

**EXCERPTED FROM:**

**PROTECT PROTECT: The Socially Useful Art of Jenny Holzer**

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“Jenny Holzer asks us to respond to a world where good and evil coexist as love and hate do in the soul.”

—Henri Cole<sup>1</sup>

In her essay “Against Interpretation,” first published in 1961, writer Susan Sontag persuasively argued in favor of an art criticism that “dissolves considerations of content into those of form.”<sup>2</sup> These ideas, which had considerable impact on art history and theory, continue to have currency in that today such considerations of form and content are rarely separated in discussions about art. Through her staunch commitment to the central role of language in art and her unique, inimitable approach to presenting it in various visual manifestations and contexts, Jenny Holzer intertwines form and content to produce a potent tension between the realms of feeling and knowledge. Yet the unceasing presence of social and political ideas throughout 30 years of her work reveals the depth of her engagement with subject matter that is timely and topical in its direct, unflinching consideration of world events and their human impact. This essay will therefore focus on the sociopolitical dimension of Holzer’s work—a persistent component of her practice that is foregrounded in her most recent works, which form the basis of this exhibition.

Holzer has engaged with socially and politically charged ideas throughout her career from the vantage point of the socially useful.<sup>3</sup> She has consistently emphasized the artwork as a carrier of ideas that stimulate a passive viewer to become an active questioner by inviting reflection on intentions, meaning, and authorship. Poet Henri Cole aptly pinpoints how Holzer’s language-based work operates to offer “the experience of reading, where self-forgetfulness brings about recognition of the self.”<sup>4</sup> This characteristic spans her entire body of work—from text pieces begun in the late 1970s to LED works programmed with text that have been ongoing since the early 1980s, to the more recent light projection pieces she has realized on building exteriors since the mid-1990s and in interiors since 2006, and her newest silk-screen paintings that present text and images culled from declassified U.S. government documents.

Labeling Holzer as a political artist oversimplifies her practice of presenting our culture’s range of voices and values; nonetheless, her work is deeply political in the way it raises questions and catalyzes thinking about the role of individuals in society and the relationship between the public and private realms. Power and vulnerability, violence and tenderness, moral struggle and depravity—all manners of contradictory motivations—are chronicled in her work as interwoven

impulses. The method in which she reveals our society's and our collective psyche's deeply embedded actions, emotions, and intellectual constructs offers a mirror of ourselves that spans the complexities of human experience.

"From a political standpoint, I was drawn to writing because it was possible to be very explicit about things," Holzer has commented.<sup>5</sup> An extensive literature exists on Holzer's early work and the formation of her text-based series of the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Truisms* (1977–79), *Living* (1980–82), and *Survival* (1983–85), each fraught with contradictory meanings, and *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), decidedly more incendiary and polemical in tone. Analyzing the statements comprising the series *Truisms*, critic Hal Foster suggests that their revelation of multiple beliefs and biases uncovers the idea of truth as arbitrary as the individual voices become "lost in a plurality of public voices."<sup>6</sup> Speaking further to the social utility of these ostensibly neutral and non-partisan texts, Foster deems them "conflicted and cogent by turns . . . verbal anarchy in the street."<sup>7</sup> Resonating with that of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Dadaists—the first model for Holzer's work between art and politics—this sensibility has continued to animate her subsequent activity. The absurdity, chaos, and aimlessness of the Dada movement, along with its frequent confrontations with and mediations on the political reality of the time, were important starting points for Holzer; its example continues to be significant in her current responsiveness to the disastrous consequences of war as a key subject in her work.