City Space
Architecture

Selflessness is the Highest Achievement.
Jenny Holzer Whispering against the City Walls

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Abstract
Jenny Holzer's art revolves around outspoken texts that inhabit posters and signs, namelessly disseminated through the city. The ungendered authority voice in her first written pieces, Truisms (1977-1987) and Inflammatory Essays (1978-1982), allowed her to avoid any associations with femininity as traditionally understood, fuelling passers-by's critical reflection.
Later in her career, in parallel with her efforts to establish herself on a phallocentric art scene, Holzer's production found placement within more institutionalised museum contexts. Nonetheless, anonymity still remains a constant in Holzer's work and is thus not secondary to her outputs. Yet, most of the time, this was partially overlooked by scholars in favour of different conceptualisations of her work. Hence, this article aims to bridge this gap in the literature by analysing how Holzer adopted voices different from hers in the early stages of her career. The goal is to understand the rhetorical strategies she employed to find a place in a male-dominated art world and cityscape. By inquiring the self-fashioning of an unnamed identity, it will be remarked how the notion of persona is constantly evolving through time and space. It will be further argued that she appropriated authoritative voices far from her own, adapting them to address the public by proposing gestures of activism on topical issues of undoubtful relevance, directly intervening in the public space.

Keywords: public art, feminism, Jenny Holzer, persona studies, rhetorical analysis

Introduction

Jenny Holzer is one of the most loquacious artists on the international scene. Born in 1950, she grew up where "the conscience of the American psyche resides." (Auping, 1992, p. 13), nurtured by the conservative Midwest.

After moving to New York, Holzer began experimenting with art through numerous media. Especially, in a city dotted with glowing slogans, her attachment to textuality sparked. Her production revolves, in fact, around stark, incisive texts that live on papers, posters, and signs, at first, *anonymously* disseminated through the city. Leveraging on commonplaces, language, and symbols, Holzer's art imposes on the public space with activists' intentions: she wants to make people uncomfortably think. Her recurring themes are *women, society, death,* and *war*. In a 2017 interview she explained "[…] we don't need to work on joy. You know, that is something that takes care of itself and is sustaining but one must argue with cruelty, homicide, abuse of any sort, this I like to argue." (Fondation Beyeler, 2017)

From feminicide to myths and social justice, her audacious approach to public art made an enormous contribution to exploring the artistic potential of activism in spreading powerful messages through the city walls.

From the very beginning, Holzer's work has been subject to many critical reflections. Essentially, the existing literature is divided into two strands of thought: one school believes that the true matter of Jenny Holzer's art is to be found in the content of her texts (Foster, 1982; Joselit et al., 1998; Hughes, 2006). The other is committed to arguing for the public dimension of her artistic production as a contributing element in the shaping of urban space (Siegel, 1985; Kalaidjian, 1992; Petersen, 2002; Breslin, 2013). Grounding the research on the postmodernist notion of "death of the author" (Barthes, 2001), scholars belonging to the first group expanded on the concept of the (de)constructive power of language. Foster (1982), in specific, focusing on semiotics, advanced a reflection of the "construction-by-contradiction" (ibid, p.182) in Jenny Holzer's *œuvre,* demonstrating how conflicting points of view in her works allowed her to craft messages that are not entirely subjected to power systems. Building on this, Hughes (2006) argued that to have contradictions, a set of values and ideologies should be assumed. However, as the author claimed, any singular pre-established agenda is consistently pushed in her first series. Therefore, he dismisses "contradiction" in favour of "antagonistic positions" (ibid, p. 426), which accounts for incongruity without absolute resistance.

Another significant feature highlighted by Hughes (2006) is the strong contextual attachment in Jenny Holzer's works. In Siegel's (1985) analysis, context is crucial in understanding the relationship between Holzer's artistic instances and their positioning in the art-world. As Petersen (2002) reiterated, the significance of *site-specificity* in the artist's artworks is key. Making the case for the public exhibition *Message to the Public (1982)*, she contextualised Holzer's production as being able to animate the public discourse occupying urban space. Therefore, showing how the city is incorporated into the work of artists, not just as a physical domain, but also as a social and ideological space. Indeed, questions on anonymity and gender have been touched on by many authors (Hughes, 2006; Fox, 2007; Miazgowicz, 2010; Breslin, 2013), however, these factors have never been contextualised in a detailed analysis of Holzer's artistic identity. Hence why, this article aims to explore in-depth the question of the evolution of the artistic

persona of Jenny Holzer, unveiling the building blocks that together allowed her to gain epistemological authority as a female artist within the urban realm.

The persona studies scholarship has recently conceptualised how identity-building results from a complex entanglement of contextual factors that comprise the truth-speaker's reliability. The notion of persona relates identity to the environment by means of performativity in different social situations (Marshall and Barbour, 2015). Consequently, locating personae in a constant state of evolution depending on their time and space. Because the construction of identity is always discursive, especially in the case of marginalised individuals, the search for self-fashioning strategies grounds on rhetorical analysis (Wesseling, 2004). That is a reliable method to inquire about the strategies of a female artist like Jenny Holzer, who employed words as her primary medium.

Rhetorical analysis – one of the tools within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework – offers a specific regard for language, seeing it as a constructive tool with the ability to act upon the world and capable of creating subjects with power over situations. It deals with understanding the specific patterns that allow utterances to gain a certain level of persuasion over the listener (Kennedy, 2014). To this end, verbal exchanges are investigated in terms of the rationality of the argument (*logos*), emotional appeal (*pathos*) and character of the speaker (*ethos*). Here, the main focus will be on this latter aspect, emphasising the projected identities of Jenny Holzer, therefore, the different speaking voices in her production will be investigated.

With an eye on the question of Holzer's feminist claims, *standpoint theory* would substantiate the analysis. McClish and Bacon link rhetoric to feminist standpoint theory, affirming that "by emphasizing the way rhetoric that emanates from a particular perspective can unmask power relations, standpoint theory underscores the value of the work of those who are subjugated." (2002, p. 31).

Hence, the question leading this paper is: *how did Holzer employ voices different from hers to gain authority as a female artist and activist in the public space?* Quest that is further inquired into by asking a series of sub-questions: *what was the socio-cultural context that established the basis for Holzer's socially engaged street art? How did she position herself to counteract the sexism in the art-world?* And lastly, *how did her art evolve in parallel with her rising recognition?*

To achieve the purpose of framing the evolution of Holzer, focusing on her female art-activist persona, – which goes beyond the scope of the sole artworks and builds upon the whole sphere of what the artist has produced and said about themself –, this article will make use of published interviews on paper and video, secondary literature, critical pieces and then go in depth into two public series: *Truisms* (1978-1987) and *Inflammatory Essays* (1978-1982). These two series represent the first written projects in which the artist is the only author of the texts. As she mentioned, in fact, once she gained public recognition as a (female) artist Holzer "stopped writing with gratitude" (The Modern, 2012) as she felt the need to use her platform to give recognition to other silenced voices who have not been as fortunate. Additionally, these pieces present different narratives and formats that correlate to Holzer's artistic and personal evolutions that are to be discussed in this paper.
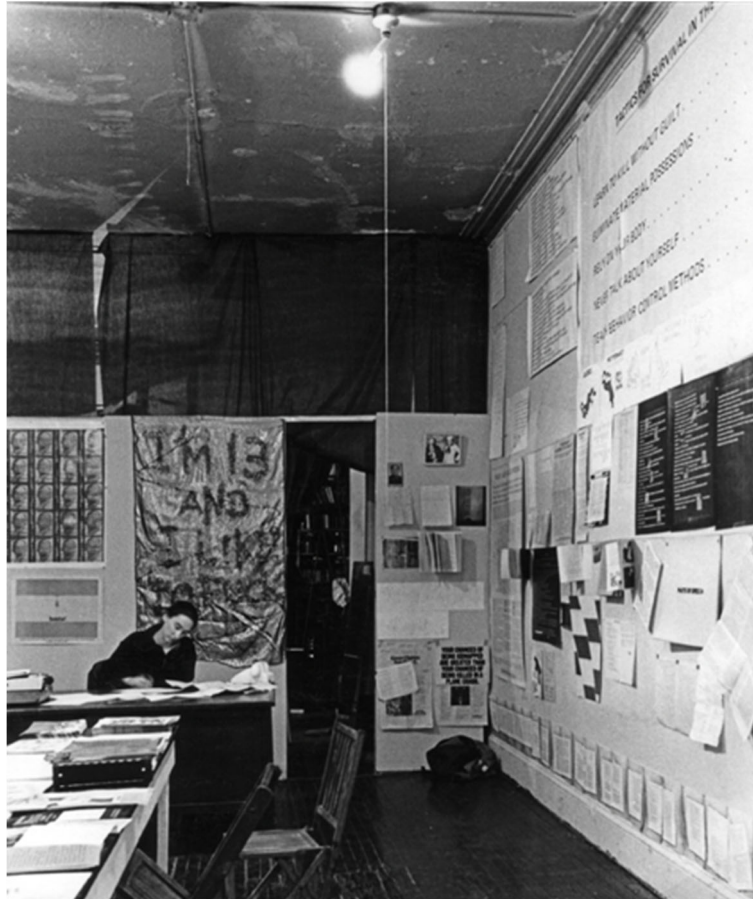
Figure 1. Jenny Holzer at the Manifesto Show, with Colen Fitzgibbon and Collab Projects, 1979
© Art Resource, NY / Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

USE WHAT IS DOMINANT IN A CULTURE TO CHANGE IT QUICKLY (The Survival Series, 1983-1985)

New York, street art and social reclamation movements

While until the 1960s the ways of living and building the city have been in a functionalist direction, since the second half of the 1970s, generations of independent thinkers, young creatives and rising artists have pushed to transform urban contexts into attractive social containers. New York represents a prime example. During the late 1970s, the city endured a prolonged economic recession. Several jobs got lost as well as a large portion of its population. Generalised social difficulties meant for many owners the impossibility to pay for repairs or property taxes. This caused tremendous disinvestments in renewing buildings, which resulted in particularly tough criticalities especially in high-density lower-income areas such as Manhattan's Lower East Village. Historically, the Lower East Side was a safe place for migrants and city newcomers during the XIX and XX centuries. However, after 1975 – when the municipality barely escaped bankruptcy – the Big Apple's institutions were unable to provide for the maintenance expenses of the district and ensure sufficient assistance for affordable housing (LPC, 2012).

Figure 2. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1970
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Inspired by social reclamation movements, some residents and community organisations began to rehabilitate the buildings through grassroots, legal and illegal, initiatives. This vibrancy attracted a wave of young artists that migrated from all over America to the lively neighbourhoods of the Lower East Side. Thus, it became a highly multicultural area where social differences were celebrated for their reconstructive potential. The area was:

> "a unique mix of Puerto Rican, Dominican, African-American, Chinese,
> Ukrainian, Polish, Italian and Jewish Americans as well as aging hippies,
> left-over punks, recent skinheads, old left and new left radicals,
> housing activists, squatters, small businesses, winos, junkies, cops, and
> the Hells Angels Motorcycle Gang." (Scholette 1998, p. 52).

Figure 3. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1970
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Within this constellation of communities, the possibility of complex socio-political contestations was more than likely to be raised, and, for sure, it included a vast selection of voices. The high concentration of creatives brought these debates to the walls. *Street art* – or more broadly *public art* – affirmed as a true frontier art. *Street art* defines a type of spontaneous creative expression. It rejects the intermediation of the art system and proposes a new contact with the public. Public art-activists side with and voice the oppressed ones, straightforwardly displaying significant instances to the faces of passers-by. Their aim was to tie the knots between the morality of the glossy consumer culture and the fringes of a society that experienced daily social and racial marginalisation. For this very reason, they usually took action in spaces and places where they knew their words and embellishments would have caused disarray, whether in agreement or disdain.

Figure 4. Vergara, Camilo J., Lower East Side, 1977
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Riding on this wave, forms of mural social engagement were ever-so present in the 1970s USA: from women's liberation to racial inequalities, anti-war activism, and sexual and reproductive rights. The social turmoil already underway provided a basis for public reclamations that only intensified after Reagan's inauguration in 1981.
This was the context in which Jenny Holzer first came to New York. Here, she came into contact with trending social and political theories, while living in the city of signs, billboards, and advertisements. However, New York City's mythology was far from as polished as one might think. Holzer recalls:

> "When I lived there, it was a very, very different SoHo. It was rough. Creeping into the 80s, when Reagan came in, and the numbers of homeless people escalated — I was living on the Lower East Side by then — there were families, mothers and little kids, sleeping on benches in the subways. Not nice. Hideous. Winter. Bundled-up kids on the subway platform. The art world was relatively clean then,

though, because there was little to no money to be made. Minimalism hadn't been all that expensive, or successful in the market. Many younger artists didn't think about selling their stuff, or developing a brand. It was a paradise in that it was about the work; it was about the content; it was about striving to give. There's a reason to be nostalgic for that. The artists in Colab [a street artist collective] were trying to find content that could be meaningful to almost anybody walking down the street, and that might actually address a few things." (Farago, 2016)

The state of difficulties, inequalities, and uncertainty was worsening. These new instances of protest and mural activism were absorbed by the artist as she publicly staged her first staple pieces of engaged, personal, and wordy street art. Holzer's first series, *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays,* were an artist's theoretically and socially informed synthesis of the public demands brought up at the time: power systems, homelessness, social equality, and women's rights.
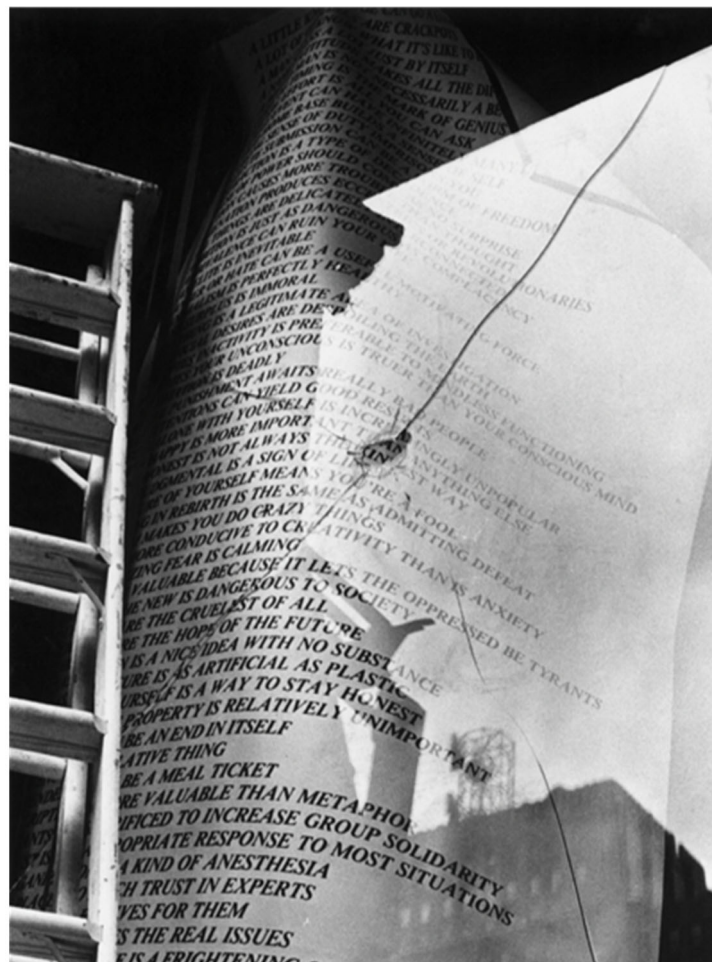

Figure 5. From Truisms (1977–1978), NY, 1978.
© Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Working with topical and newsworthy themes, Holzer always made sure these instances were publicly available to the most finger-pointing people. She posted her posters in heavily trafficked streets poignantly describing issues that were far from the blue-collar audiences they were intended for. Jenny Holzer's aim was, in fact, to instil some sort of spark to take action, despite the fact that she acknowledged all too well their unwillingness to accept change as they were themselves contributing to the creation of the problem (The Modern, 2012).

WORDS TEND TO BE INADEQUATE (Truisms, 1978-1987)
The use of language in the art world

As mentioned, when it comes to identifying the privileged medium of Jenny Holzer's art, *writing* is central in all her production.

The social and intellectual conditions for carving a niche for inflamed writings as art pieces were already forming, and the public debate in the early 1980s was very much alive. For about a decade, the new school of *conceptual art*, led by male personalities such as *Kosuth* and *Broodthaers,* had been gaining ground. Conceptualists dematerialised traditional artistic media by believing in the standalone power of concepts. New art materials became pamphlets, posters, and reflections on everyday life and the art system (Millet, 1972). Not typical museum pieces but tokens drenched with meanings, intended to expose the contradictions of art and society. Language became, thus, a powerful tool, resorted as one of the key sites "where ideology is replicated in the subject, or rather, where language as ideology creates the subject." (Holzer et al., 2008, p. 119).

Figure 6. Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Chairs, 1965
© 2021 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, NY https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435

CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST (Truisms, 1977-1987)
Truisms and the rhetorical power of a street poster

1980s New York was not lacking in subjects or clashing ideologies to draw from. The social vibrancy of the avant-garde city offered Holzer many conceptual cues that became staples throughout her artistic career. In the first public series, *Truisms,* the artist's voice explored minimal forms of linguistic exchanges to put forward reflections on the role of beliefs in society.

> "I was in my twenties, trying to figure out what I believed in, and I was trying to understand more about how people might govern when there are so many opinions in the world. *What do you do to have society cooperate rather than go to war?*" (Fundación BBVA, 2012).

Truisms helped Holzer fight her way out of the wilderness. The series consists of a list of sentences written in all caps, bold, and italicised that claim to be self-evident truths. These provocative short-phrases found their place on posters, pasted outside on the bustling streets of a densely populated SoHo, where people expected to see yet another billboard but instead were faced with a tangle of thoughts. Indeed, what was important to Jenny Holzer was to find a space for herself in the city. But above all, what she strived for was the recognition of the problems she was facing citizens with.
SoHo has always been an important neighbourhood close to the Lower East Side. A neighbourhood where diverse people were exchanging life experiences and ambitions. However, the rising population of artists was just inadvertently laying the foundations for the redevelopment of the neighbourhood. Although a new identity for SoHo, which had always been a difficult and working-class district, initially benefited the residents, on the other hand it catalysed a process of gentrification (Lasner, 2017). Indeed, young entrepreneurs, especially in the arts, became attracted to the creative neighbourhood and began to settle in the already overcrowded buildings as well as started to build new ones. Thus, they quickly replaced the neighbourhood's population with more affluent residents, leaving displaced as a consequence the less fortunate (artists included) who settled there for the benefits of the vicinity network and cheap rents (Sutton, 2020). This very noticeable increase in homelessness among her peers and the resulting social problems were good enough reasons for Holzer to take action and try to push an agenda with a greater sensitivity towards her fellow humans in mind. She started with literature, distilling concepts   from a "prodigiously long reading list" (The Modern, 2012). She scrutinised the most influential political theory, feminism, post-structural philosophy and social studies accounts, from which she grasped short utterances coming from a polyphony of voices and points of view. Those *truisms* took the form of newly pronounced clichés, challenging maxims that spoke for themselves. She articulated:

> "I knew the Truisms weren't poetry, so they shouldn't go into a little book, and I knew they weren't a novel, so they didn't go in a big book. I had to think of a form that was appropriate for them. After I, half-way, became convinced that they were legitimate, I realised that they had to go outside. They were useless as a list on a desk." (Auping, 1992, p. 78).

As part of a growing group of young and mainly female street art-activists (honourable mentions include Lady Pink, the collective Guerrilla Girls and Barbra Kruger), the focus was to convey contents and hard truths about social inequalities to the general public by directly intervening in the public space. Thus, the relatively inexpensive posters seemed to Holzer to be the way forward to reach her twofold objective: firstly, confront and take up time and space in the public life of private citizens; secondly, be brave and declare in no uncertain terms "what a room full of people might be thinking if they were honest about what they were thinking." (The Modern, 2012).

Truisms were thrown towards the audience in public, which in response reacted more or less receptively to the messages. What Holzer was looking for at this moment was indeed the frankness that only being on the street can give you. In fact, with Truisms she strived to create devices that could confront people, hoping for a reaction. She recalls many who "check(ed) the ones they liked and appreciated" and others who "finally dismiss(ed) the entire enterprise as unmentionable" (The Modern, 2012).
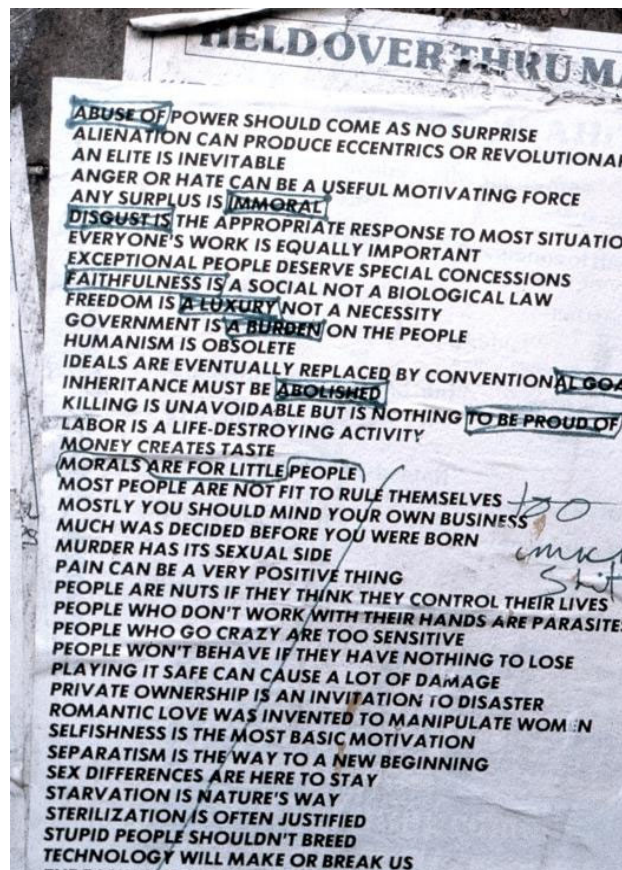

Figure 7. From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1977 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

This success, the fact that it moved and had a persuasive and time-honoured hold on people, is most likely due to Holzer's carefully crafted rhetorical operation. The rhetorical intention of the *Truisms,* however, was fairly ambitious. The artist wanted to urge, instruct, provoke and emotion – or whichever combination of those. *Truisms*

conveyed different and sometimes contrasting ideas or feelings about human behaviour, presented simultaneously, in the same physical and ideological frame.

Dealing with a multitude of beliefs and issues, any visual or conceptual hierarchies were created. She arranged the statements in alphabetical order, resulting in casual concatenations of multifaceted socio-political thoughts. Their plainness and tidiness in style did not necessarily differentiate them that much from classical posters or pieces of written communication in the urban space. Nevertheless, each of these elements contributes to enhancing their symbolic and rhetorical value.

Jenny Holzer's persuasive aim was to feed the public discourse. She wanted to present a cascade of views to a fast-moving stream of people with a short attention span. Hence, the rhetorical power of one-liners on a poster was unmatched.

The combination of content and medium allowed Holzer to propose reflections on commonplaces and institutions in an authoritative voice, by directly taking over the public space. The unexpected presence of these statements "asked viewers to draw their own connections between idea, speech, written text and action through a variety of lenses: personal, historical, or social." (Fox 2007, p. 39). To reach this goal, Holzer's words needed to be logical, simple and understandable. After all, her intention was to activate people with her art in the public space, therefore, she needed to level out the cognitive distance between the art-world's intellectual vanities and the common viewers. When asked about the nature of her words, Jenny Holzer likes to mention her regional provenance:

> "I think being a Midwesterner had something to do with my choice of language and my choice of particular type of language. When Midwesterners are moved to speak, they speak very plainly and very succinctly. What is, maybe, not very Midwesterner about my whole enterprise is that a lot of times people from the *Heartland* are prone to keep things to themselves. They don't buff about things. Maybe, what's a reaction against my Midwesterner upbringing is to bring unmentionable things to the publics' eye." (Holzer and Müller, 2010)

At the logos level, Truisms are a series of simple-structured complete phrases in a declarative voice, that sounds like folklore. Readers find themselves confronted with pronouncements that allegedly know more, are worth more and command more than what the busy walker could have ever expected. Emotionally, however, this very commanding, anti-narrative component of the language deliberately intrigues and stimulates the psyche of passers-by. The care in the writing process aimed to produce the most complex rhetorical stunts. She crafted the language to appear as something already known and established over time, relying on *repetitions*, *antithesis*, *half-quotations* and *commonplaces*.

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN GO A LONG WAY is a clear example of Holzer's language manoeuvring. In many posters, this is the first *Truism* one might encounter. Holzer took inspiration from the renowned *maxims "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing"* or "*a little money can go a long* way" and put her spin on it by inverting its meaning, setting the critical tone and inquisitive attitude in the reader. Among the same lines, *MONEY CREATES TASTE* is a renewed rendition of the sayings "*money can't buy taste*"; or "*there's*

no disputing taste". Again, the reader feels familiar, yet sceptical about this new revisitation of those dogmatic postulates.

In carrying out this operation, Jenny Holzer's persona shines through as austere and detached. The artist, in fact, always sought to maintain some distance between herself and her audience. "I try to polish them, so they sound as if they had been said for a hundred years, but they're mine... to write a quality cliché you have to come up with something new." (Siegel 1985, p. 65). This denial of Holzer's own personality for the sake of omniscience demarks an attempt to broaden the scope of her claims from the specific to the general. Indeed, she agreed with numerous truisms, but at the same time Holzer did not argue further, leaving the space for the viewer to decide whether to stand up for the common good, get angry, or simply let it go.
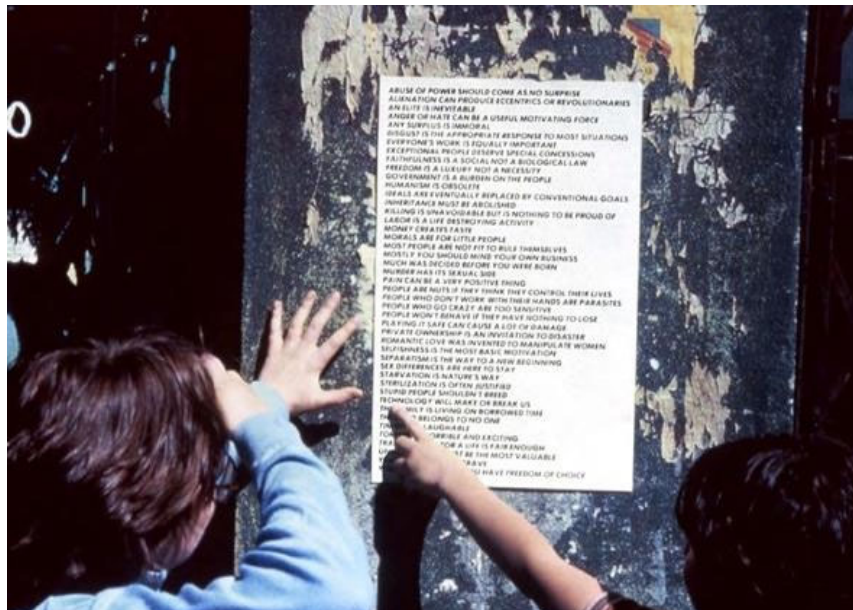

Figure 8. From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1979 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

For this reason, she can deliberately contrast an optimistic *CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE* with a far darker *IT IS A GIFT TO THE WORLD NOT TO HAVE BABIES* offering a complete *antithesis* on the same topic. The same is true for *USING FORCE TO STOP FORCE IS ABSURD* and *VIOLENCE IS PERMISSIBLE EVEN DESIRABLE OCCASIONALLY* which are alphabetically subsequent.

Holzer provokes people with contradictory views on fundamental and contemporary human themes, forcing viewers to reconsider their response, helping them deal with disaster, fear, and change in the world.

The omniscience of the compositions allowed the artist to enact the persona of the master behind the enterprise, never the individual-(wo)man but always the every-*man*. As Foster (1982) underlined "in a variety of signs she presents opinions, credos, anecdotes in a way which both manifests the domination active in everyday discourse and confounds it by sheer anarchic display" (p. 107). She twists and turns this ideal western collective wisdom intending to bombard the reader with different one-liners that interact with each other, more or less intentionally – and this allowed her to

project in the public space identities, ideologies and voices from all over the place. Because in the end, *YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CONSTITUTING THE MEANING OF THINGS (Truisms, 1977-1987).*

CHANGE IS THE BASIS OF ALL HISTORY (Inflammatory Essays, 1978-1982)
Raging arguments to change the world
With *Truisms*, Jenny Holzer created the standard for her productions to follow. The seminal contents and public connotation of her work had been established. Although she already touched upon several recurring topics – politics, religion, feminism, morals, society and sexuality – a more structured conceptual maturity came to be in *Inflammatory Essays.*

> "I remember that I thought the tone of the Truisms was possibly too
> even, too bland, too balanced. I wanted less balance, and I wanted the
> next writing to flame…I wanted a passionate statement about the way
> the world could be if people did things right…I went to the library to
> find examples of lunatic manifestos and beautiful ones."
> (Waldman 1989, p. 16)

Expanding the process of clichés-building inaugurated with the previous work, in *Essays,* Holzer presented more articulated arguments and provocations. The Truisms had such a hold on the audience because everyone could find at least one sentence with which they could agree among the cacophony of messages on the posters. However, still not many things were changing in society. Once she realised that Truisms were hitting some spots but not the right ones, she decided to venture further into the city, artistically occupying business neighbourhoods and tourist meeting points. She used posters, but this time the writing standard was different and more substantial. Each *affiche* hosted hundred-word long arguments, separated into twenty lines of text. Here, the persuasiveness was enhanced not only by the paragraph format – which creates bridges between fragments – but also by the introduction of colours in the papers.
Despite maintaining the same rationality of the argumentation of the previous series, the *Essays* became more enraged in their topics and tones. Hence, the rhetorical aspects of those visual arguments had to be more outstanding. In detangling their complexity, the presence of figures of speech is not irrelevant.
The piece in *Figure 9* starts with a commanding repetition of "*don't*". This produces a figure of speech defined as *anaphora*, when the first part of a phrase is repeated through the same paragraph. The effects evoked by this rhetorical device are manifold: a series of orders that create an authority figure that opposes another subject. Presumably, Holzer speaks for women and the difficulty they have in being heard in society. Having more space to convey her point, the pathos of the paragraphs is in fact much more emphasised than in the previous series. Continuing the analysis, here, through the vindictiveness of the *climax* culminating in a *rhetorical question*, the artist reiterates the question of an unknown person (*man*) that has the power to take over others (*women*), unless they recognise the other's oppressed identity. They are just waiting for the proper time to counteract. The question of time ("*biding my time*", "*almost over*") reinforces through sayings the idea of the approaching of the maximum point of tolerance for the speaking subject.

Figure 9. From Inflammatory Essays (1978-1982)
© 1977 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Figure 10. From Inflammatory Essays (1978-1982)
© 1979 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

A similar idea of temporality is biblically ("SUNDAY, I RESTED" can be read as hinting at the seventh day of rest in Genesis 2:2-3) expressed in this *Essay (Figure 10)*. In a parabolic fashion, the artist presents some real events that might have happened to Holzer or that, with a certain saddening recurrency, she actively witnessed. With a multiplication of the ones that are characterised as *evils* that must be "*cut off without thinking*" the first and last sentences act as a *frame* in which the history develops during the week.

Even if the short *Essay* does not give us enough descriptive information to visualise the violent and the victim, again we can identify a *he* and a *she* involved. The point of tension in the text coincides with the central part, highlighted by a *contrarium* with the same structure but an inversion of subjects *("wishing she was dead"/ "wishing he was alive").* This rhetorical device creates distance between the reader and the scene and underlines even better the denunciation tone of the piece, reinforcing the idea that *she* had it worse.

Furthermore, the whole essay presents a series of *synecdoche* – when the name of a part is used to refer to the whole or vice versa – aimed to target different social categories. The *thief,* contextually, might allude to all the people living in challenging conditions that need to transgress the law to survive. The *politico* with the use of *irony* mocks (and at the same time sides with) the activists who constantly strive to be heard. Crucially, as the resilient protagonist *I,* Holzer's rhetorical operations always aimed to go against systems of power – might it be *governmental, male power* or *language power.*

SEX DIFFERENCES ARE HERE TO STAY (Truisms, 1977-1987)
Women in the '80s art world

Remarkably, the lack of signature (*ellipsis*) in her posters is also rhetorically significant to enquire about her character and persona. It makes people question themselves, *who is giving me orders? Who pronounced this? Is it a he or a she?* It has never been the desire of the artist to declare her presence in public space. She is there, but nobody knows her. "I wouldn't want to be isolated as a woman's voice," the artist said in 1986, "because I've found that when things are categorised, they tend to be dismissed."(Ferguson, p. 114). Arguably, anonymity could also be related to the state of the law under which Holzer operated. New Yorkers' institutions, in fact, were fighting to prohibit the increasingly rampant expressions of public art, seen as litter for the town and responsible for the devaluation of buildings. (LPC, 2012; Schwartzman, 1985). Yet, Jenny Holzer's activist soul could not care less about the state orders, her mission was, in fact, to point out the shortfalls of this very system. *YOU MUST DISAGREE WITH AUTHORITY FIGURES,* one Truism commandingly recites. But subverting laws was not the only reason for her namelessness.

During a lecture for The Modern Museum of Fort Worth, she declared, "I thought: of course, I'm not an artist! How could I be an artist? What is art anyway? I'm from the Midwest. I came from some practical people! Art, anyway, was Picasso with his babes." (The Modern, 2012). This statement reflects one fundamental facet of Holzer's persona and a very common thought in the 1980s art world. On the one hand, her upbringing taught her to be practical, to get her point across simply and pervasively. Although the path she decided to follow was in the arts, "almost an anti-career move" (Auping 1992, p. 70), at the same time, she cared and valued the influence of creativity in challenging

established and unequal social hierarchies. She had, however, to confront another obstacle. In the eighties, the widespread idea was that *the artist* needed to be male ("Picasso"), and that *he* needed to be exuberant and publicly brag about his position ("with his babes"). Holzer did not conform to this, nor was she interested in it. Nevertheless, women artists wanted their role in society and their claims to be heard. As mentioned, Holzer crossed paths with several feminist artists and collectives that firmly declared their validity in the art world. Notably, the sensibility regarding social topics in those years was very rich and lively among female artists and collectives. Names started to appear, but yet amid those flamboyant years "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female" as fellow activist and artist Guerrilla girls in their infamous *Naked billboard (Figure 11)* stated. Emphasising the notion that women were still seen as objects, and not as subjects capable of putting forward social and artistic criticism such as to be included in institutional collections.
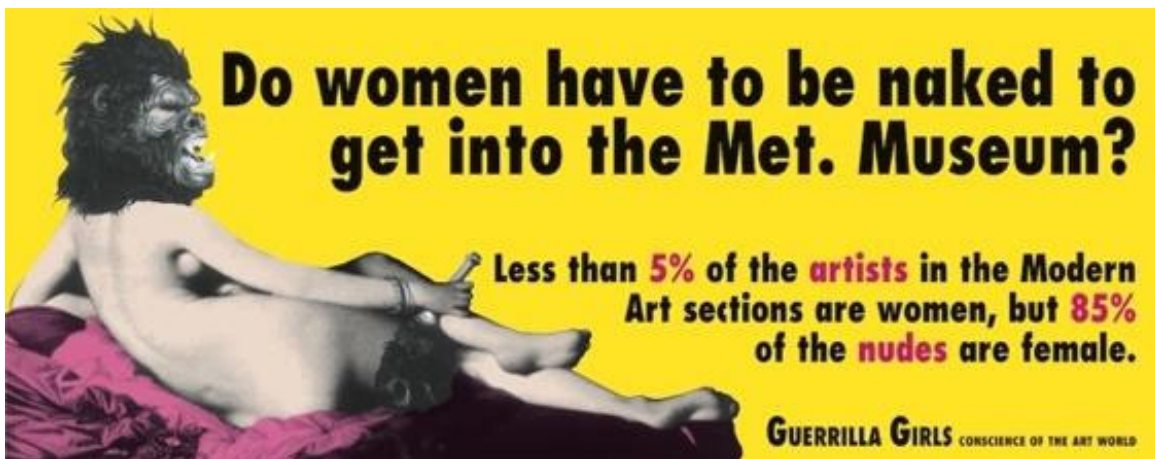

Figure 11. Guerrilla Girls, Naked billboard, 1989
© 1985-2020 Guerrilla Girls / https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages

IT IS MAN'S FATE TO OUTSMART HIMSELF (Truisms, 1978-1987)
Anonymity, female authority and subversion

How did she manage to position herself as recognisable among other quieted women, then? Being the message carrier between the different opinions that floated around the public space, Holzer can be defined as a disembodied enraged mediator. She wanted to pass on urgent insights before being considered an artist. Choosing namelessness was thus a gesture to emphasise her identity as a thinking subject capable of pronouncing strong words; words that society would never attribute to a woman.

> "It was anonymous partly because I was, as a person and as an artist. I thought of myself as essentially anonymous, and I didn't sign because I wanted people to concentrate on the content […] Of course, there's the woman thing. I didn't want the work to be rejected out of hand by people who'd know it was by a young woman, people who would filter

out the content for that reason, operating on immediate assumptions."
(Kennedy, 2019)

In a world of art traditionally dominated by men, Jenny Holzer decided to adopt their
tones and behave like what was considered the prototype of *the artist*. Deconstructing the
characteristic dominant voice, she arrogates authority to herself. As Kelly (1998)
remarked "because of this coincidence of language and patriarchy, the feminine is
metaphorically, set on the side of the heterogenous, the unnameable, the unsaid." (p. 23).
The spirit of protest of Jenny Holzer could not accept this risk. Anonymity out of fear
of not being heard or worse, of not being taken seriously. "It's funny. Somebody asked
me if the reason I was selected for the Venice Biennale was that I am a woman, but a
woman who acts like a man and does art like a man. I was taken aback." (Auping 1992,
p. 79). As observed by Ryan et al. (2016), in a patriarchal society "it is culturally and
socially restrictive for women to develop an authoritative ethē" (p. 2). Since her *Truisms*
and *Essays* were impossible to trace back to a distinguished author, as argued by
Hughes, they were automatically attributed to a male speaking voice.

Figure 12. Jenny Holzer at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1989.
© 1989 Marianne Barcellona / Getty Images

Historically women, in fact, were defined as being "formless, ungrounded, irrational,
devoid of shape, clarity, truth." (Hughes 2006, p. 438). By refusing those values she plays
with social hierarchies. She reacted against the binary system – in which male voices are
commonly linked with rationality – and subverted it. Holzer created a *verfremdungseffect*
that alienates the reader, who becomes unable to identify the source of knowledge and
is driven to critical reflection.
However, although she does not project a feminine voice – as commonly being referred
to as *modesty, politeness, emotionality and submissiveness* – she always situates herself as a
female speaker. On multiple occasions, Holzer reiterated "I do want my voice to be
heard and, yes, it's a woman's voice" (Ferguson 1986, p. 45). This acknowledgment in

anonymity of the feminine situatedness of her vision (Haraway 1988) granted her authority in the public realm.

As a result, all of Holzer's early work in the city space should not be viewed as a mere attempt by a marginalised individual to reclaim her rights, but rather, to borrow Haraway's words, Jenny Holzer

> "…seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision. [She] We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – *not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible*. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular." (1988, p. 590)

The artist intercedes for the marginal position she is speaking from. She namelessly reclaims the space in the city for all the disregarded or muted identities that inhabit it. Holzer's art engages in a fight, a fight that is not only specific to her but first and foremost to all women, marginalised groups, in her time and place. (Hughes, 2006). Winning this battle comes at the expense of her authorship, her singular voice. We only grasp it by listening closely in between the lines of her posters as the "source of all this noise." (ibid, p. 440).

Figure 13. Messages to the Public, NY, 1982 – From Truisms (1977-1987)
© 1982 John Marchael.
https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/messages-to-the-public-holzer/

KNOWING YOURSELF LETS YOU UNDERSTAND OTHERS (Truisms, 1978-1987)

By the end of the '80s, her self-fashioning strategy as man-acting-female-thinking proved to be fruitful. As her reputation grew, she became the first American woman to have an entire pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1990.

She recalls "I absolutely didn't want to do a bad show because I was afraid that people would take that as an excuse to dismiss women's art. […] I also found it difficult to be an official American representative. Most of my art until that point had been anonymous and that has given me the liberty and the freedom to do anything I wanted. I was shocked when I came indoors and did shows because people knew who did it." (Holzer and Müller, 2010)

Coming indoors meant for Holzer to acknowledge her female identity, as an artist and individual, for the first time in her career. What had always scared her the most was being overlooked. She did not want the things she most valued to be disregarded because they were pronounced by a woman.

The aim of this article was to uncover how she succeeded in avoiding it during the early stages of her career. To unveil, how she manoeuvred words and visuals rhetorically to counteract and grant herself a spot among a plethora of male artists acting in the public space. What has been shown is that through her work, she "appropriated, adapted, and generated new *ethē* to speak to and within patriarchal publics." (Ryan et al. 2016, p. 4), until, through anonymity, she found herself and her authority. Her particular view on authorship and self-worth allowed her to collapse the values of truth, identity, morality and ideology. She assumed the authority attributed to men to present in the public space the persona of a socially engaged feminist.

By lending the voice of authority to echo feminist and social issues, she repurposed the tools of power, changing the rules of the game. In this sense, as various feminist standpoint theorists made clear, she gave a voice to every woman and targeted individual, as the recognition of the ethos of an oppressed identity inevitably comes in relationship with others (Ryan et al., 2016).

Holzer imposed herself on the scene by quietly affirming the loud power of language by way of selection, context and presentation. She hijacked a tone foreign to her and appropriated it. Bringing up heated topics, and speaking people's minds on the city walls, she became one of the most recognised female public artists among a generation of artsy-activists.

Playing on the contradiction between authoritative tones and sensitive topics, she built herself a persona that can be trusted and listened to. Adding an extra degree of complexity to her artworks, away from the purely visual, she challenged the ultra-masculine tradition of public speaking. Subverting the traditional norms of power, she manipulated and repurposed voices to gain recognition and credibility. As a result, her art, which straddles the political and the personal, has forever altered our understanding of truth, which is never one and undeniable but always multiple and circumstantial.

The accessibility of her language, always in search of a public response, gave her the best platform to voice her positions and to expand her artistic practice in the cityscape. Holzer was able to strategically locate herself as a predominant voice in the very place where the events she was dealing with were taking place. Thus, materialising the public dimension of the ideological battles that were going on in those years. Furthermore, the placement of her artworks where is the least expected allowed her to create forms of

control in spaces in which they often go unnoticed. By exposing the linguistic influence in everything that surrounds us, Jenny Holzer succeeded in creating private systems of subversive knowledge that live in the public space, and through which polyphonic representations are granted.

Jenny Holzer represents an artist who came to maturity in a troubled time when democracies were endangered and people reluctant to act. Her art became a medium of a new form of trust in people, of which she embodies the protectress. So that she could disappear behind her artworks, again.

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