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The Visual Culture of SARS-CoV-2

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Jenny Holzer's 2020: New York, activism, and collective mourning. Again

Camilla Balbi

Abstract

L'articolo si propone di analizzare la produzione più recente di Jenny Holzer, in particolare i progetti *Expose* (2020) e *Protect* (2020), da una prospettiva insieme storica e comparativa.

In primo luogo, si tenteranno di rintracciare gli echi – nelle opere prodotte durante la pandemia e nel periodo più buio dell'amministrazione Trump – della produzione giovanile dell'artista, impegnatissima, tra gli anni Ottanta e i primi anni Novanta, nel dare voce alla disperazione di quella New York messa in ginocchio tanto dall'esplosione del virus dell'AIDS quanto dal silenzio e dall'indifferenza della politica reaganiana.

In secondo luogo, la riflessione si concentrerà sull'inedita interazione di pratiche artistiche consolidate per l'artista americana – i trucks e i signboard, impiegati sin dagli anni Ottanta – con i social media, in particolare instagram, rivelando come il ricorso ai social nel corso della pandemia abbia costituito per Holzer un'occasione importante di superamento delle posizioni postmoderne giovanili e una riscoperta della vena più strettamente politica della propria pratica artistica.

The main objective of this paper is the study of Jenny Holzer's latest works, specifically the *Expose* (2020) and *Protect* (2020) projects, from a comparative and historical perspective.

The study opens by tracing the echoes – present in the works produced during the pandemic and the darkest time of the Trump administration – of a younger Jenny Holzer, who was struggling to emerge in the late 80s and early 90s as she wanted to give voice to the desperation of New York, a city that had been brought to its knees both by the explosion of the AIDS virus, and the silence and indifference of Reagan's policy on the issue.

Secondly, I will offer some observations about the hitherto unseen interaction of Holzer's well-established artistic hallmarks – the trucks and the signboard, which she had been using since the 80s – with the use of social media, particularly *Instagram*, showing how venturing onto social media during the pandemic was a great occasion for Holzer to overcome the postmodern positions of her youth and to rediscover the more strictly political vein of her artistic practice.

Keywords

Jenny Holzer, Postmodernism, Activism, Covid-19, Public Art

Jenny Holzer, Postmodernismo, Attivismo, Covid-19, Arte pubblica

I want to go to the future please

THE NEW DISEASE CAME. I LEARN THAT TIME DOES NOT HEAL. EVERYTHING GETS WORSE WITH DAYS. I HAVE SPOTS LIKE A DOG. I COUGH AND CANNOT TURN MY HEAD. I WILL THINK MORE BEFORE I CANNOT. I LOVE MY MIND WHEN IT IS FUCKING THE CRACKS OF EVENTS. I WANT TO TELL YOU WHAT I KNOW IN CASE IT IS OF USE. I WANT TO GO TO THE FUTURE PLEASE.¹

These are some of the sentences that were projected in 1989 onto the walls and carved in thirteen sarcophaguses in the premises of the DIA Chelsea Art Foundation, inaugurated just a year-and-a-half earlier, in the main neighborhood of New York's queer community².

The author is the 40-year-old Jenny Holzer, and the artwork is *Laments* (1989)³, one of the artist's bleakest and most intimate works⁴. The dark evil that inhabits Holzer's sepulchral atmosphere is never mentioned, but the spectators are indeed painfully aware of it: these are the years of the New York gay community's holocaust, a slow and relentless annihilation unfolding in total indifference of the political and healthcare institutions.

The critics of the time had already noted a rupture between *Laments* and what the artist had been seeking to do up to then⁵. Until that time, Holzer had worked in the public space, but now, with a change of heart, she had decided to remove her work from the public eye, to create another, heterotopic, space⁶, dedicated to meditation and mourning. *Laments*,

¹ The recording of the artistic installation *Laments* (DIA Art Foundation, 1990) is available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEiJ7GGJtP0&t=101s>; the text can be found at min. 1.38.

² For the geography of New York's LGBT communities and Chelsea's gay life in the 70s and 80s, see Christina B. Hanhard, *Safe Space, Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2013.

³ Holzer had already presented the first few elements in the series (two sarcophagi and two LED panels) in 1987 to celebrate the 8th edition of *Documenta*. See D. Waldman, *Jenny Holzer*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1989, p. 12.

⁴ It was here that Holzer used the pronoun *I* for the first time, albeit to speak of a fringed subjectivity that is impossible to trace back to a determinate referent.

⁵ D. Waldman, *Jenny Holzer*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1989, p. 12.

⁶ It is important to keep in mind, however, as Breslin points out, that the choice to adopt the DIA as the location for the *Laments* exhibition was in no way neutral. *To work at Dia was to direct her production specifically towards two distinct audiences whose populations overlapped significantly—gay men and those men and women who made up the professional visual art community. As mentioned earlier, Chelsea had become the epicenter of gay life in New York by the early 1980s. By the time Dia moved to its location on West 22nd Street in 1987, organizations addressing the AIDS crisis—obviously in addition to businesses already there such as bars, restaurants, and book stores owned by and geared towards gay men—already had made the neighborhood home (...) The content of Laments—the mourning, militancy, and melancholy of living in a time scarred by the AIDS crisis—would have intersected with the every-*

with its dark setting, barely lit by glimpses of neon reflected by the polished surface of the tombstones, became a secular temple, giving voice to a grief that had no space or visibility in civil society. The goal of Holzer's program, to give voice to the AIDS tragedy, was explicitly memorial.

In those same years, New York's queer community, on the other hand, took a different approach, starting an ambitious project of visual activism to vigorously denounce Reagan's policy and give visibility to an emergency that the media were silently glossing over⁷.

Thus, intellectuals and activists like Larry Kramer (who passed away of Covid-19 this year in his New York home) were taking stock of the virus's catastrophic pace on posters that if seen today would cause quite a stir:

There are now 1,112 cases of serious Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. When we first became worried, there were only 41. In only twenty-eight days, from January 13th to February 9th [1983], there were 164 new cases – and 73 more dead. The total death tally is now 418. Twenty percent of all cases were registered this January alone. There have been 195 dead in New York City from among 526 victims. Of all serious AIDS cases, 47.3 percent are in the New York metropolitan area. (...) And, for the first time in this epidemic, leading doctors and researchers are finally admitting they don't know what's going on. I find this terrifying too – as terrifying as the alarming rise in numbers. For the first time, doctors are saying out loud and up front, "I don't know"⁸.

The art world, at the same time, was becoming populated by groups of neo-situationist artists who, affiliated with ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), claimed the need for a different kind of art that would be militant, political, and informative. Just one year before the *Laments* series, in 1988, working on their first commission from a museum institution, the Gran Fury group, "the *de facto* ministry of ACT-UP propaganda, made of guerrilla graphic-designers"⁹, spread their own aesthetic, ethical, and political manifesto on the streets of New York: *with 42,000 deaths, art is not enough*.

day life and politics of the population of gay men who were Dia's immediate community and neighbors. D. Breslin, *I WANT TO GO TO THE FUTURE PLEASE: Jenny Holzer and the End of a Century*, PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2013, p. 149.

⁷ For a reconstruction of the narrative of the AIDS emergency in North American media see J. Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, London, 1989.

⁸ L. Kramer, *1,112 and Counting*, in "New York Native", Issue 59, March 14-27, 1983. Available online at http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php (consulted on October 16th 2020).

⁹ D. Crimp, A. Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1990, p. 20.

These were difficult years rich in liminal experiences, hybrids, and short-circuits. On the one hand, there were artists such as Jenny Holzer, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Kruger and Marta Rosler, whose artistic discourse, as Benjamin Buchloh¹⁰ and Hal Foster¹¹ pointed out, had not only surpassed minimalism (of which the sarcophagi in *Laments* are both tribute and subversion¹²), but also institutional critique. As Foster says: “just as the conceptual artists extended the minimalist analysis of the art object, so too these later artists have opened up the conceptual critique of the art institution in order to intervene in ideological representations and languages of everyday life. It is important to trace this genealogy”.¹³

On the other hand, while art was starting to break away from museums, politically occupying the public space and questioning itself on the possibilities of how the aesthetic sign could expand and rearrange the urban landscape¹⁴, ACT-UP and anti-Reagan activism¹⁵ were seeking to make their own the elaborate linguistic solutions from post-conceptual artists

¹⁰ B.H.D. Buchloh, *Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art*, in “Art Forum”, September 1982, pp. 43-56.

¹¹ H. Foster, *Subversive Signs*, in Id., *RECORDINGS, Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1985, pp. 99-115.

¹² As Breslin notes, “Holzer’s choice to embed this content in forms like the L.E.D. sign and stone sarcophagi redolent with minimalist morphological associations would both address and interrupt the historical lineage and narrative of DIA itself and the movement most associated with it. Holzer’s *Laments* unsubtly rebukes both modernist and minimalism art presumptions, particularly in regard to the politics of presence or the present (...) The use of minimalist forms by Holzer and Gonzalez-Torres rupture the neutrality of temporal orders and recast time as a material influenced by presumption and prejudice: delays in drug approvals, rushed housing evictions, precipitous declines in T-cell counts, dosages taken at exact times for maximum effectiveness, longterm drug trials, waiting for the next election, only being able to visit a partner during ‘official’ visiting hours because you’re not legally family, waiting for a diagnosis, waiting to die. These projects demonstrate that bodies are moved and touched by decisions, directions, and inactions that cut time into just another administrated order.”

D. Breslin, *Jenny Holzer*, Hatje Cantz Pub, Ostfildern, 2008, pp. 148-152.

¹³ “Or just as the conceptual artists extended the minimalist analysis of the art object, so too these later artists have opened up the conceptual critique of the art institution in order to intervene in ideological representations and languages of everyday life. It is important to trace this genealogy.” Hal Foster, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁴ A. Jaworski, C. Thurlow, *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image Space*, Continuum, London, 2010, p. 31.

¹⁵ The relationship between the healthcare emergency and the political fight by the queer in those years was very close; suffice it to recall that the first time the President would publicly talk about AIDS was 1987, 6 years after the epidemic causing 20,000 deaths had started. For a better understanding of Reagan’s politics during those years, see M. Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States. ReVisioning American History*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2012, p. 375 ss.

like Holzer, bending them to their aims of political exposure, overthrowing neoliberal hegemonistic theory in a verbal anarchy in the street.

For a long time, even critics involved in the movement (Douglas Crimp is the first name that comes to mind) saw the post-conceptual vocabulary used by the activists – posters, t-shirts, billboards, LEDs – as a mere tool, only useful to make the practices of militant activism more efficient – “what matters in the art of the activists is propaganda, to steal practices from other artists is part of the plan, ‘if it works, we use it’”¹⁶. Conversely, seen from the due historical distance, these practices turn out to be much more problematic and fruitful than the simple statement “migration of forms is in one direction, from art to activism, and not the reverse” would seem to imply¹⁷. As closer inspection has revealed, “a productive tension emerges when different tactical and formal approaches are viewed within a larger circuit of exchange, rather than perceived through a binary logic opposing aesthetic autonomy and political commitment, or “art” and “propaganda”¹⁸.

The next section therefore questions this one-directionalism in the speech flow (the trivialization of language in the migration from art to activism), showing how, especially from a long-term perspective, the complex dialectic between aesthetic autonomy and political commitment has proven to be incredibly vital, acquiring, in particular, an unprecedented form in Holzer’s 2020 artworks.

A historical moment, I would argue, not accidental. The activistic response to the AIDS crisis represented “an extraordinary upsurge and exemplary moment of political art”¹⁹, in which languages stolen from the “official” art became means of processing and commenting the ongoing emergency. And it is this legacy – both formal and ideological – that artists like Holzer resort to in 2020, reversing the flow of influences. If, in the years of the AIDS pandemic, activism had borrowed the language of Holzer and her colleagues to transform it into a political protest, it is to these “subversive” declinations of her formal solutions that the Holzer of 2020 looks to narrate and denounce the crisis of Covid-19. Those realized

¹⁶ D. Crimp, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁷ A. Weiner, *Disposable Media, Expendable Populations – ACT UP New York: Activism, Art and the AIDS Crisis, 1987 – 1993*, in “Journal of Visual Culture”, vol. 11, n. 103, 2012, pp. 103-109.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 105.

¹⁹ Tyrus Miller, *AIDS, COVID-19 and Art: Reflections on Pandemics*, in “School of Humanities at UC Irvine”, 8th July 2020. Available online at <https://ucihumanities.medium.com/aids-covid-19-and-art-reflections-on-pandemics-b8174d18c36e> (last consulted on 1th May 2021).

during the current pandemic are in fact not memorial works, as *Laments* was, but actual *interventions*²⁰, which help us to identify and understand in a historical perspective a strand of renewed activism in the art born during the Covid-19.

The memory of 80s and 90s *art engagé*, and the extent of the ideological revolution provoked by the current sanitary and political crisis, emerge forcefully in works such as *Protect* (2020) and *Expose* (2020). Here, the artist – driven by an emergency similar to the one already experienced at the end of this past century – cites herself. On the one hand, she goes back to the artworks and the tools of her younger self and questions their structural limits, on the other she radically reconsiders – although the rupture happens very discreetly – two of the main coordinates of her research: politics and the public space.

1984

February 2020. While the rest of the world was being terrorized by the rapid progress of the Covid-19 epidemic, convinced that humanity was facing a completely unexpected, unprecedented and therefore destabilizing, experience, a small part of the American community felt a terrible sense of *déjà-vu*. Writer Alexander Chee tells us about it in the pages of the *New York Times*:

The first weekend of the coronavirus shutdown in March, my husband, Dustin, and I made calls to my family and friends to discuss our plan. Most of them were already adjusting to the idea of a pandemic unlike anything we have ever seen before, but it was already feeling like one *I had* seen before. “I’m used to not doing everything I want to save myself from a virus, and they are not,” Dustin said. This virus is not that virus. But this country is still that country²¹.

Among those touched by this painful feeling of helpless *déjà-vu* we find Holzer, who – after losing, at the time, many of her loved ones to AIDS,

²⁰ I use the term in the sense discussed by Bishop, C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and Politics Spectatorship*, Verso, London, 2012.

²¹ A. Chee, *In this Pandemic, Personal Echoes of the AIDS Crisis*, in “New York Times”, 18th June 2020. Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/us/coronavirus-aids-epidemic-lessons.html> (last consulted on 19th October 2020).

and fearing she had contracted the virus – has never ceased to preserve and pass on the memory of the epidemic²², just like an open wound inflicted at the heart of American society (in 2016 she created the *New York City AIDS Memorial*, in the East Village)²³.

I asked Holzer – as we read in a Harper's Bazaar interview that was done in September – what she makes of the eerie callbacks to that time some experienced this year, seeing National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases director Dr. Anthony Fauci, a key figure during the AIDS epidemic, back in the news as a deadly disease spreads at breakneck speed. "Reagan made the AIDS epidemic worse. More people suffered and died than necessary," Holzer said. "Sound familiar?"²⁴

It is no coincidence that while the connections, amply discussed by many American intellectuals²⁵, between Trump's years and those of the Reagan administration became increasingly evident (from the denial of the disease to blaming minorities, from indifference to the recommendations of the scientific community to the initial inadequacy of research funds), Holzer preferred to talk about Covid-19, looking not so much at her (explicitly memorial) AIDS-related output, but rather at her most militant and directly critical artwork dating back to the years of the Reagan administration: *Sign on a Truck* (1984).

Between the 3rd and 5th of November 1984, in the days right before the 6th November elections, where Reagan, by defeating Republican candidate Walter Mondale, won and earned his second term, Holzer sent an 18-wheel truck around the crowded areas of Manhattan (from Grand Army Plaza to Central Park, and from Broeling Green Plaza to Wall Street). Upon it she had mounted a *Diamond Vision Mobile DV*

²² Cf. D. Kim, *Jenny Holzer: Louder than Words*, in "Surface", 27th October 2016, available online at <https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/artist-jenny-holzer-in-studio-aids-in-america-painter/> (last consulted on 19th October 2020).

²³ <https://nycaidsmemorial.org/design/>. In addition, last July Holzer started the awareness-raising campaign URGE URGE URGE for the memorial.

²⁴ N.C. Morgan, *It's Jenny Holzer's World*, in Harper Bazaar", 16th September 2020. Available online at <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a33614231/jenny-holzer-interview-2020/> (consulted last on 20th October 2020).

²⁵ In addition to the numerous articles in the national press by intellectuals like Masa Gessen or epidemiological activists such as Gregg Gonsalves, amongst the scientific publications on the topic we can cite, for example, Lesley Russel, *Coronavirus and HIV in the United States: Lesson Learned, Lessons Ignored*, available at <https://www.uscc.edu.au/analysis/coronavirus-and-hiv-in-the-united-states-lessons-learned-lessons-ignored> (last consulted on 19th October 2020).

2000; at the time it was the biggest outdoor screen on the market. The idea was to show pre-recorded non-stop videos of 22 artists (the project involved, among many others, Keith Haring, Barbara Krueger and Claes Oldenburg), interspersed with her iconic aphorisms, the *Truisms*, and live camera interviews with ordinary people, invited to comment on the upcoming presidential elections²⁶. It is an incredibly complex work of art in many respects.

The ideological core of the project, in the same vein as the immediately preceding *Truisms* (1977-1979) and *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-1982), is strictly postmodern. Holzer's *Essays*, for instance, were graphically homogeneous posters that invaded the streets of New York, bearing texts that anonymously quoted ideologically controversial personalities and were even self-contradictory. The authors cited, indeed, ranged from Hitler to Lenin, from Emma Goldman to Mao Tse-tung. Holzer, at the time, focused particularly on the dyscrasia, clearly rooted in post-conceptualist and post-structuralist practices, between *production of meaning* and *production of truth*. Regarding the *Essays*, Gordon Hughes writes:

Holzer extends Conceptualism's concern with the production of meaning as an effect of difference to the production of truth, identity, and ideology as effects of a difference. In this move from sign value to truth value [...] Holzer's work, in other words, opens onto a different order of collapsed values. No longer is the void of nothingness held at bay by the structural ground of semiotic difference. No longer are the empty values of signification limited to the mechanics of the meaning production²⁷.

In these works, the use of language is stripped of any value, in both the absolute and differential sense, trying, as Holzer herself says, to "contain all points of view – not literally all – but they seem to, with no value judgement"²⁸.

Many have commented on the reasons for this, at least apparent, ideological disavowal. For Hughes it is an almost Nietzschean profession of ni-

²⁶ Part of the work can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb5N9vFn7qE>. I would like to personally thank the Jenny Holzer Studio, particularly Erik Sumption, who made the full versions of all Holzer's cited artwork available to me.

²⁷ G. Hughes, *Power's Script: or, Jenny Holzer's Art after "Art after Philosophy"*, in "Oxford Art Journal", vol. 29, n. 3, 2006, p. 436.

²⁸ B. Ferguson, *Wordsmith: an interview with Jenny Holzer*, in "Art in America", December 1986, p. 112.

hilism, showing how the relationship between language and truth is, after all, nothing more than a relationship of power²⁹. Foster, on the other hand, sees these works as an act of antifascist dialectic, of subversion against a language that is conceived as a tool of power. According to Foster, Holzer is working on the construction of a sort of “third way”, which will “open to a truth based on contradiction (this truth, the dialectic one, denies its own closing/shutdown as truth, and this is what makes it true)”³⁰. Foster sees a work such as *Sign on a Truck* – where Reagan’s supporters have the same visibility as his opponents – as an emblematic feature of this research:

Through the provocation of art and the reaction of passers-by on the street, different political positions were articulated publicly through contradiction. By this direct presentation of political response outside the irresponsibility of the popular media, the work assured both its radicality and its visibility, for it operated within everyday representations and spaces but not at the positions which power establishes through them³¹

A completely different interpretation – probably because it came right after the work was created and the day after the defeat of the democratic candidate – is that offered in Benjamin Buchloh’s now historic analysis of the work in an essay on video art³².

In the 1985 text, Buchloh disputes Holzer’s belief that the “non-mediated” representation of the opinions expressed in *Sign on a Truck* could result in ideological neutrality. On the contrary, the critic says, an operation of this kind simply highlights and stages the strategies that society exploits to interiorize the voices of the official ideological system. Where stereotypes and propaganda are displayed – Buchloh continues – the artist ends up condescending. So, basically:

This anarchistic trust in the collective mind as being innately democratic, concerned with its environment and social equality and justice, has long become a myth that itself functions to protect us from insight into the actual operations to which the collective mind is subjected. This liberal ambivalence was in fact an accurate reflection of the funding conditions that had enabled Holzer to deploy this spectacular video device in the first place: in order to

²⁹ G. Hughes, *Power’s Script: or, Jenny Holzer’s Art after “Art after Philosophy”*, in “Oxford Art Journal”, vol. 29, n. 3, 2006, p. 436.

³⁰ H. Foster, op. cit. p. 109.

³¹ Ibid, p. 111.

³² B.H.D. Buchloh, *From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works*, in “Art Journal”, vol. 45, n. 3, 1985.

receive the public funding necessary for the extremely high rental fee of the truck (funding was provided by the New York State Council on the Arts) as well as the city government's Public Projects in the Arts) Holzer had to commit herself to a project that did not engage directly in the support of one particular political opinion or party³³.

To the future

Holzer may have been considering the inherent ambiguities of her 80s output when, in May 2020 – just a few months before the presidential elections and in one of the peaks of the Covid-19 epidemic in the USA – she cited herself, and *Sign on a Truck*, in *Expose*.

An army of trucks, with LED screens on the sides, invaded the streets of New York City and Washington Dc. On the screens appeared single words from the darkness – mainly verbs – and only two sentences, coming forcefully one after the other:

EXPOSE, IGNORE, DISMISS, FUMBLE, WANDER, DELAY, DENY, SCORN, BULLY, LIE, SPIT, SPIN, ABANDON, DISDAIN, PARALYZE, RISK, REVERSE, EXPOSE, NEGLECT, CONFOUND, BLAME, BRAG, RAGE, RENT, BAIT, LASH, MUSCLE, BACKTRACK, BUNGLE, PREVARICATE, PROFIT, HOARD, MENACE, IMPERIL, OBFUSCATE, BETRAY, FORSAKE, SPREE, THE PEOPLE PERISH, COVID 19 PRESIDENT³⁴

We are, once more, close to the presidential elections, the Republican Party's slogan is once more *Make America Great Again*, and there is once more a virus beyond our control that particularly affects minorities. And therefore, once more, Holzer sends her *trucks* around New York City. Even so, the two works could not be more different. Surprisingly unnoticed by critics, in *Expose* there is indeed a radical change in Holzer's artistic approach: for the first time after 19 years, she had gone back to writing. There are no other characters, neither physical (like the other artists and the bystanders in *Sign on a truck*) nor ghostlike (like the authors whose voices she had borrowed over past decades³⁵). This time, the artist decides to use *her own words*. Ideologically, this is far from being neutral.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

³⁴ Transcription by the writer.

³⁵ On Holzer's "silence", see David Breslin, *op. cit.*, p. 199 ss.

Holzer's recent turn to explicit political engagement and ideological clarity has been well pointed out by Elizabeth Chodos, Director of The Miller Institute for Contemporary Art at Carnegie Mellon University, who affirms:

This project is so important to mobilize voting because Holzer distills the chaotic experience of the contemporary political climate by offering phrases that are hauntingly true and resonate. These truths are motivating because they engender a kind of confidence in a dizzying moment in time when faith in institutions of all kinds is completely destabilized. Holzer's work brings clarity through the uncertainty [...] This is not a time to be apathetic. As Jenny points out in one of the YOU VOTE animations, "This isn't right or left, this is life or death"³⁶.

And it is precisely this recourse, on Holzer's part, to what is *true and resonate* that constitutes the most relevant consequence of the 2020 emergency on her work. In 2014, indeed, Holzer's political and linguistic convictions were still in line with what had been driving her production since the 70s, as we read in a brilliant conversation with Buchloh,

BB: I find that your work consciously generates a treacherous liberalist slippage, an ambiguity that seems at odds with its agitational potential [...] Your work always gives its readers/spectators a considerable degree of responsibility to decide whether they would want to recognize their respective ideological suturing within the apparatus at large, or whether they would claim conscious choices as spaces of exemption and self-construction.

JH: the readers already have this freedom and responsibility, so various texts of mine reflects as much as grant that [...] I organized a project, *Sign on a Truck* – perhaps not art – but it did provide political criticism from various viewpoints as well as chance to hope a little, and to think about how to vote and why in the 1984 presidential election.

BB: This generosity seems to originate in a political foundation of critical enlightenment thought, one that is driven by the liberal aspiration that readers/spectators would inevitably be free enough to determine their own ethical and political practices and behavioral patterns.

JH: Voting relies on this. Anyway, this seems an ideal, but I don't believe it's always possible to realize perfectly. Even so, it's worth imagining and representing and setting up situations in which something like that ideal can work.³⁷

³⁶ Chodos's press release is quoted in J. Kamp, *Jenny Holzer launched a new public artwork campaign encouraging voter participation in swing states*, in "Artsy", 15th October 2020. Available online at <https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-jenny-holzer-launched-new-public-artwork-campaign-encouraging-voter-participation> (consulted last on 1st May 2021).

³⁷ B.H.D. Buchloh, *An Interview with Jenny Holzer*, in D. Breslin, *Jenny Holzer*, op. cit. p. 121.

It is therefore in the context of the collapse of this type of criticism based on illuminist and liberal principles over the last few years, a process further accelerated by the pandemic, that Holzer's return to the word should be framed.

Two years after Buchloh's interview, the Oxford Dictionary declares *Post-truth* "word of the year"³⁸. Three years later, Donald J. Trump wins the elections for the first time, making – according to the Washington Post – in just his first year of office about 2,140 false or misleading statements, averaging 5.9 misleading statements per day³⁹. As Vincenzo Trione points out, over the last few years,

the truth has gained a new status where it indicates unconventional spaces, it cannot be controlled and it does not require any type of verification, it is moved by allegations, it can be recreated by any of us, it is condemned to an "overproduction", to a surge of supply which has determined a "collapse of value"⁴⁰.

It is in this context that Holzer decides to re-read her 80s oeuvre in a different light, more reminiscent of the spirit of ACT-UP activism than Post-conceptualism: *art is not enough*.

Her artistic practice seems indeed to be directly responding to another endemic virus that, according to W.J.T. Mitchell⁴¹, the pandemic has helped to spread: the one of infodemic, an overabundance of information, often incorrect, often politically manipulating, often amplifying hate speech, social rage and scientific distrust that in the last year we have sadly witnessed.

Therefore, during what has been defined as "the first post-truth pandemic"⁴², while the ghosts of the past come back in eerie night, and post-modern verbal anarchy slowly slides into an extremely dan-

³⁸ <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.

³⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6f5e63fbef2c

⁴⁰ In a context in which, as Vincenzo Trione puts it, *la verità ha acquisito un nuovo statuto. Indica spazi alternativi. Non si fa controllare. E non esige neanche verifiche. Ma procede per illazioni. Può essere rifatta da ciascuno di noi. È condannata a una "sovraproduzione" a un'impennata di offerta che ha determinato un "crollo di valore"* V. Trione, *L'opera interminabile. Arte e XXI Secolo*, Einaudi, Torino, 2019 p. 282-283.

⁴¹ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Present Tense 2020: An Iconology of Time*, lecture part of the KVAB "Thinkers' Programme" on Image Science. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Juh7R20eAion (consulted last on 1st May 2021).

⁴² On this topic, see e.g. T. Shelton, *A post-truth pandemic?*, in "Big Data&Society", vol. 7, n. 2, 2020.

gerous dystopian dimension dominated by fake news, fake science and fake history, Holzer finds her voice for the first time. She abandons role-playing, she abandons the lyrical silence of poetry, she decides to bring back to life the Barthesian corpse of the author and become the subject once again.

Protect

A significant confirmation of this interpretation of Holzer's art can also be found in another project, on which the artist worked over the course of 2020, and which was part of the public art project *Messages for the City*⁴³.

Although scientific studies on the subject are still lacking⁴⁴, it is nevertheless clear that public art has been one of the major protagonists of pandemic art, arguably owing to features such as the community-building effects and the free fruition that are proper to it⁴⁵. For a place like New York City, with a long pre-existing tradition of public art⁴⁶, the involvement of artists during the pandemic was more ordinary than elsewhere, and Holzer's presence in Times Square was not a new operation itself. Nevertheless, everything was different. The Square was not anymore the hectic, glowing crossroads in which the artist used to operate, but rather a metropolitan mediascape laid waste by the pandemic. Even her intervention, as we will discuss, presents fundamental linguistic innovations – also a direct result of the pandemic – compared to the works created in New York City's public space in the 1970s and 1980s.

For her massive, illuminated billboards, Holzer chose therefore two fundamental and iconoclastic slogans for: WASH YOUR THUMBS TOO and PROTECT.

⁴³ The project was promoted by *Times Square Arts, Poster House, Print Magazine and For Freedoms Radiating out from the screens of Times Square to the digital billboards above Lincoln Tunnel and nearly 1,800 LinkNYC kiosks across all five boroughs, the initiative turns our city's digital displays into platforms of public service and appreciation through the lens of established and emerging graphic designers and visual artists from around the world.* The press release of the project is available at the following link: <http://arts.timesquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/at-the-crossroads/messages-for-the-city/index.aspx>.

⁴⁴ On the topic, tangent, of pandemic street art see e.g. E. Radisch, *Covid19 & the Public Sphere*, in "Academic Discipline", vol. 6, n. 1, 2020.

⁴⁵ See M. Miles, *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures*, Routledge, London, New York, 1997, pp. 1-5.

⁴⁶ See A. Pasternak, *Creative Time: The Book: 33 Years of Public Art in New York*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 2007.

PROTECT is the one I will focus on. It is particularly interesting because, just like *Expose*, PROTECT is a further case of the artist rethinking her previous production. At the same time, it is a *positive* resemantization of some iconic elements of her work that were strongly indebted to postmodern aesthetics. The elements that have typified the artist's work since the 70s return in PROTECT, both from the textual ("protect") and the mediological points of view (the billboards in Time Square), but with a whole new meaning. I will trace their evolution over the coming paragraphs.

PROTECT is not, indeed, an entirely new message for Times Square⁴⁷. The message dates back to at least 1977, when Holzer had just started work on *Truisms*. These were sequences of aphorisms listed in alphabetical order, in a standardized and essential poster-like graphic form, and displayed by the artist on the streets of New York City. Despite the authoritativeness of the aphorismic form, the work, like all the early projects of the artist, does not merely serve to point out solid and sharp truths but to investigate the intrinsic ambiguity of every ideological system, including language. The artist explains in an interview with Seth Cohen that her main objective, in *Truism*, was indeed the breakdown of any type of hierarchy, and the rejection of one single truth:

I wanted each statement, in and of itself, to be a very strong version of one person's point of view; that once you heard that statement you would have not only a description of that particular issue but a picture of the personality of someone who would make such a pronouncement. On that level I was trying to give some sincere portraits of one person's ideology or one person's view on a certain subject. I was hoping that on one level it was literal and descriptive and maybe humanizing. I presented each one of those sentences with equal weight. It was a Utopian goal I had. I thought it would be nice if for once, rather than ordering things in a hierarchical way or splitting them into a right wing or a left wing, everyone's pronouncement was given equal weight. Hopefully it instills some kind of tolerance in the person who winds up scanning these opinions. I was hoping it wouldn't polarize things. I was thinking that if you are never in camps you will never fight. I was hoping at the end that it wasn't zero sound but a collection. An entire array of all opinions that would yield a positive result. They were leveled so that you wouldn't favor one or the other, which hopefully doesn't yield a zero. I think that at the end of the array you can't go off and think that only this or that position is right. I think

⁴⁷ The work is not only displayed in Times Square, but on 1,774 advertising boards all around the city, as well as in other North American metropolises, such as Chicago and Boston.

that the “Truisms” act as a warning of how things are dangerously reduced to a one liner or a tiny bit of information. They were sincere but they were also a warning⁴⁸

It is among the voices of the *Truisms* that, for the first time ever, the *semantics of protection* that will become fundamental to Holzer’s language appear. A now iconic voice begs, prayerlike, on the city streets: PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT.

In reality, it is only through a short chronicle of the Holzerian concept of *protection*, as it was identified in the 70s, that it is possible to understand the linguistic innovation of *Protect* (2020) and its close connection to the turning point that characterized *Expose* (2020). It is my intention to reconstruct it.

In 1982, a few years after the first *Truisms*, the aphorisms shifted to another medium, which would become typical of the artist in the decades to follow: the billboard⁴⁹. In that year, in fact, Holzer decides to transpose her *Truisms* to the big luminous screens in rotation, just like the Spectaculars in Times Square. Yet the messages, despite being separate from her others, are anything but isolated. Holzer’s aphorisms are destined, rather, to be blended with the commercial messages that daily cross the immense spectacle of the urban landscape, “in which the phantasmagorias of commodity fetishism and their theatrical and pictorial seduction of the consumer have become so predominant that they have attained the total occupation of social life”⁵⁰. Messages among messages, hazy, ambiguous, vaguely existentialist; it is only by

⁴⁸ S. Cohen, J. Holzer, *An Interview with Jenny Holzer*, in “Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art”, n. 15, 1990, pp. 154-155.

⁴⁹ In her interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Holzer explains her choice, saying that “initially, it was cheaper and easier to put writing on electronic signs, ones that were already installed in public places, than it was to produce and paste the posters. All that was required was advance art worry and a little programming time (it was hard work not to be caught in the middle of the night with an armload of posters and a bucket of paste). Often there was dead space on the big outdoor signs, so I didn’t have to pay to exhibit because the operators welcomed contents. With those outdoor signs, I was able to work without using any art material, and the first LED boards I bought were humble objects (...) The move to electronic technology had to do with my needing to be where people look. I thought I should present many hard germane subjects as large, loud and well as what’s done for celebrity gossip, concerts, products and the sometimes too cautious reporting of the news”.

B. Buchloh, J. Holzer, *Interview with Jenny Holzer* in D. Breslin, *Jenny Holzer*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2008.

⁵⁰ A.R. Petersen, *Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger at Times Square*, in *The Urban Lifeworld. Formation, Perception, Representation*, Routledge, London, New York, 2002, p. 370.

dropping them in the metropolitan landscape that the *Truisms* reveal their deepest nature. Holzer's "texts have neither positive value – they are not, in and of themselves, inherently good or bad, true or false, left or right, right or wrong – nor do they have differential value, such that one position acquires value in oppositional relation to another, in terms of relative difference"⁵¹.

The crucial role played by the context in determining the meaning of the artist's aphorisms, which would otherwise be intrinsically polysemous, impinges on the concept of *protection* from the very first works. Emblematic, in this sense, as Hughes observes⁵², is the meaning of one of the most famous *Truisms*, MEN DON'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE. This sentence, on the façade of the Liberty Theater on 42nd Street, tells of the gentrification of the neighborhood⁵³ after years of crime-fighting by the Giuliani administration (there is no need for police, MEN DON'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE). The same quote changes its meaning completely when it is printed on a condom wrapper⁵⁴ between 1983 and 1985. Here "the MEN who do not protect you anymore are now more narrowly confined to either male sex partners, or, in the context of the 1980s AIDS crisis when the work was produced, male, conservative, straight, primarily white politicians who failed to respond to the epidemic"⁵⁵. To this sequence we could add an additional chapter. The artwork displayed in March 2020 in Berlin's *Kolonnadenhof*, on the occasion of the exhibition *Kampf um Sichtbarkeit. Künstlerinnen der Nationalgalerie vor 1919*, has in fact acquired an even different and markedly feminist connotation. Here, the artwork expresses the difficulty of female artists in being part of a distinctively male art world and shows how, in the art context, the patriarchal tradition whereby men protect women is completely reversed and transformed into abuse (MEN DON'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE).

A further chapter of Holzer's output in which semantic ambiguity, on which the artist has always made the concept of protection rely, emerges

⁵¹ G. Hughes, *Power's Script: or, Jenny Holzer's Art after "Art after Philosophy"*, in "Oxford Art Journal", v. 29, n. 9, 2006, p. 431.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ On the cultural history of Times Square, see W.R. Taylor, *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, London, 1996.

⁵⁴ The medium of the condom, whose last version (THE JAR OF CONDOMS, created in collaboration with the New York City AIDS Memorial) dates back to 2020, is also used for the similarly resemantized *Truism* PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 433.

with even greater force in the 2007 *Redaction Paintings*⁵⁶. The series concerns US government declassified documents (mostly made illegible) relating to the subsequent *Freedom of Information Act*. It is made of *big screen prints* on canvas of material concerning North American military operations. Among them is a work realized from a PowerPoint presentation given to the White House by the Pentagon before the 2003 invasion of Iraq and almost untouched by the government censorship operation (hence the title *Redaction Painting*): PROTECT PROTECT⁵⁷.

A map of Iraq: the word PROTECT is written north, south and west (coinciding with the Turkish, Jordanian and Saudi Arabian borders), but it coexists with less reassuring indications such as: SEIZE, EXPLOIT, ISOLATE, SHOCK, SUPPRESS and TAKE CONTROL.

Here, the ambiguity of the signifiers that Holzer puts in place reaches its peak. The artwork, with its very strong ideological instability, functions, in effect, like *Truism*. In this case too, although the political position of the artist is evidently clear, it is not yet pronounced⁵⁸. Rather, Holzer chooses to show a point of view at the antipodes from her own, going straight for the nucleus of the ambiguity embedded in the concept of protection, which is now described as something inseparable from a dynamic of both violence and control. Just as what is on a billboard competes with and defines its own meaning when coexisting with the other stimuli coming from the urban landscape, the meaning of PROTECT coexists with the other stimuli coming from the image, without the presumption of imposing, affirming or objecting. The artwork's ethical dimension exists, but even this time the artist takes a stand by leaving the context (the map of Iraq in this case) to determine the meaning of the last signifier, regarding which the author (traditional holder of the true meaning of the artwork) keeps a meaningful silence, in a post-modern exercise of auto-dissolution.

⁵⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the series, see R. Storr, *Jenny Holzer: Redaction Paintings*, Cheim & Read, New York, 2006.

⁵⁷ The title of the work will be used as the title of one of the major retrospectives dedicated to the artist in recent years (the exhibition has traveled, for example, to the MCA in Chicago and the Whitney in New York), as further confirmation of the primary role assumed by the signifier PROTECT within her production.

⁵⁸ In the Buchloh interview Holzer states even more clearly: "I can offer that I think the war in Iraq is a mistake and continues to be dangerous and reprehensible. The works with declassified material are from my sometimes frantic (witness the number of paintings) worrying about the war and the attendant changes in American society". B. Buchloh, J. Holzer, *Interview with Jenny Holzer*, op. cit., p. 123.

This is not what happens in 2020 in Times Square. When Holzer's adopted city reaches the peak of daily deaths due to Covid-19, the message that Holzer hands over to the billboards becomes, maybe for the first time ever, unequivocal. The first word that appears, written in a blue bright neon on a dark backdrop is, once again, PROTECT.

In the context of the pandemic, the iconic imperative of the artist would have been enough to determine, alone, the meaning of the artwork. And yet, this time, Holzer chooses to leave no room for vagueness, possible ambiguity, or semantic indeterminacy in her appeal. Just as in *Expose*, there is an urgency for an *activistic* work, which prevails at the expense of the traditional post-modern dimension of her relationship with language and reality. Other words follow the first, just a few seconds after:

PROTECT
NURSES
DOCTORS
YOURSELF

The context endows the artwork with a choral dimension. The voice that asks for protection is not only Holzer's, but the entire city's, according to the most typical praxis of the artist. And yet this is not the crowded and colorful circus that Times Square usually is, with whom Holzer usually speaks. The place is the same, but the semantic framework that determines the sense of her performative act has radically changed. The message of the artist does not speak to the other billboards that light the square, it does not find meaning in blending in with them; rather, it seeks dialogue with its streets, that are, for the first time ever, deserted. Here then, Holzer's traditional strategy of signification takes on a different form. It is no longer a linguistic game based on the polysemic instability of the reality and its signs but a specific message, an unequivocal call that the context does not deny, complicate or contest, but – for the first time univocally and supportively – confirms.

So, for the first time after 40 years, in May 2020, Holzer's PROTECT bears *one* meaning.

Back to reality

The lesson of 2020, works like *Expose* and *PROTECT* seem to say, is the need for a return, if not to an ideology, at least to an idea of politics

capable of saving some truths. There is a need to take a step back to the accomplishments of the post-modern revolution, with the terrible suspicion that annulling the fascism that we find in language through the emptying of sense, has actually opened the door to a new fascism, one of a different stamp, but frightening all the same⁵⁹. If young Holzer embraced the Nietzschean idea that *no facts exist, just interpretations*, post-pandemic Holzer finds the strength to criticize her own youthful poetics and resemanticize it. To shout – amid the chaos of news, presidential declarations, denials, disclaimers, social media, protests, and silence – that facts do exist, and it is criminal to ignore them. THE PEOPLE PERISH. PROTECT.

It is interesting to see how the poetic and ideological change that has been outlined (and which took place, it should be remembered, in an extremely discreet manner, maintaining unchanged the structures and *modus operandi* that have made Holzer an iconic artist) has found confirmation in a transformation of a *medial* nature, which has gone on unnoticed.

Expose, as a matter of fact, before intruding on the streets of New York City and Washington, was a work conceived for Holzer's Instagram account. And it is only here that, after the project is finished, it is still possible to observe both *Expose* and *PROTECT*.

In Holzer's case, moreover, Instagram is not only the 2.0 version of the documentation of impromptu artistic practices common in conceptual work from the 1960s onward, nor is it just – as the artist herself said in a recent interview – a way to get immediate feedback on audience reactions⁶⁰.

It is true that during the months of the pandemic, as the art world was collapsing, the use of Instagram as an important platform for artists was very much needed in order “to promote themselves, but mainly to reveal themselves, opening themselves up in their own private sphere, to make

⁵⁹ On this point, see the interesting reflections by H.A. Giroux, *The Ghost of Fascism in the Post-truth Era*, in Idem. “Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times”, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020, pp. 17-31.

⁶⁰ “The animated texts appeared slightly earlier in the pandemic's course on Holzer's Instagram. Though fake Jenny Holzer accounts have circulated on Twitter for years—some featuring real texts from Holzer's work, others proffering their own brand of Holzer-Wisdom: *Jenny Holzer, Mom*; *Jenny Holzer, Cat*—she has largely avoided social media until recently. Instagram sometimes serves as a testing ground for particular meshings of form and content. ‘It's interesting to see what's a complete fail and what seems to catch people’, Holzer explained. ‘I'm not sure I'll keep doing it. But the practice has been handy’.” N.C. Morgan, *It's Jenny Holzer's World*, in “Harper Bazaar”, *September 16th, 2020*. Available online at <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a33614231/jenny-holzer-interview-2020/> (last consulted on 20th October 2020).

ongoing diaries, to express to their own testimonials, to report pieces of their lives"⁶¹. However, in the case of a postmodern artist, this testimonial urgency reaches a completely different depth, indicating a renewed confidence, or at least a need, to establish a narrative and an identity rooted in a unique, and unequivocally political, subjectivity. Holzer's online voice does not compete with the luminous stimuli of the billboards in Times Square, it does not blend in with Brooklyn's punk posters, it does not risk being ripped apart or vandalized. It does not leave people wondering about the ideological position of who is writing, it does not accommodate the opposite view. Paradoxically, it is precisely because of this shift from the cityscape to the mediascape⁶² that Holzer's voice finds once more its more political and militant bent. In a vacant New York City, which mourned the loss of 26,000 (and counting)⁶³ locals, the elderly silent director of the New Yorkers' public space returned with her art, with a new awareness, to the most famous slogan of the ACT-UP activists, her erstwhile companions: "SILENCE = DEATH".

Biography

Camilla Balbi è dottoranda di ricerca in Visual and Media Studies all'Università IULM di Milano, tutor il prof. Vincenzo Trione. Da sempre interessata alle intersezioni tra pratiche mediali e linguaggi artistici differenti, i suoi principali interessi di ricerca riguardano la teoria dell'arte e i curatorial studies. Accanto a questi interessi, oggetto della sua ricerca di dottorato, scrive e si occupa di culture visuali eccentriche, lavorando sulle specificità dello sguardo ebraico e di quello femminile e queer.

Camilla Balbi is a PhD student in Visual and Media Studies at the IULM University of Milan. After graduating in Modern Literature at the University of Pavia, she obtained a master degree in Arts, Heritage and Markets at IULM. Her major research interests cover curatorial studies, museography and art theory, with a special focus on the German and

⁶¹ Vincenzo Trione, "C'è una svolta nell'arte, il racconto adesso si propaga su Instagram", in *Corriere della sera*, 16th October, 2020.

⁶² For the meaning of 'mediascape' see A. Appadurai, *Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy*, in "Theory, Culture, & Society", vol. 7, n. 295, 1990, pp. 295-310.

⁶³ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/usa/new-york/>.

Jewish-German culture of the Twenties. Indeed, she's currently writing her PhD thesis on Erwin Panofsky's media theory. Alongside these interests, subject of her doctoral research, she writes and engages with eccentric visual cultures, working on the specificities of the Jewish gaze and the female and queer gaze.

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