fashion designer and one of Holzer's financial backers, asked, "What times are these when a single sentence printed in blood donated by volunteers shocks more than the incessant flood of pictures showing real

bloodshed?"[89] His rhetorical question points to how, despite proclamations from the West that large-scale genocide would never happen again, Yugoslavia's neighbors did not properly intervene in the conflict. Despite the close geographical proximity to powerful western European nations like Germany or Italy, the cultural and political distances were immense. Perhaps one of the most disturbing military tactics of this war, to which the west could only react with abject horror, was the systematic rape, torture and abuse of Bosniak women at the hands of Serbian soldiers and policemen. Both within and beyond this historical and political context, the written text of *Lustmord* explores the psychological ramifications of sexual violence.

Although news outlets were showing graphic pictures of war casualties from both the Bosnian and Gulf wars in the early 1990s, Holzer relied on words to communicate perhaps even more pernicious horrors. Unlike *Truisms*, whose terse sentences seemed to come from scores of different potential sources, *Lustmord*'s text describes a crime with just three identifiable positions: a female victim (WITH YOU INSIDE ME COMES THE KNOWLEDGE OF MY DEATH; MY BREASTS ARE SO SWOLLEN THAT I BITE THEM), a (presumably) male perpetrator (I WANT TO FUCK HER WHERE SHE HAS TOO MUCH HAIR; I TAKE HER FACE WITH ITS FINE HAIRS. I POSITION HER MOUTH), and a helpless witness (SHE STARTED RUNNING WHEN EVERYTHING BEGAN POURING FROM HER BECAUSE SHE DID NOT WANT TO BE SEEN; I WANT TO BRUSH HER HAIR BUT THE SMELL OF HER MAKES ME CROSS THE ROOM. I HELD MY BREATH AS LONG AS I COULD. I KNOW I DISAPPOINT HER) whose gender is not discernible. The sentences, awkwardly worded with odd syntax, suggest both the complexities of translation and the intense emotional states of each of the three positions. Taken

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[89] As quoted in Simon, p. 82.

together, these sentences do not allow the viewer to piece together a complete version of the rape from any of the three perspectives, much less an objective view of what happened.

These ominous, stomach-churning sentences share little with the content or structure of *Truisms*; tattooed onto skin, these sentences suggest that the psychological scars of rape are just as painful and persistent, if not more so, than the physical ones. Despite, or perhaps because of their almost hallucinatory qualities, these sentences are horrifying and gut-wrenching. They illustrate the ways in which scars are not limited to the physical body. Renata Salecl identified Holzer's complex engagement with psychoanalysis: "The most horrible violence occurs when the subject is touched in his or her inner being, in such a way that the story s/he was telling him or herself no longer makes sense. He or she may feel like a mere pile of bones, covered by flesh and skin."[90] That Holzer seeks to disrupt the traditional tactics of interpreting a work of art by means of the author's privileged intentions or biography is not new, yet in *Lustmord* there are implications for both the characters within her disjointed narrative and a potential viewer.

Holzer's use of text to de-center the violated woman from the center of an account of rape signifies a crucial difference between her *Lustmord* and those of German avant-garde artists. Grosz and Dix presented women and female sexuality as the "Other," dangerous and mysterious forces that threatened masculinity and provoked uncontrollable carnal urges. Holzer, however, gives equal space for the textual representation of three different perspectives of the same crime. As with *Truisms*, one cannot locate Holzer's

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[90] Renata Salecl, "Cut-and-Dried Bodies, or How to Avoid the Pervert Trap" in David Joselit, et. al., eds., *Jenny Holzer* (London, UK: Phaidon, 1998), pp. 80-1.

own point of view or position. Marsha Meskimmon explained the implications of this difference in an article of 2001:

> Never shirking the force of these violent acts against women, *Lustmord* still refuses simply to render woman as the object of symbolic and material violence upholding the privilege of the center. Instead it places violence against women into this very center, giving voice to the victims, locating the brutality within a time and space, and calling to the embodiment of the viewers through corporealised texts and objects. These strategies engage with histories through an active generation of ideas between materials and practices.[91]

Lustmord rejects the modernist idea of the viewer as standing outside of the artwork, passively absorbing its transcendental qualities. The ambiguous pronouns of the text, which humanize the subject of the photograph, simultaneously refuse to make any specific identification. Their presence is also an emptiness that begs the viewer to realize his or her position within the discourse surrounding violence against women. Histories of war, sexual violence, modernity, and gender collide and converge so that the viewer must constantly struggle and shift in and out of position, agency, and subjectivity. Yet each photograph presents the past, a history that has already happened, in opposition to the viewer's constantly shifting position in the present time. The small hairs visible in several of the photographs mirror this task; they continually surface and re-surface, healing the scars of writing by filling in gaps. In these visual and follicular processes, of course, nothing is fixed. These struggles to remember, to forget, to re-imagine, are what Holzer realizes through her engagement with both site and language.

In subsequent exhibits of these photographs, Holzer referenced the archeological cataloguing of human bones in order to further ground this project within a specific

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[91] Marsha Meskimmon, "Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord* and the Project of Resonant Criticism" in *n.paradoxa* 6 (July, 2000), p. 16.

context. She engraved *Lustmord*'s text onto silver clasps around human bones and teeth.[92] They were first displayed at the Barbara Gladstone gallery in New York on small wooden tables; in subsequent exhibitions in Dresden and Houston, viewers were invited to pick up and examine the bones, though Holzer found that invitation too disturbing to accept herself.[93] As Salecl wrote, *Lustmord* demonstrates how the trauma of rape initiates a tragic derangement of self-perception. Without a firm intellectual grip on reality, a person's connection to his or her own body in turn disintegrates. Flesh and bones become empty, meaningless units of corporeal form. Holzer's bones, surrounded by the immovable clasps, demonstrate how such a traumatic experience penetrates right to the bone. The cold, clinical arrangement of the bones by type and size is reminiscent of a display of ancient mammalian remnants at a natural history museum. Strangely, viewers are permitted to touch and handle bones, objects normally unavailable to touch, while human skin kept at a distance in the photographs. Simon wrote, "Indeed, the one-two punch of this project lies within this conceptual inversion between what is seen to be touched and what is actually touched."[94] Although she was referring to the relationship between the note card and the photographs, her assertion helps to explain the significance of the bone display. The human faculties of sight, touch, and even smell are unable to aid the viewer in fully comprehending, all at once, the unspeakable horrors of rape. This reproduces a primary lesson of poststructuralism: one meaning can never be permanently fixed. However, this lesson is not entirely legible from text alone.

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[92] Holzer acquired these bones from a dealer in none other than SoHo. See Johnson, "*Lustmord* Horrifies but Intrigues."

[93] Despite the fact that Holzer constructed this project. See Johnson, "*Lustmord* Horrifies but Intrigues."

[94] Simon, p. 83.

Despite the numerous accolades Holzer received for this project,[95] some critics leveled the same charges as Welish and Kuspit had a few years before. When Holzer adapted *Lustmord* for exhibition at her gallery in New York, she augmented the project in an especially eerie way. In addition to a display of the photographs and the engraved silver clasps encircling human bones. She installed, in a separate room, a large hut-like structure suspended within a massive grid. The hut's interior was lined in red leather imprinted with a diamond grid pattern and embossed text. Both inside and outside of the hut stood a vaguely anthropomorphic LED sign that spun text around like a vortex suspended in mid-air. The signs alternated between red, yellow, and green lights that engulfed the otherwise pitch-black room. Holland Cotter, art critic for the *New York Times*, saw this overwhelming display as ineffective because once again Holzer did not fully grasp the implications of her formal maneuvers. Cotter wrote,

> Ms. Holzer's gallery and museum installations have always edged toward too-easy melodrama, and while her subjects are serious—*Lustmord* addresses violence against women—the moral position of her work is so calculatedly opaque as to come across as sensationalist. *Lustmord* packs a punch, but how its heavy technological artillery relates to the abuse of women is not clear.[96]

Cotter more or less repeated the same argument that Kuspit and Welish made: Holzer may be talented, but large-scale, technology-heavy installations are not the right place for her work. In this case of *Lustmord*, the installation was frustrating because there was no easily discernible claim that Holzer made about violence against women. Yet Holzer has

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[95] Including two Gold Medals from the Art Director's Club of Europe in 1993 and the World Economic Forum's "Crystal Award" in 1996.

[96] Holland Cotter, "Art in Review" *New York Times* (May 13, 1994). Retrieved March 15, 2007, from
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A0DE0DB1E39F930A25756C0A962958260>

never been interested in advancing one ideological position over another in her work, as has been clear since *Truisms*. This does not mean that she had no intent at all while conceptualizing *Lustmord*; the multiple sites and contexts that she found useful for displaying the project demonstrate that one way of encountering these texts does not supersede another, just as the urgency of one position is not privileged over another. *Lustmord* demonstrates Holzer's burgeoning interest in creating total environments within which to exhibit her art, but not necessarily at the expense of resonance or meaning that Cotter suggested. The "heavy technological artillery" does relate to violence against women as much as it relates to previous critical discussion of Holzer's work as site-less or without context.

It is strange that although Cotter used military terminology in referring to the large hut and the LED machines, he did not connect military tactics or the machinations of war (particularly the Bosnian war) with the systematic torture and abuse of women. Holzer noted that inspiration for this room came from images she saw of "women being dragged from their houses, raped in their houses, their houses burned."[97] The house, a symbol of familial and domestic stability, was turned into something sinister with both the presence of two phallic sentinels in the guise of LED machines perched upon cylindrical pedestals and the suffocating cage-like structure. David Joselit also saw associations between the domicile and the human body. He wrote, "This rudimentary structure functioned both as a transhistorical structure signifier of shelter and, on account of its red walls composed of tanned skin, as a visceral evocation of body cavities."[98] The house, completely empty except for the LED projector, was a bodily cavity that had

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[97] Holzer as quoted in Simon, p. 84.
[98] Joselit, p. 70.

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already been violated and ransacked, left only with an incomplete collection of fragments pertaining to the violence that took place. Although the projector is situated against one of the walls like a religious altar, it is more of a Sphinx than an oracle. It projects and spins the same texts that was tattooed on skin and clamped onto bones, but a viewer is no closer to truly understanding or demystifying the trauma of sexual violence.

That *Lustmord* could be produced, translated and adapted for exhibition in several cities within a short period of time reveals a connection between globalized capitalism and the art market at this specific moment. The success of *Truisms* resulted in several commissions in both the United States and Europe, and Holzer is now jointly represented by galleries in New York, Paris and Cologne.[99] This was Hoving's problem: to him, Holzer "belonged" in New York and should have stuck with her simple, witty public sayings. Celebrity and wealth would delegitimate the force of her earlier work. As Kwon has written, "If the artist is successful, he or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as a guest, tourist, temporary in-house critic, or pseudo-ethnographer to São Paulo, Paris, Munich, London, Chicago, Seoul, New York, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, and so on."[100] Thus it is more the figure of the artist and his or her trademark, whether it is Serra's monumental steel sculptures or Holzer's writing, that validates this type of nomadic, yet still critical site-specific practice. This point appears to negate the way in which Holzer has worked to eschew the traditional trappings of authorship, yet the debate surrounding the viability or relevance of traveling artists returns to a recurring question: where does one locate

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[99] Cheim & Read, Yvon Lambert, and Monika Sprüth, respectively.
[100] Kwon, p. 46.

boundaries between artist, critic, and celebrity? Would *Lustmord* have been more

powerful or effective had Holzer's name not been attached to it?

The several incarnations of *Lustmord* make it rather difficult to discuss as a

monolithic entity. Meskimmon saw the project not "as an art object…but rather as a

mutable place of meanings, confrontations and reconceptions in process, materializing a

range of possible narratives across different spaces."[101] One could think of *Lustmord* in

relation to multitude of sites: the history of rape within modern art, Germany, the former

Yugoslavia, the human body. The task of site-oriented art at the dawn of the 21st century

should not be pre-occupied with choosing one model of site or site-specific practice.

Kwon wrote,

> Today's site-oriented practices inherit the task of demarcating the
> *relational specificity* that can hold in dialectical tension the distant poles
> of spatial experience…This means addressing the uneven conditions of
> adjacencies *between* one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one
> fragment *next* to another, rather than invoking equivalencies via one thing
> *after* another.[102]

In a way, *Lustmord* offers a site upon which this debate can continue. The project is not

simply "about" rape or violence against women, but also about the capacity for empathy

and knowledge in an increasingly globalized world. As advances in information

technology bring people and countries in closer contact, conceptions of physical borders

and distances have begun to deteriorate. *Lustmord* is a reminder that jarring

juxtapositions of seemingly conflicting ways to view the same experience (in this case, a

rape) are the only way to fully grasp its lasting effects. Otherwise these events begin to

coalesce into a generic, undifferentiated chain of happenings that are quickly forgotten.

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[101] Meskimmon, p. 12.
[102] Kwon, p. 166.

Conclusion

Questions of permanence and transience reverberate within Jenny Holzer's *oeuvre*, and her increasingly more ambitious experimentations with form and site have only augmented the scope of this dialogue. From posters to LED displays to stone benches, Holzer has explored the various implications of a variety of methods used to disseminate information. How might a person treat information he or she receives moving across a screen differently than information found on a park bench or written on the side of a car? Does this information change over time, or is it simply forgotten after it is no longer in public view? Holzer's work demonstrates that the apparatus that displays or conveys information is just as important as the information itself. Her project *Please Change Beliefs*, which has been accessible online since 1999[103], crystallizes many of the ideas central to both *Truisms* and *Lustmord*.

Please Change Beliefs was one of the first projects created specifically for the internet by a major American artist, and its implications are far-reaching. Now administered by the Walker Art Center, the hypertext project contains an index of Holzer's truisms to which viewers can respond by stating whether or not they agree with them or by altering or replacing them. This generates a separate list of revised truisms that better reflect the attitudes of those who use the web site. There have been hundreds of submissions to date; they range from silly and mocking to serious and thoughtful. The project continues the *Truisms*' conception of a democratic public space, in which all people are allowed to contribute their ideas to discourse. Although *Please Change*

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[103] http://www.adaweb.com/project/holzer/cgi/pcb.cgi

Beliefs is not a tangible object, it has remained one of Holzer's most permanently

rendered projects to date. For however long the Walker chooses to support this site,

anyone in the world with a reliable internet connection can access and interact with the

site. Their contributions are archived and never painted over, destroyed, or deleted.

Perhaps the project looks dated and elementary by today's standards, but its

simple interface still provokes a complex question: how can people process the vast

amount of information available on the web? The photographs and bones from *Lustmord*

present two different ways of understanding the same scenario, but one is not more

correct or complete than the other. There are seemingly an endless number of ways to

approach the task of recounting or dealing with the horrors of rape and sexual violence,

yet there is no possibility for an "objective" view. In fact, one of the salient features of

Holzer's art is not only the absence of a singular, universal truth, but also the reminder

that the existence such an entity would be dangerous. Over time, truths and maxims

inevitably change and fall out favor with certain people or groups. The pluralization of

perspectives in *Truisms*, the varied sites and contexts of *Lustmord*, and the endlessly

malleable nature of *Please Change Beliefs* all illustrate Holzer's dedication to illustrating

the intricate relationship between human beings and the quest for knowledge and

information.

While many would take this investigation into the complex interplay between

people, writing machines, and information as an example of postmodernism, in the end

that term is too limited in scope to fully describe Holzer's practice. After all, the task of

what to do with knowledge and how to properly disseminate it has plagued civilizations

for centuries. To suggest that Holzer has simply been repeating the same structuralist

linguistics lesson over and over again is to obscure the art historical and socio-political contexts within which her art operates. In fact, that one theoretical or stylistic term cannot be deployed in order to briefly sum up the scope of Holzer's work speaks to its lasting power.

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APPENDIX B:
IMAGES
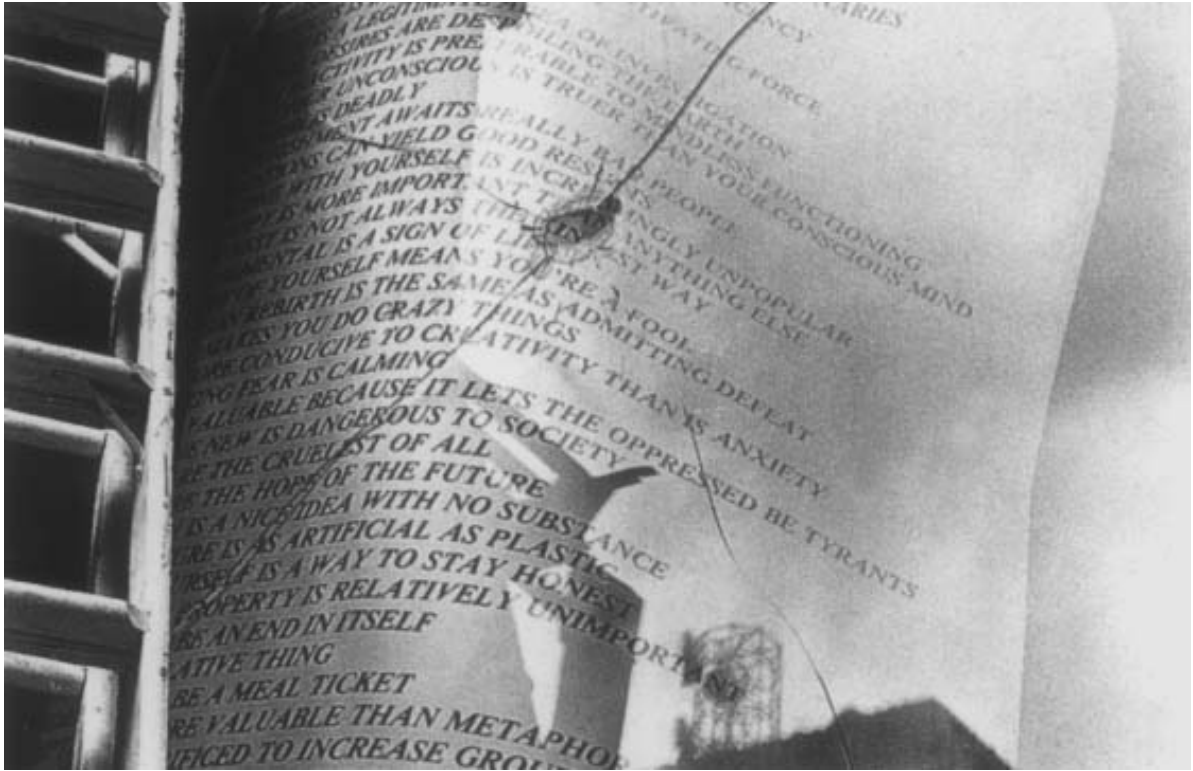
Figure 1
Jenny Holzer, excerpts from *Truisms* (1977-79)
Photostats, audio tape, posters
Installation, Franklin Furnace, New York, 1978
< http://www.balkon.hu/balkon_2001_03/holzer_1.JPG>

Figure 2
Richard Serra, *TWU*, New York (1979/80)
Cor-Ten steel
© Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
<http://kunst.uni-stuttgart.de/seminar/serra_3d/bildm.jpg>

Figure 3
Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, New York (1981)
Hot-rolled steel
© Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
<http://www.arts.arizona.edu/are476/images/Serra-Tilted_ArcBIG.jpeg>

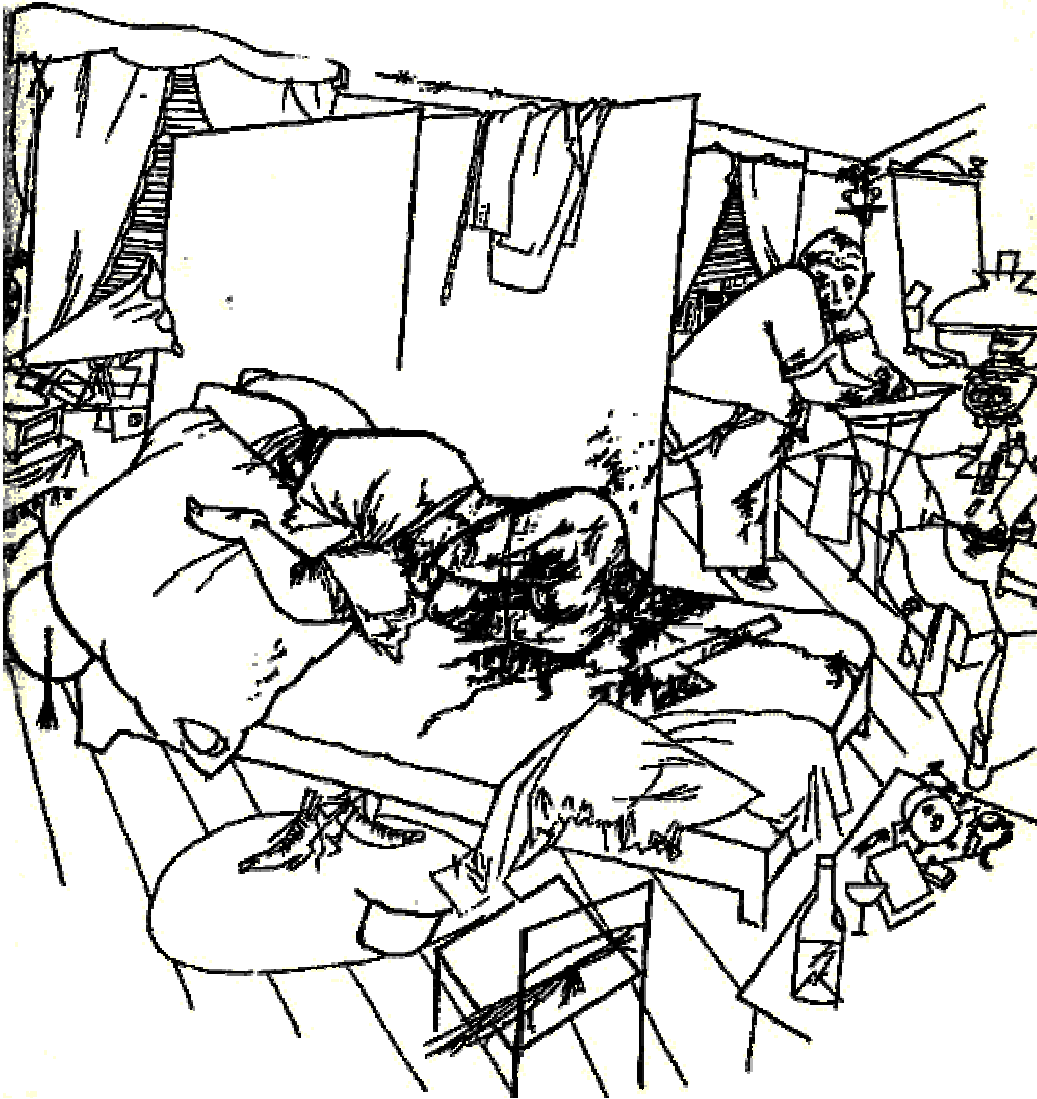**Figure 5**
Jenny Holzer, *Lustmord* (1993-94)
Ink mixed with blood
Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin Edition No. 46, 19 November 1993
< http://kunstmuseum.backslash.ch/4all/images/tumb/758870560.jpg>

Figure 6
George Grosz, *Lustmord in der Ackerstrasse* (1916-17)
Offset, From the book *Ecce Homo*
< http://www.cc.ncu.edu.tw/~sctseng/ArtandSociety/art/grosz/14.htm>

Figure 8
Otto Dix, *Lustmord* (1922)
Oil on Canvas
© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn