

**"Advertising Art That Advertises Itself As Art That Hates Advertising":
Jenny Holzer and the Truisms of Times Square**

Sırma Soran Gumpert

There are no more ideologies in the authentic sense of false consciousness, only advertisements for the world through its duplication and the provocative lie which does not seek belief but commands silence.

Theodor W. Adorno

Media and Art in 1980s America

Theory of art in the Cold War years and onward, for the most part, highlighted the question of art's relevance to social-political issues. Aspects of art and theory of the 1950s and 1960s posed the question whether art could instigate a revolutionary transformation of society or not. Theorists and artists who confirmed the popularization of culture chose to deal with explicitly human and cultural themes and/or with the identifiable forms of an explicitly contemporary culture. In this respect Jenny Holzer fits the type of artist engaged with historic and social conditions (namely the post-war years in the U.S.), and one who integrates her work with urban architecture in order to reach the populace more directly. Hence, this study offers an observation of how Jenny Holzer's work *TRUISMS* sets a successful example of how the popularization and/or politicization of art may allow for an awakening of the masses and consequently even a transformation of society.

In 1989 at the entrance to an art show called *Image World: Art and Media Culture*, at the Whitney Museum in New York City, visitors were greeted with the following message, with the heading "Everywhere, All the Time, for Everybody":

This morning 260,000 billboards will line the roads to work. This afternoon, 11,520 newspapers and 11,556 periodicals will be available for sale. And when the sun sets again, 21,689 theatres and 1,548 drive-ins will

project movies; 27,000 video outlets will rent tapes;
162 million television sets will each play for 7 hours;
and 41 million photographs will have been taken.
Tomorrow, there will be more. (Heiferman, 17)

Marvin Heiferman, author of this passage and curator of the show it introduced, was one of several artists in the 1980s whose primary concern was to evaluate how artists responded to, deconstructed or reconstructed their image-saturated, capitalist, consumerist environment. Instead of the more traditional, modernist conception of art as a self-contained object or form, postmodern art tended to involve itself more with socio-political issues.

"Everywhere, All the Time, for Everybody" characterizes the American society of the 1980s at a moment when mass media and commercialism gained enormous momentum. Hence, the interplay or collaboration between art and media may be said to have reached its height by then. A great deal of the art that received the most recognition in the 1970s and '80s was overtly political. In this art, artists expressed their displeasure with numerous social problems from sexism to ecological damage; but by far the most vociferous response was to the potentially damaging powers of the mass media in a persistently consumerist society. By the 1980s American society was producing a surfeit of commodities and images through computer technology, and the U.S. came to define itself as a consumer society. A vastly increased number of goods was made available to a growing mass of affluent consumers and people were encouraged to buy products by advertisements.

Artists working in this consumer culture, especially in New York, came to feel that the individual in society and culture had lost a certain autonomy. A self-ruling, self-governing individual had almost become an endangered species, and it became a popular notion that individuals were, to a large extent, under the spell of massive corporate institutions and their hypnotic representations in the media.

Theoretical Approaches to Art and the Image: McLuhan/Debord/Baudrillard

Theory played a crucial role in developing artists' critical approach to consumerist culture. The ideas of Marshall McLuhan, father of communication studies, became particularly influential in the visual arts. McLuhan had already proclaimed that advertising was the greatest art form

of the twentieth century. Noting the inevitable correlation between the two mediums (arts and the media), McLuhan insisted, prophetically, on the magnetic power of advertisement and how the artist must eventually "join 'em" in order, perhaps, to "beat 'em." The modern discourse of advertising in America suggests an impulse towards cultural homogenization. Marshall McLuhan underscored this potential danger of mass media but believed that the artist had a pivotal role in society, affirming; "To prevent undue wreckage in society, the artist tends now to move from the ivory tower to the control tower of society [...] the artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms and structures created by electric technology" (64-6). Correspondingly, artists of the postmodern era endeavored to analyze their technological environment and impose alternate methods of artistic expression that would perhaps "correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology numbed conscious procedures" (McLuhan 66).

Another theoretician and social critic with a powerful influence on the art world from the '60s onward was Guy Debord. Leader of the infamous European politically involved group, the Situationists, Debord was to a large extent preoccupied with trying to define consumerist society. Debord and the Situationists' primary target was capitalism, which Debord defined as "a society without culture" (*Art in Theory* 698). They claimed, in Marxist fashion, "capitalism had evolved and instituted such powerful mechanisms for manipulating consciousness that the masses had been transformed into passive consumers by the 'spectacle' of advertising and media. The spectacle was mind drugging and curbed the quest for challenging and meaningful activities that might provide genuine fulfillment and an authentic sense of self" (Maayan 51). The "authentic sense of self" that Debord refers to is, according to him, threatened by the spectacle of media. The Situationists' plan was to challenge the power of the spectacle.

Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, the key Situationist text, remains today an influential theoretical work on the relation between capital, cultural imperialism, and their mediation in society. In his text Debord relates that the spectacle "is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice" (*Spectacle* 13). By saying "a choice *already made*" Debord stresses mass advertisement's power to develop desires and needs in people—needs they did not originally have. By this way the desire to possess, no matter how much you already possess, is indefinitely sustained, as Debord states: "So long as the realm of necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain

a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep" (Spectacle 18). Debord's effort was to expose media not as natural but as a fake construction devised and continued by the ruling class through its command of social agencies and the means of communication. Debord strived to revolutionize art and urban culture by exploiting public space. He believed social consciousness could be awakened by and through art especially on the streets where he believed people were in a numb state, and therefore Debord's aim was, in his own words, to "reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible" (*Art in Theory* 694). Although as a group the situationists lasted only until the early '70s, their ideas inspired a considerable number of artists and their art-theoretical advocates who aimed to deconstruct—that is, uncover and expose—the ways in which the existing social order signified itself.

The deconstruction of art institutions, and the appropriation of media images for socio-political purposes reached its apogee in the 1980s. The deconstructive movement in art was also a channel for the theories of Jean Baudrillard in the '80s. A growing number of artists began to deconstruct consumer culture and the mass media, and thus were generally regarded as deconstructive artists. Many postmodern artists or artists identifying themselves as deconstructive were influenced by the theories of Jean Baudrillard, and in particular his *Simulations*, first published in 1983. In this major text Baudrillard argues that reality has essentially been replaced by images, above all those produced by the advertising industry, images which have come to dominate the masses. Reality itself for Baudrillard has vanished in our information-saturated, media-dominated world, a world where the real has been supplanted by the *hyper-real* and all is *simulacrum*. Baudrillard maintains that in an age of consumer capitalism there has been a veritable explosion of signs, so that all of contemporary life has become facsimile (*Simulations* 10, 13). For Baudrillard, in effect, nothing can challenge the seductive power of the media.

As for art, Baudrillard insists that this category, too, has become a product in a capitalist market. In his essay "The Hyper-Realism of Simulation," first published in 1976, Baudrillard argues, "The work of art redoubled itself as a manipulation of the signs of art: this oversignification [...] introduced art to the sign form. Thus art entered the phase of its own indefinite *reproduction*" (*Selected Writings* 147). Baudrillard points out that art cannot isolate itself from the inevitable process of reproduction in the age of the simulacrum, and thus art now only ends up repeating and

reproducing the very idea of art. Art, according to Baudrillard, is in a way now just another form of advertisement: what it advertises is art itself. Art, too, has become a simulacrum of itself.

Baudrillard declares that in a world where consumption is so ubiquitous it is almost impossible to say no. This is a view that has not gone unchallenged. A number of politically charged artists, even those influenced by Baudrillard's work, argued that it was possible to defy the media and resist the power of the simulacrum. From the 1970s onward an increasing number of artists used mass media itself for their own causes; these artists appropriated media images, texts, and techniques and, in effect, sought to turn them against the media. As Irving Sandler puts it: "these new artists became *double agents of a kind*" (379). Hence the title of this paper "Advertising Art That Advertises Itself As Art That Hates Advertising," a phrase art critic Harold Rosenberg used to describe the pop art movement. These kinds of artists are themselves advertising their art (or themselves) like advertisement critics. In a sense, therefore, deconstruction artists are also viewed—or view themselves—as artists of appropriation.

In her long career as a distinguished member of the 1970s and '80s American art scene Jenny Holzer, like many of her contemporaries, has been described by numerous labels. She has been called *postmodern*, *deconstructive*, an *appropriation artist*, a *verbal artist*, a *conceptual artist*, a *politically charged artist*, a *media artist*, etc. The confusion over nomenclature is in part a sign of the interdisciplinary nature of the postmodern artist, who chooses to create a socially conscious art by way of approaching mass-market representations with a critical eye and interrogating messages buried under the images and texts of a consumer society.

Appropriation Art and Jenny Holzer

Jenny Holzer is one of a series of artists all-too aware that television, film and advertising (as well as photography) were the dominant languages of what has frequently been called postmodern American society. Media discourses, for these artists, were loaded with concealed ideological messages, and it was the task of the deconstruction artist to decipher these ideological texts. By using de-familiarizing and distancing techniques, Holzer attempted, so to speak, to shake and shock the viewers out of their hypnotic state. The goal here, and it is indeed an idealistic one, is to inspire and provoke the masses. Deconstruction artists believed that through deployment of mass culture in their art they could steer "the power and effectiveness of the mass media to positive ends," according to Stephen Ellis.

Ellis continues, "Art would be freed from its marginal, elitist position, become engaged in the cultural mainstream, and the way would be cleared for raising of the mass consciousness—effected by the artist" (125). The greatest challenge for these artists was to find effective ways to get their message across to the public. It is at this point that the use of commercial language and verbal texts found a more significant place in the arts.

Language As a Form of Art and Holzer

By the 1980s artists such as Mary Kelly, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger, Victor Burgin, Hans Haake, Cindy Sherman and Jenny Holzer laid claim to the language of mass media. For example several of Kruger's works are a combination of verbal texts and images mostly reminiscent of advertisements and city billboards, touching upon gender issues. Sherrie Levine posed the question of originality in art by appropriating images and photographs by famous male artists. This particular employment of media images and its discourse for artists was surely not completely novel; long before Holzer and Kruger, Marcel Duchamp's readymades and Andy Warhol's pop remades were appropriations of consumer products. And artists such as Holzer expanded this critique of the institution of art in order to intervene in ideological representations in the mass media. This intervention was a key term for Debord as well: "Revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention; and who have themselves intervened in the spectacle to disrupt and destroy it" (*Art in Theory* 699). According to this statement, Holzer is a revolutionary artist in the Debordian sense, one who aims to destroy 'spectacle' through the employment of language. The employment of language in art entailed a shift in perspective, not only for the artist but for the viewer as well. In his article "Subversive Signs," the American art critic Hal Foster comments on this topic as follows:

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—indeed, the recapitulation in this work of the 'allegorical procedures' of the readymade, (dadaist) photomontage and (pop) appropriation is significant—yet it remains strategic if only because even today few are able to accept the status of art as social sign entangled with other signs in systems productive of value, power and prestige. (99-100)

The viewer of art now assumes a new role where s/he can be an active reader rather than one who passively observes an aesthetic piece of work. Once again the goals of art in the postmodern era is in step with theoretical formulations of this time. Foster's 'active reader' would immediately bring to mind Roland Barthes' reader, reborn, as it were, in "The Death of the Author," in which the reader attains a much more active role as interpreter and the author loses his/her dominance: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). This statement can easily be applied to the viewer of art who is forced, in a way, to collaborate with the art work because it is sending out messages about his/her viewer and environment and life style. One can say that the author/artist loses his/her importance; first because the viewer is occupied with interpreting the given signs, and second, because the viewer discovers in the end that the author/artist is irrelevant to the work itself.

When an artist exhibits an essay in an art exhibition, for example Heifermen's greeting text for the Whitney Museum, this obviously places linguistics at the center of the visual or plastic arts. The majority of Jenny Holzer's works consist of verbal texts. Holzer herself pointed out that she was "trying to respond to the place of language in art" (Reason 11) and above all in order to unmask the genre of public advertisement. By manipulating the language and mechanics of contemporary media, Holzer inspired debates over the role of language and image in the visual arts and criticized established notions of where art should be shown, for whom, and with what intention. In this art-as-social criticism, *writing* plays a central role, and since the '80s Holzer's texts have moved on to appear on just about everything — except its traditional site: the gallery. Her texts have been displayed on TV, radio, billboards, electronic signs, park benches, magazines, T-shirts, airports, banks, shopping malls, business centers, and supermarkets—all verbal messages and most designed to function, in one way or another, as political tools.

Truisms: Public Places, Public Reactions

Truisms is the first and foremost of Jenny Holzer's verbal art works. The *Truisms* series was first displayed in public areas of Manhattan, NY starting in 1977; eventually, however, from the '70s to the '90s Holzer displayed *Truisms* in different forms and styles throughout the United States. *Truisms* is a series of straightforward but confrontational one-liners exhibited in alphabetical order and bold italics. When they were first displayed in the '70s they took the form of commercially printed posters, each poster containing

between forty to sixty truisms. There are a total of about 300 truisms. Holzer has pasted these big posters onto walls and buildings in SoHo and elsewhere in Manhattan, so that they occupied the same spaces with political broadsides, and public advertisements.

The following is a brief selection from the *Truisms* series:

- A LOT OF PROFESSIONALS ARE CRACKPOTS
- A RELAXED MAN IS NOT NECESSARILY A BETTER MAN
- A STRONG SENSE OF DUTY IMPRISONS YOU
- ABSOLUTE SUBMISSION CAN BE A FORM OF FREEDOM
- ANIMALISM IS PERFECTLY HEALTHY
- CHILDREN ARE THE CRUELEST OF ALL
- CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE
- CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST
- DYING SHOULD BE EASY AS FALLING OFF A LOG
- EXTREME SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS LEADS TO PERVERSION
- IN SOME INSTANCES IT'S BETTER TO DIE THAN TO CONTINUE
- IT'S A GIFT TO THE WORLD NOT TO HAVE BABIES
- IT'S BETTER TO STUDY THE LIVING FACT THAN TO ANALYZE HISTORY
- IT'S CRUCIAL TO HAVE AN ACTIVE FANTASY LIFE
- LOOKING BACK IS THE FIRST SIGN OF AGING AND DECAY
- MORALS ARE FOR LITTLE PEOPLE

Statements such as these brought forth reactions not only from the art world but also from the streets of Manhattan, precisely the audience Holzer was targeting in the first place. In an interview Holzer asserts, "The *Truisms* were my first attempt to understand and depict what people think, as a means to understanding why they do what they do" (Auping 80). When Holzer's *Truisms* street posters were first hung along the side streets of lower Manhattan in the late '70s, did the residents of Manhattan who came across *Truisms* know what to make of them, did they perceive them as *art*? The posters did not have signatures, and were nothing but messages written in a simple style. Then again, the scope of these posters, their minimalist simplicity, the fact that they were hung up on a wall to be displayed, but that they did not appear to advertise anything, and that they carried severe, critical messages, made them correspond to more traditional notions of what we think of as art.

Holzer's provocative language is a strategy for creating public discourse, and it is not surprising to see to what extent her verbal art incited strong and diverse reactions. Passersby would sometimes scratch out lines they did not agree with, or underline those they did; on many posters viewers added their own opinions next to the original truism. Correspondingly, following a question on whether she received any feedback from her *Truisms* posters, Holzer replied: "Yes people wrote on the posters and I was able to get feedback by standing nearby and eavesdropping. Those were the two ways of educating myself, coming back and reading the responses and overhearing conversations" (Auping 80).

Holzer, not surprisingly, has been particularly attracted to the expressionistic nature of graffiti. She appreciates street art that has instant impact that can make people stop and think arguing, "If a text says something out of the ordinary, people take notice." And this is why Holzer has always been quite sensitive about how urban public space *can* and *is* being used. Times Square, one of New York's great public spaces, according to Holzer, has been stolen from the people and placed into the hands of corporations whose ads and logos cover this so called public space like a blanket. Holzer's fight is to win back the spaces that have slowly but surely been taken away from the public. With the goal of making a public environment more livable, more alive, Holzer was hoping that viewers would experience, in Debord's expression and aspiration, the "playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects" (*Art in Theory* 696) of the city. In other words, Holzer's aim here is to force her audience to be more aware of their social and urban environment, and at the same time of their own psychological states as they wander the streets of the city.

Holzer's big breakthrough came in 1982, when she worked on a project for the Spectacular sign in Times Square. This was the first time she used an electronic sign to display her texts. The Spectacular sign in Times Square allowed Holzer to reach a far more extensive audience than she had before. Holzer employs the strategies of advertising discourse, using quick, repetitive consumerist language, all with the goal of engaging the viewer in meaningful public discourse. In effect, Holzer steals back the attention of the public from advertisers. The attention of the passerby is the most important and precious thing for an advertising company, and Holzer, using precisely the same mode of operation, distracts that which is most precious for, for example, Coca-Cola and McDonald's: the viewer's gaze. By means of her work Holzer wants urban spaces to come alive with a new kind of public sentiment or awareness. This objective corresponds to art critic Edit DeAK's

description of postmodernist art, which, he said, produced "the shock of recognition instead of the shock of the new" (56).

Truisms: How True?

Holzer's phrases are for the most part ambiguous, or enigmatic. The fact that conflicting messages appear to be coming from the same source make them seem indecisive and paradoxical, like the stuttering of someone unable to make up his or her mind. Consider the example of two truisms about children listed one after the other on the same poster: *CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE follows CHILDREN ARE THE CRUELEST OF ALL*. Perhaps through this kind of contradiction Holzer is able to maintain a certain neutrality so that her work becomes, not so much propaganda as mock propaganda. It is thus difficult to identify Holzer's work with any one ideology. Indeed Holzer's texts fluctuate between changing opinions and styles. To a question about the relation of the *Truisms* to truth, Holzer replied: "When I was writing the statements, I wanted them to seem as if they were the strongly held opinions of individuals. You could imagine your friend or your enemy making these pronouncements. I think the statements [in *Truisms*] would be true to whomever is saying them. They are conflicting truths, however, because there are over two hundred fifty different viewpoints in the collection" (Auping 80).

As Holzer herself points out, these statements are *subjective* truths; that is, they are far from expressing any general or absolute truth. Thus the title for the series *Truisms* would appear to be ironic. The word truism is generally used to express a cliché or an unexamined axiom, a proposition that has become general and popular. Holzer's truisms certainly take on the form and style of truisms in this sense: short, direct, compelling, with a kind of 'everyone agrees with me' tone. However, the content of Holzer's truisms offer a more twisted kind of truth, turning ordinary clichés into something more perverse, almost surreal at times, such as: *Murder Has Its Sexual Sides* or *Being Sure of Yourself Means You're a Fool*, or *Believing in Rebirth Is The Same As Admitting Defeat* or *Slipping into Madness Is Good for the Sake of Comparison*. Surely these statements are not clichés in the familiar sense. Whose clichés are these? In what world could these be taken as axioms or unexamined truths?

Holzer's statements may generate a kind of liberation or a sense of confrontation in the viewer. Perhaps her messages are staging the essentially human process of conflict itself. The audience is not rallied to any side, in the end, except the side of thought. Which is why critics never man-

age to agree on what the texts add up to. Art critic Henry Sayre's comment on Holzer's contradicting truths is that their "thrust is not toward closure but openness. They emphasize the conflicts that lie at the heart of all discourse" (198). Holzer does not offer truth therefore, in her ironically titled *Truisms*, but she seeks, rather, to explore the competing voices that inhabit—indeed that constitute—all of us:

I think they are a representative sampling of opinion. I didn't want to make a didactic or dogmatic piece. That was one of the reasons for writing contrasting *Truisms*. I wanted to highlight those thoughts and topics that polarize people, but not choose ideas. I was trying to present a fairly accurate survey and not have it break down into left, right, center, or religious versus anarchist, or what have you. (Auping 80)

And at one point Holzer remarks that, all in all, these *Truisms* reflect the American collective (un)consciousness. The text in Holzer's work functions as a metaphor for repression or suppression; voices that were buried re-surface. This decentralization of the author here is a key post-structuralist notion: when the author dies, Barthes tells us, the reader is born. Holzer has thus sacrificed herself in a way, remaining anonymous in order to empower the viewer. In 1982 Sherrie Levine offered a variation of Barthes' conclusion, stating: "A painting's meaning lies not in its origin, but in its destination. The birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter" (48). Holzer's truisms are origin-less, they are, as Levine states "all the quotations that make up a painting" (48), and literally Holzer's *Truisms* are quotations from *everyman*.

It is, however, also important to recognize that Holzer's signs are not meant to be understood as a separate or self-contained language; her work gains meaning from the space within which it is displayed. Conversely, and just as significantly, public spaces occupied by Holzer's signs are themselves transformed, reborn with a new significance. Art critic Michael Auping writes that Holzer's work "is a symbiotic collage of contextual elements in which language is enhanced by the site, and the site is, in return, charged or energized by the language" (36).

With her language art that appropriates the instruments of the media, Jenny Holzer has been able to bring a new level of artistic expression onto the streets of America. By working within the system, against the system, Holzer has succeeded, to a large extent, if not in waking the masses up, at least in keeping them from sleeping peacefully.

Gumpert

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