Destabilizing Cultural Assumptions; Language and Images
in the Art of Jenny Holzer

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ABSTRACT

Since 1977, when Jenny Holzer first introduced her *Truisms* signs to the public, the surreal quality of her art has increased with her successively more dramatic installations and messages. Juxtaposing light and dark, impersonal media with personal texts and the future with the past, Holzer's ability to fill and command large areas of space (both public and private) has won her international acclaim and recognition.

The sites for her installations have included sections of the Dia Foundation in Manhattan, as well as an immense 535-foot electronic, spiraling sign along the walls of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1989). Holzer's most ambitious project to date is *The Venice Installation* ; in 1990, she was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, a prestigious international exhibition. There, Holzer's installation won the elite Golden Lion Award for Best Pavilion. Jenny Holzer currently lives and works in New York City.[1]

Whether in a public or private forum, Holzer's signs and installations manipulate the "official voice" of public announcements, which are accepted by the general public as important and true. Through verbal dislocation--placing familiar

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[1] Background information on Jenny Holzer taken from Michael Auping, <u>Jenny Holzer</u> (New York, N.Y.: Universe Publishing, 1992) pg. 42-51.

words in alien contexts--she undermines the unwavering authority of this official voice, thereby jolting viewers from complacent acceptance of any information. In this thesis, I hope both to illustrate the artistic and social contexts from which Holzer's works developed, and to suggest the ramifications of Holzer's provocative texts from a greater perspective.

As in any historical research and documentation, it is difficult to gain a global perspective on any subject from a contemporary point of view. Generally, it is only in retrospect that one can recognize the impact an individual and/or movement has had on their society. However, working with the assumption that much can be learned about a society and culture through the art it produces, I hope to demonstrate through my research how art is used not just as a means of contemplation or "abstract personal expression", but that it is also used to catalyze action, and if necessary, political action. With this idea, the actual product of an artist's creation is secondary to the revolutionary consciousness that it can awaken in its viewers, the far-reaching, political result of artistic provocation.

In addition, I shall examine--both in theory and practice--the creative process behind a work of art. Rather than simply turning to life, Holzer's art seems to be compelled by life, and it is this element of immediacy and provocation in her works that I would like to explore. Holzer's works demand a creative response from viewers, and while this response will generally remain on a cerebral level-- rethinking cultural assumptions that are made daily--in this thesis I will take my own personal response one step further.

Verbal analysis of art is ultimately an analysis "at arm's length", therefore my final goal in the scope of this paper is to produce a creative (i.e., artistic) response to Holzer's works. This will consist of a series of drawings/collages and explanatory notes, an artistic interpretation and response to the many questions raised in the course of my research on this subject. Some of the issues or topics I will address concern: the use of language itself as an artistic medium; the creation of semantic meaning in words and images; the conflicting and fragile relationship between cooperation and corruption; and the struggle against power relationships in society from an inside and outside perspective.

By responding to Holzer's artistic provocation with my own artistic interpretation, I hope to demonstrate the chain-reaction dialogue that art can catalyze. For, as one critic describes, art "can do what has always been within its province to do: offer a unique insight, vision or perspective which can heighten or resonate with one's own consciousness."[2]

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[2] Nina Felshin, Art for Nuclear Disarmament (New York, N.Y.: Adama Books, 1983) pg. 16.

I. INTRODUCTION: Background of Holzer and Description of Her Works

"Art doesn't interest me. Artists interest me."

--Marcel Duchamp

Jenny Holzer was born in Gallipolis, Ohio, in 1950.[1] She was one of three children in the family; her mother taught riding in a college and her father was an athlete who became a Ford dealer. After attending a private school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1968, she applied and was accepted for early enrollment to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. However, Holzer soon became dissatisfied with the liberal arts program at Duke and transferred in 1970 to the University of Chicago, where she took printmaking, painting and other art courses. Holzer completed her undergraduate work at Ohio University in Athens in 1972, and two years later attended summer school at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence.

When she began graduate courses in Providence in 1975, Jenny Holzer was an abstract painter, influenced by artists such as Mark Rothko and Morris Louis. Among her projects at RISD were a

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[1] I will be using three major sources to describe Holzer's life and works: Michael Auping. Jenny Holzer (New York, N.Y.: Universe Publishing, 1992); Interview with the artist by Bruce Fergusen in Jenny Holzer: Signs (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 1986) ; and Diane Waldman. Jenny Holzer (New York, N.Y.: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1989).

sequence of paintings on torn canvases, in which she incorporated words that gradually assumed greater significance than the images. Holzer's experimentation with public art began at this time as well, which she notes was "a kind of precursor to my current work...putting things in public and leaving them for people to find, either downtown or at the beach."[2]

The *Truisms* series marked Holzer's shift from abstract imagery to "the pure writings" in 1977, in which language became her primary medium. She was intrigued by language for its ability to communicate in a way that painting could not. Holzer realized that, although uninterested in narrative painting, she wanted to express her feelings about contemporary society and culture. When she enrolled in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in New York in 1977, the reading list included studies in literature and art, psychology, Marx, social and cultural theory, criticism and feminism. From these readings Holzer was inspired to create the *Truisms* ; one-liners such as: "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE' and 'CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST'.

These cryptic statements were introduced to the public in bold black type on white paper, appearing on garbage cans, parking meters, alley walls and in telephone booths around the streets of Lower Manhattan. Eventually, these statements also appeared (in a series of 400) on exhibit in the Franklin Furnace gallery in New York,

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[2]Interview with the artist by Diane Waldman, June 6 and June 12, 1989.
   Ibid., pg. 15.

an indication that these signs are for an art audience as well as for the general public.

In the Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1973), "truism" is defined as: "a statement the truth of which is obvious and well-known; a platitude; a commonplace." With an irony that is typical of her works, Holzer recycles and distorts linguistic clichés from North American media. With the Minimalist economy and precision of words in her *Truisms* series, her (often) strange proverbs parallel the equally strange statements she borrows from "real" life, such as: **"You're an achiever of the Coffee Generation"**, **"Coke is it"** and **"Let your fingers do the walking"**.

The *Truisms* present contradictory statements with a multiplicity of tones, which might be summed up as follows: 1. the moralist--for example, **"YOUR OLDEST FEARS ARE YOUR WORST"**; 2. the optimist--**"A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE GOES A LONG WAY"**; 3. the realist/fatalist--**"AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE"** and 4. the cynical--**"MOST PEOPLE ARE NOT FIT TO RULE THEMSELVES"**.

Expanding the process of construction behind these imperatives, Holzer created the *Inflammatory Essays* (1979-82), statements presented rather as arguments or provocations. Holzer standardized the format of these texts so that each message could be identified as part of the same series: each was a hundred words long and divided into twenty lines in the same size square of paper. From the posters Holzer expanded to t-shirts, hats and billboard-size posters, where her works evolved from relatively temporary media to a more permanent, authoritative and monumental art.

In 1980 she began *The Living Series*, a series of bronze and hand-lettered wall plaques which described various aspects of living, in the form of narratives, such as:

It's an odd feeling when you trigger instinctive behavior in someone. It's funny to be in his presence while a different part of the nervous system takes over and his eyes get strange.

The turning point in Holzer's work came in 1982, when she began using electronic signboards, and ultimately, L.E.D. machines (computer operated light-emitting-diode lamps, that could display scrolling texts and graphics in various colors and styles). *The Survival Series* (1983-5) as created specifically for this medium, were statements based on fear, insecurity, pain and self-protection. Similar themes run throughout her next series, *More Survival* (1985- to present), yet with a shift in tone. Here, the different "voices" describe not only various actions, but also a series of random inner thoughts, such as: **"YOU DON'T CARE WHAT'S REAL"** and **"PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT"**. Instead of decorating the sites in which they are displayed, Holzer's disturbing messages are intended to elicit a reaction from viewers. The slick presentation of her signs is seductive and deceptive, mimicking the hundreds and thousands of signs and posters we (the viewers) are bombarded with daily in urban American society.

As her works evolve, one can see how the linguistic manipulation becomes increasingly sophisticated. For example, in the *Living Series* and *Survival Series*, rather than simply displaying

several different "voices", Holzer also introduces a variety of reactions and even solutions to life situations. In one humorous message, she advises viewers to **"Spit all over someone with a mouthful of milk if you want to find out something about their personality fast."** Later in these same series, the tone shifts yet again, this time to emphasize a sense of impending eventuality or foreshadowing. Often, these statements hold a sense of doom--**"The beginning of the war will be a secret."**[3]

The increasingly apparent theme of vulnerability takes an even more desperate and subjective tone in her series *Under a Rock* (first shown in 1986) and the *Laments* (1988-89). Here, Holzer etched poetic phrases on sarcophagi and stone benches and placed them in front of scrolling, electronic messages on the surrounding walls, thus creating a stark juxtaposition between a somber physical presence and a jarring technological medium.

In addition, it is interesting to note the various mediums Holzer employs in her works. While the use of paper, metal, stone and marble provide relatively stable and physically concrete mediums, Holzer's writings in conjunction with artificial light (electric signboards) creates an illusory sense of materiality--phosphorescent texts that are both monumental and fragile.

Artists in every generation have been fascinated by light, yet the representational use of light in art varies greatly from one artist to the next. Like her contemporaries, artists Joseph Kosuth, Mario Merz and Piotr Kowalski, Holzer's use of artificial light to frame her texts goes far beyond mere "éclairage" (lighting). Her sophisticated

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[3] Ibid., pg. 69.

electric signboards both mirror the urban landscape of neon signs and capture viewers' attention with their flickering but persistent intensity.

Perhaps the most striking and visually aggressive example of Holzer's use of light can be seen in the last room of The Venice Installation, nicknamed "the microwave room" and described by one critic as "an orgy of pure aggression and excess" and "physically painful".[4] [See photo on following page.] Designed as an assault on the senses, each sign combines rapidly moving texts in five different languages with several color combinations and type styles. In this fiery electric cavern, critic Micheal Auping describes how Holzer virtually "canibalizes" her own language, saying that, "...Holzer would seem in this instance to have become a kind of anti-poet, attacking language and disintegrating it through her spectacle into an anxious and unstable environment."[5] It is the self-destructive quality of this installation that makes it so disturbing and powerful, for the highly reflective marble floor creates the illusion of a deep pool or abyss into which the words and lights melt away.

Another startling element of Holzer's work lies in the juxtaposition between a sterile and impersonal context and the vulnerable, humanist accent of her texts. Raised in the Midwest, the daughter and granddaughter of Ford auto dealers, Holzer's background could be seen as an all-American one. Coming from the "heartland" of the United States has distinctly shaped her creative

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[4]Quoted from David Joselit. "Holzer: Speaking of Power", Art in America, Oct. 1990, pg. 157.
[5]Ibid., pg. 64.

expression, for language in this region, as Holzer describes, "comes in direct bursts that can be delightfully or painfully honest." [6]

Although Holzer's work is presented anonymously, the evolution of her style is marked in part by the increasingly subjective tone of her writings. From the factual and impersonal *Truisms* statements, Holzer moved to *The Survival Series* and *The Inflammatory Essays*, in which the second person, "you", is directly addressed. This evolution culminates in the *Laments*, which introduce various "I's", each representing different individuals/personae. This shift from broad, impersonal statements to more analytical and personal messages is explained by Holzer herself to be both a natural and calculated response:

> At a certain point, what you read in the paper or hear on
> the television news seems equally real and unreal. But
> I'm not interested in an interior monologue. The language
> is a direct response to what is going on in the world.[7]

By illustrating the fluctuating zone between fiction and reality--transforming news stories into personal nightmares and vice versa--Holzer's social realist works confront and provoke the viewer into examining her/his own assumptions about what is or is not "True". As critic Michael Auping suggests, Holzer "wraps her language confidently in a kind of uncertainty, conspiring to elicit this uncertainty and tension in the viewer."[8]   The stark juxtaposition between increasingly subjective messages in conjunction with

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[6] Ibid., pg. 13.

[7] Artist's text. Jenny Holzer: The Venice Installation (Buffalo, N.Y.:   The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1990) pg. 28.

[8] Ibid., pg. 33.

increasingly depersonalized and technological media seems to create just such confusion in the viewers.

Holzer is representative of how, for the first time in history, independent artist-initiated public communication through art has become widespread. As an established artist, her works have become increasingly complex both in presentation and by layers of meaning, yet she continues to recognize the distinctive qualities of public versus private display.

Holzer's public realm extends from public telephones to walls to Spectacolor Boards (monumental electronic signs) to canvas. The scale of her art has kept pace with her ambitions. From the immense electronic sign above Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas to the Spectacolor Board in Times Square, Holzer's art vies for attention amidst the barrage of corporate, commercial signage covering the urban landscape. In the realm of street art, a more active means of communication, a greater number and variety of viewers can be reached, as opposed to the traditional art contexts of museums and galleries. As one critic writes, "Streets are like hallways connecting different interiors."[9] With such a wide audience, there is a greater possibility of catalyzing change and provoking critical thinking around one, especially in a city like New York, where so much of life spills out onto the streets.

In addition to reaching a wider audience through public art, art taken out of traditional art contexts frees the artist's expression from esthetic value judgements. The lack of communal organization-- street "turf" being available in one way or another to everyone and

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[9] Allan Shwartzman. Street Art (Garden City, N.Y.: Dial Press, 1985) pg. 6.

anyone--allows the artist to address social issues exactly as s/he chooses, bringing artistic commentary closer to mainstream life, and mainstream life closer to artistic expression. As traditionally trained artists (like Keith Haring and Jenny Holzer) turn to public (graffiti) art, they break down the stereotypical image of the independent Bohemian, an artist whose entire life is spent in pursuing creative expression solely for the sake of ART.

By moving from the separatist parameters of the enshrined art world to the public realm, Holzer is able to establish a grassroots social dialogue. With the concise syntax of advertising or political slogans, Holzer pits statements against one another to exploit their hypocrisy as well as to create a provocative commentary on the equally contradictory or confused dialectic of this society.

In addition to provoking a response, this social commentary could also be interpreted as evidence of fear and disillusionment-- the reaching out for dialogue as some sort of desperate plea for change, communication and humanity. As Holzer herself explains:

> I believe people's beliefs are at the root of their actions. I hoped that since there are many conflicting statements [in the *Truisms*] that people would pick things out and in understanding themselves, they would know how to proceed [with their actions]. I was also hoping there would be a tolerance, since it would be hard to see someone with opposing viewpoints as a monster if the opposite viewpoint was right below [yours] and also rang true.[10]

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[10] Ibid., pg. 39.

Holzer's posters are an extension of her earlier experimentation with public "eavesdropping" as they are intended to elicit discourse with passersby, who often scratch out words or sentences and add their own opinions. The public collage which evolves is not unlike the spontaneous discussions written on bathroom walls, an anonymous stream of ideas, beliefs or fears. Not only does this provide access to a safe forum for public discourse, but it also establishes an ambiguous tension between the text and the site in which it is displayed. This ambiguity stems from the contradictory nature of the statements themself and from the anonymous authority with which they appear.

Holzer works on a thin line between art and politics, a position that inevitably draws criticism from within the art world. Until recently, with few exceptions, the visual arts have made a conscious effort to separate the philosophical ambiguity of art from concrete social issues. Holzer, however, belongs to a highly politicized generation that has chosen to use art explicitly as a political tool.

Holzer, along with several other women artists--Rainer, Laurie Anderson, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Lyndon Benglis, and many others[11] --have been acutely interested in understanding and reorganizing the institutionalized systems in urban, American society (i.e., television, radio, commercial billboards, etc.) that project ideas out to the world at large. As the disparity of wealth between social classes becomes even more marked than in previous generations, and as technological advancements continue to privatize the methods and means of communication and information, Holzer and an entire

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[11] Ibid., pg. 33-36.

movement of artists have successfully developed a new artistic language to critique both the indifference and corruption of this modern society and culture.

II. INFLUENCES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

"Great art can communicate before it is understood."
--T.S. Eliot

Throughout history, artists have explored ways to express the inexpressible. At the turn of the century, Sigmund Freud introduced

his theories about the unconscious and dream analysis. Whereas people turned away from trying to understand Albert Einstein's theories of relativity due to their complexity, it was much easier to acknowledge and relate to the distortion of space and time experienced through dreams, aberrations of "reality" discussed by Freud. From his work, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), concepts suggesting the validity of dreams were quickly drawn upon by artists, who began integrating iconography of the subconscious to push the limits of "rational" art.[1]

The Dada movement, founded in Zurich in 1915 by a group of artists and writers, constituted a violent revolt against the "smugness" of European and American artists and writers, a reaction in which the forces of creation were focused on anti-art.[2] The irony, nihilism and cynicism characteristic of this movement arose from the mood of disillusionment caused by World War I. Emphasis was placed on the illogical and the absurd, and the importance of chance in artistic creation was exaggerated. According to one popular account of the origin of the name (French for "hobby-horse"), a penknife was randomly inserted in the pages of a dictionary, symbolic of the anti-rational stance of the movement.[3] This tendency towards absurdity and whimsicality formed a basis for the movement that followed.

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[1] Leonard Schlain. Art and Physics (New York, N.Y.: William Morrow & Co., 1991) pg. 224.
[2] Ian Chilvers and Harold Osborne. The Oxford Dictionary of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) pg. 131.
[3] Ibid., pg. 483.

In 1917, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire described the movement following Dadaism as "Surrealist", above reality. The movement flourished in France in the 20s and 30s, and was characterized as well by a facination with the bizarre, the incongruous and the irrational. Like Dadaism, it ,too, was conceived as a revolutionary mode of thought and action, a way of life versus a set of stylistic attitudes. André Breton, principle theoretician of the movement, said its purpose was "to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality."[4] However, contrary to the nihilistic nature of Dada, the Surrealists' anti-rational stance was essentially positive in spirit.

Freud's dream analysis gave new meaning to "streams of consciousness", which encouraged artists to transfer the unconscious into creative expression. Poet William Butler Yeats described the impact of Freud's theories as such: " The visible world is no longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream."[5]

Two elements at the heart of Surrealism are the juxtaposition in space of things or people and the shattering of the laws of causality. Surrealist artists created images that were previously represented only in our subconscious dream state. Although the artists of this period did not work hand in hand with the physicists, Leonard Shlain, in Art and Physics, outlines how both disciplines pushed the barriers of imagination by introducing new ways to perceive space and time. As the seemingly "graphic chaos" of

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[4] Ibid., pg.484.
[5] As quoted in Marshall Mcluhan. Understanding Media (N.Y.: Random House, 1981), Vol.3, pg. 174.

Surrealism and Dadaism assaulted the collective sensibility of the West, Shlain notes:

> Never in the history of art spanning millennia and varied cultures had one group of artists so systematically and deliberately developed an art that could not be understood. In a concentered and fantastic coincidence, the branch of science primarily responsible for explaining the nature of physical reality [physics] became unimaginable at the very moment that art became unintelligible.[6]

In both the artistic and scientific realms, the new concepts which emerged seemed so difficult to understand because they had surpassed the language necessary to build mental images.

Describing the breakdown of fixed notions about time and space, Michel Foucault wrote of Surrealist artist René Magritte's works that: "It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."[7] For example, Dutch artist M.C. Escher created visual paradox by visually and mathematically distorting our assumptions as to the nature and shape of three-dimensional space, thereby forcing the viewer to consider alternative kinds of geometry.

Unlike other innovators in art, the Surrealists were not only interested in new departures in subject matter and style; they wanted to change the traditional form of exhibits as well, by which art, the environment and the spectator would all be intertwined. In 1913, the International Exhibition of Modern Art (the New York

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[6]Ibid., pg. 222.
[7]Michel Foucalt, This Is Not a Pipe (Berkeley: University of Cal. Press, 1983) pg.84.

Armory show) gave the first exposure of new European art to the United States. The show was met with shock and disapproval; it was considered a slap in the face to a public brought up on strictly representational art. However, despite the heated response it provoked, one critic summed up the exhibition's lasting impact as follows: "realism as a creative force in American art had become obsolete." [8]

World War II brought several European artists to the States, including Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Andre Breton, Man Ray, Marc Chagall and Marcel Duchamp. After the war, many of the European artists went home. For Duchamp, however, New York (and the States in general) offered more freedom than abroad. As he once described:

> In France, in Europe, the young men of any generation
> always act as grandsons of some great man; even the
> Cubists used to say they were all grandsons of Poussin,
> and so when they come to produce something of their
> own they find the tradition is indestructible. This does
> not exist in America. Americans don't give a damn about
> Shakespere, do they? And that makes it a better terrain
> for new developments. [9]

This disregard for tradition provided a perfect environment for an artist like Duchamp, who strove to break free of artistic conventions and operate in a new, nonrational context.

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[8]Quoted in Calvin Thompkins. The World of Marcel Duchamp (New York: Time-Life Books, inc., 1966) pg.52.
[9]Ibid., pg.157.

At different periods, Cubists, Dada collagists and Futurists have all used language fragments both as compositional elements and to convey content. However, Marcel Duchamp is considered the patriarch of a 20th- century position that sees language as dominating the use and meaning of an artwork. Marcel Duchamp is also seen by many as the patron saint of modern art due to the lasting influence of his artistic philosophy--that art and life are one and the same, inextricable and without borders. He saw the transformation of art to life and life within art as a crucial element of any creation. Duchamp's life-long facination with the conflict of ideas rather than with their resolution encouraged freedom from the rigid parameters of artistic conventions. No longer was it a question of what to express in certain given media, but instead how art could be newly defined. Duchamp forced an uneasy realization that art is dominated by language, and that meanings are determined not by any quality inherent in the work itself, but rather, by usage and consensus.

Duchamp's "ready-mades"--defined by Surrealist leader André Breton (1934) as "manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of objects of art through the choice of the artist."[10] --clearly represent his attempt to step out of the art world and into everyday life. The promotion of utilitarian objects to the status of "Art" by a mere signature was echoed as well by the "objets trouvés" (found objects) of the Surrealists and the junk sculptures of later generations. The significance of the ready-mades invention--granting conventional authenticity and cultural value to banal objects--can be seen in

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[10]Ibid., pg. 36.

relation to subsequent developments in how artists have used language, an issue I will discuss further on in this and the next chapter.

Duchamp's intention behind the "brutal immediacy" of the ready-mades was to select banal objects not usually privileged from an aesthetic point of view, thereby challenging the authority of "high art" as an aesthetic set of values. As he once noted, "I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste."[11]   In turn, this re-evaluation of the role of art in (non-academic) life was intended to de-glorify and de-mystify the nature of art and artists themselves. Critics of the ready-mades described them as "the defenestration of Art"[12] , because they defied any existing definitions of Art.

In defense of "R. Mutt" (Duchamp's pseudonym) submitting a porcelain urinal as a sculpture in an exhibit of The Society of Independent Artists, Duchamp cites the artist's intention as the sole criteria for what constitutes a work of art. As he explains, "He [R. Mutt] took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under a new title and point of view--[he] created a new thought for that object."[13]   By implication, Duchamp's ready-mades suggested that, good or bad, art is art, just as a bad emotion is still an emotion.

According to Duchamp, there are two poles in the creative process: the artist and the spectator. Therefore, a work of art is incomplete without the spectator, who brings it into contact with the

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[11]Ibid., pg. 35.

[12]Ibid., pg. 176.

[13]Ibid., pg. 39.

(external) world by interpreting and deciphering its layers of meaning and thus contributing to the creative act. In addition, the spectator delivers the final verdict on art and artists through the posterity s/he bestows on it. In direct opposition to assumptions by the general public and the art world that art must be abstruse, significant, complex and pretentious (in order to be valuable as a commodity), Duchamp saw its importance only as far as it encouraged free expression of intelligence and humor.

Like Ben Shahn, who scoffed at the notion that artists are not really aware of what they do[14] , Marcel Duchamp wanted "...to put painting once again at the service of the mind.[15] ". Strongly opposed to "retinal" art--just painting what one sees--Duchamp wanted to de-glorify the manual aspects behind a work of art, describing the process as just one of any other activities of the mind. By the same token, he rejected the image of the artist acting as a medium between the conscious and unconscious, as this would create an assumption that all decisions in the artistic execution are a matter of intuition, and thus cannot be thought out or translated into self-analysis.

Reflecting the Surrealist notion of distortion and juxtaposition (both visual and verbal), Duchamp mixed text and images to render "the logic of the visible into the service of the invisible.[16] ". Dislocations of verbal meaning were meant both to disorient

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[14]Ben Shahn. The Shape of Content (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) pg. 22.

[15]Ibid., pg. 53.

[16]Marcel Duchamp (Barcelona: Fundacio Caixa de Pensions, 1984) pg.192.

spectators and to express rebellion against the rigid stratification of the French Académie's standards.

Described as an "anti-artist" by some, Duchamp described artistic processes as arbitrary, thereby reducing the value of art per se. Carrying on the age-old questions concerning the nature and function of art, Duchamp remarks:

> Art has absolutely no existence as veracity, as truth.
> People speak of it with great, religious reverence, but I
> don't see why it is so much to be revered. I'm afraid I'm
> an agnostic when it comes to art...As a drug it's probably
> very useful for many people, very sedative, but as a
> religion, it's not even as good as God.[17]

By making the insignificant significant, and vice versa, he explains the uselessness of art to all but the artist him/herself, as the work acts to satisfy the artist alone. Therefore, self-expression no longer exists simply as a type of speculation but as a vital necessity for the individual.

To emphasize this point, Duchamp's distortion of words and images led viewers to question the validity of scientific "truths" as well, such as his creation of "playful physics"; the description of concepts such as "oscillating density" and "emancipated metal". He argued that scientific laws were merely ways of explaining phenomena beyond humans' limited intelligence--attested to by the fact that "...every 50 years or so a new law is discovered that invalidates the old one." [18]

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[17] Ibid., pg.10.
[18] Ibid., pg. 33.

Contrary to some critics predictions of a return to traditional, "humanist" themes after the rude shock of Abstract Expressionism (first seen in the revolutionary Armory exhibition in New York), the public was confronted with the emergence of yet another movement: Pop Art, emerging from the 60s. Yet Pop Art was not a continuation of the preceding, abstract movement. Its highly realistic subject matter was derived not from traditional "humanist" themes but from the sterile, dehumanized images of 20th-century advertising and mass culture.

Asking the perennially unresolved question, "What is art?", the young Pop Art generation of artists naturally looked with reverence to Marcel Duchamp, whose indifference to conventions was highly respected. He was especially respected by artists who were skeptical, irreverent and curious about the nature and function of art in what could be described as an "existentially absurd" era--the era of The Bomb. Duchamp saw art as a devise for getting people's attention, making them realize that the world is a work of art. Furthermore, he introduced the notion that since any "non-art" (ready-made) can be (made) art through intention and announcement, any art can theoretically be "de-arted", as suggested by his desire to use a Rembrandt for an ironing board.[19]

Like Surrealism, Pop Art, too, was a reaction against the "pure painting" of preceding movements. Pop Art was a decidedly unromantic reaction to the emotionality of Action Painting, in which attention was directed outward, to the surrounding world, rather

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[19]Dore Ashton. Twentieth-Century Artists on Art (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) pg.22.

than inward upon personal reactions to it.[20] In effect, this could be described as a hardened response to a hardened environment: a reflection on the alienation and automation of a highly consumeristic society.

Pop Art , a term coined by English critic Lawrence Alloway, was based on the imagery of consumerism and popular culture: comic books, advertisements, packaging, images of television and cinema, etc. An important feature of the iconography of this movement is that it rejected any distinction between good and bad taste. Since the mid-19th century, when Parisian artists rebelled against the highly regulated Académie and created their own outlets, the emergence in the United States of what is termed Modern Art was heralded by many as the new "universal language of abstraction".[21] The problem with this "universal language" was that few people could actually see its purpose, and few cared to try and understand it.

To bridge the gap between those who did and did not comprehend this new language of art, artists like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns recycled gimmicks of promotional media, and promotional media in turn became their art. Warhol painted American cultural heros like Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, stars who were already packaged and marketed by the media. Recognizing the importance of Duchamp's perception--that the significance of a work of art need not reside in the object itself--Warhol became a pioneer in displaying the endless material for art in popular culture,

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[20]Ibid., pg. 136.
[21]Mario Amaya. Pop Art...and After (New York: The Viking Press, inc., 1965) pg. 15.

as the "supreme artifice" of his works mockingly raised these pre-packaged images to new heights.

While Pop Art rejected conventions of the previous period by adopting ready-made or "low culture" objects and subjects, Minimalism attempted to undermine formalist tradition by exceeding its conventions and rules. The use of commercial and industrial materials within a restricted set of geometrical shapes seems to give Minimalist objects the cultural authority of technological markers, but taken out of the context from which it emerged, viewers had difficulty recognizing Minimalism as art. As Anna Chave explains, "Lay spectators only recognize such objects as works of art because they are located in the legitimating contexts of the gallery and museum, installed by curators and dealers (in homage) to a certain era of history."[22] Using techniques, materials and methods of production already full of associations and connotations in American society, Minimalism flips the authoritative power of pop icons by challenging the "established meaning" behind such ready-made images.

With the blunt and impersonal magnitude characteristic of this movement, what could be seen as simply a cool display of power is meant to describe an ambivalence towards authority. It is important to realize that this movement emerged from the 60s, years when the United States saw much unrest and brutality both at home and abroad: televised military brutality of American troops in Vietnam;

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[22] Anna C. Chave. POWER: Its Myths and Mores in American Art (1961-1991) (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) pg. 118.

police suppression of civilian uprisings both in the streets and on university campuses; the rise of corporate power due in part to the military-industrial complex, and the civil, women's and gay rights movements.

Vested power was threatened on all fronts, thus the "expectation" of strength needed to solve all the country's problems could explain this show of authoritarian rhetoric (by artistic means) as a response to this climate. As one critic writes, "The demand has been for an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art...minus symbolism, minus messages and minus personal exhibition."[23] . In both Minimalism and Pop Art, as in Holzer's works, the projection of industrial objects as Art has developed during an often volatile time of re-evaluation of values and power relationships.

Whereas Warhol recycled cliché images from popular culture, Jenny Holzer recycles and distorts linguistic cliches from American media. Verbal slogans, like the visual ready-made object, constitute a paradigm of the way in which people make and unmake culture. Drawing upon Duchamp's role in the debate over the language-image dialectic, Holzer uses both the language and mechanics of late 20th century communications. The questions posed by Holzer within her works demonstrate a desire (like Duchamp's) to bring art into the world and the world into art. For example, in "Honey, tell me...", a painting done in collaboration with graffiti artist Lady Pink, Holzer asks viewers to think about how we feel about the world we live in. More specifically, she questions viewers within an urban American context.

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[23]Ibid., pg. 117.

HONEY, tell me exactly what will happen on Earth and if you want it.
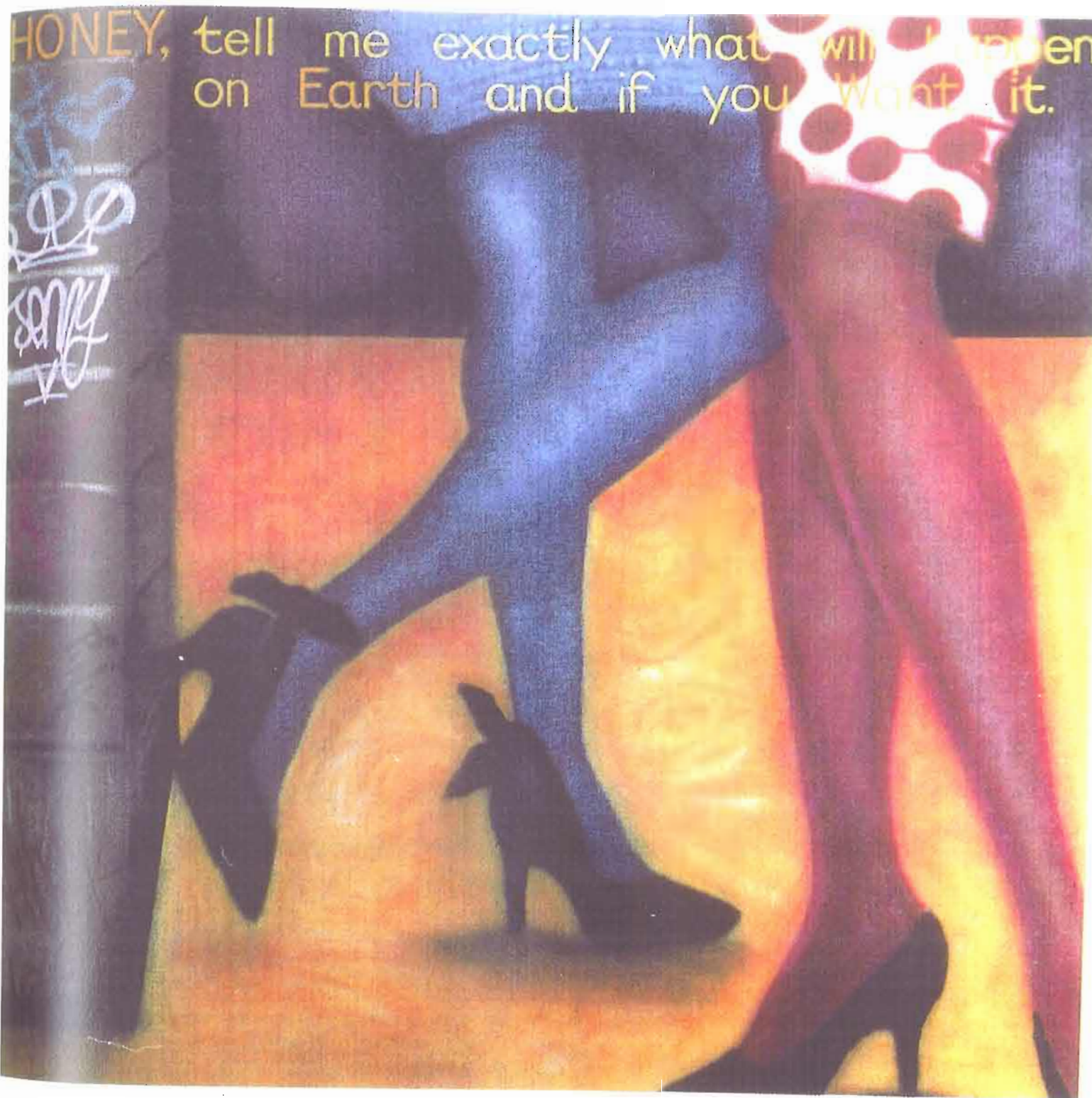
Like Duchamp, Holzer recognizes the participatory role of the onlooker in a work of art. In an attempt to place "...the logic of the visible into the service of the invisible,"[24] she eludes charges of esoterism or elitism by making art accessible to the general public. Holzer's installation pieces present a unique, direct way of melding the artist and viewer; the conscientious construction of a scene becomes a way of forcing the viewer to become involved.

Duchamp equated dislocations of verbal meaning with distortion in painting, and in Holzer's bronze plaques, this Dada-like juxtaposition between nonsensical messages within a serious or official context are particularly striking. Holzer's *Truisms*--creating new clichés from old ideas--also parallels Duchamp's humorous constructions, from "playful physics" to novel units of measurement. The disorientation provoked by such a visual and verbal paradox forces the spectator to distinguish and make sense of the various levels of meanings suggested.

With humor and skepticism, Marcel Duchamp served as an influential model against the tendency of artists to take themselves too seriously, and of dogmatic theorists to turn discoveries into academic formulas. Similar self-doubts and questioning about the nature of "reality" are present in Holzer's conflicting *Truisms* , as well as in her fearful *Laments* series. By continually knocking over his own esthetic notions, Duchamp opened a path for generations to come. His definition of art as a mere "act of will" suggested how (implicit in the works themself) the artist creates her/his own terms of reference. Therefore, as in the case of the ready-mades, a banal

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[24]Ibid., pg.192.

object becomes an expression of modern, urban activity--the city, the factory, the street, mass production...

While art based in linguistic signs is not a new concept in and of itself, Holzer's signs synthesize the ideas of previous movements to represent the distinctive concerns of this generation. Holzer's texts, language fragments pulled from both the conscious and the unconscious, masquerade as public service announcements of a subversive nature. Her direct and provocative use of language suggests the desire to provide a social and politically utilitarian form of art in the midst of a public barrage of messages. Artists like Jenny Holzer and her contemporary, American artist Barbara Kruger, integrate text and image in an increasingly political dialectic, a tradition expressed by Holzer's own statement: "Use what is dominant in a culture to change it quickly.". [25]

III. LANGUAGE:

"Words, like glasses, obscure everything they do not make clear."
--Nietzche

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[25] Ibid., pg.13.

Recognizing both the cultural authority of technology and the persuasive power of language, Jenny Holzer re-defines the role of language in the visual arts today. The dynamic dialogue generated by her messages, slogans and warnings is a result of the distinctive ability of language to reach a wide audience, and thus, to generate more reactions than visual images alone could provoke. But what is Holzer's ultimate goal or intention in using language as her artistic medium?

I maintain that Holzer's texts serve two main goals: 1. Using language to bridge the gap between the art world and the "real" world; 2. Provoking critical and revolutionary thought as a response to the confusing juxtaposition of context and message in her works. In addition, her works raise a series of questions that reflect ongoing debates and discussions in which questions range from: traditional views of changing iconography in art over time and the rising impact of mass communication media and technology on art; the social implications of art; the relationship of art to its public; and the role of patrons in art production.

In The Shape of Content, artist Ben Shahn speaks of the discrepancy between an artist's actual intention and the messages inferred by viewers. Duchamp described this relationship as the "art coefficient": the relation in a work between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.[1] According to Shahn, the "universality" of language (both symbolic or literal) produces a sense

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[1]Ben Shahn. The Shape of Content (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) pg. 11.

of community, for the contact created between the artist and viewers (through the work) briefly "...illuminates the private and personal world in which each of us lives the major part of his life."[2]

In addition, Shahn illustrates how the intention behind a work is more important than the physical product itself, for he explains that:

> ...it is not the degree of communicability that constitutes the value of art to the public. It is its basic intent and responsibility. A work of art in which powerful compassion is innate, or which contains extraordinary revelations concerning, or manifests brilliant thinking, however difficult its language, will serve ultimately to dignify that society in which it exists. (pg. 106).

However, in the case of Holzer's texts, the fact that they are set in a public, urban context would indicate that communicability itself is at least one of her basic intentions. Furthermore, the fact that Holzer's texts are translated into several different languages supports this idea; the message itself is her medium, having greater importance than the original (english) words themself.

Indeed, it is not surprising in recent years to see an increasing number of traditionally trained artists turning to street art, as the public realm grants greater freedom to challenge authority than from within the restrictive pecking order of the art world. Holzer understands the double power of language; it provides both a direct means of social commentary and a (subversive) de-familiarization of

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[2] Ibid., pg. 47.

socially accepted "truths", thereby causing individuals to question their relationship to the world around them.

Philosopher Roland Barthes wrote: "Language is legislation, speech is its code...To utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate."[3]   The manipulation of language in Holzer's texts is a sarcastic reminder of how societal conventions produce and dictate the meaning of words and images. At this level, the intention behind using language goes far beyond mere dialogue, for it now represents a shift of power; as Barthes illustrates, language itself is the instrument by which power is inscribed,

Language has often been used as a weapon by those on the fringes of society, but it is since the late 60s and 70s, when urban youth art culture developed its own moral codes and regulations, that Graffiti Art arose as a public display of communication between youths[4]   . For disenfranchised youths (African-American, Hispanic, and often poor),"Tags"--graffitists' stylized aliases, scrawled anywhere available--provided a way to reclaim space by leaving a mark on public property. Secure in prevalence and safe in anonymity, competition between graffiti artists through "style wars" created a dynamic forum of public expression for those otherwise denied access to an "official voice" in society.

The anonymity of Holzer's works, like that of graffiti artists, runs counter to the principle of private ownership, be it of knowledge, materials, etc. In addition, it is harder to create assumptions about the "artistic intention" behind a message if

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[3]Quoted in: Kate Linker. Love for sale (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990) pg.27.
[4]Ibid., pg.6.

viewers do not know who or what to point to. Anonymity creates a tension, for it is disconcerting for viewers to interact with an invisible element. Addressing the privatization of art, Bulgarian-born public artist Christo explains that "...when art became a commodity and we started to own it and to have it only to ourselves, that is when our monumentality started to be broken into small pieces..."[5] The common spirit of classlessness that is characteristic of street art illustrates a unique set of values in regard to art and to the role of art in society.

However, whereas graffiti tags explicitly flaunt Authority, the works of traditionally trained street artists like Holzer and Kruger are couched in the official voice of the corporate and political worlds, to subvert them in their own game. Holzer once wrote that "...writing is more effective if it's not dogmatic and if its not immediately or not entirely identifiable as propaganda",[6] explaining that once identified as such, viewers would be apt to discount its message as left or right-wing.

By creating an ambiguous mixture of elements--public and private installations, as well as the coinciding personal and impersonal nature of her works--Holzer consciously uses anonymity to establish a wall between the spectator and the artist. In turn, this wall is intended to act as a sounding- board or mirror for the spectator, creating self-reflection through the confusion and curiosity it provokes. Presented anonymously, such works fall into the same

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[5]Dore Ashton. 20th-Century Artists on Art (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) pg.196.
[6] As quoted in: Jeanne Siegal. Artwords 2--Discourse on the Early 80s (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988) pg. 293.

categories as public service announcements; having been continually conditioned to accept the veracity of official and anonymous information through the media, viewers assume that the lack of a signature (conventional evidence of an individual) gives evidence instead of an organization or institution.

One cannot ignore the paradox that is implicit to this situation; artists like Holzer are critical of social power relationships, yet as a mainstream artist she, too, accommodates the culture's dominant discourse. Perhaps Holzer's contradictory *Truisms* reflect her own inner struggle as well, the paradox between resistance and accommodation, or of criticism and cooperation. To what extent is an artist able to resolve these polarities?

Using industrially-manufactured, mass production methods as a way to address societal myths and mores from within (in contrast to distancing art from everyday life), Holzer risks being co-opted by the very corporations and wealthy patrons that fund her works, the same institutions she herself undermines.This dilemma is perhaps best expressed by one observer's admission: "Given the impossibility of transcending the power relationships of one's own culture, perhaps it is more realistic to at least acknowledge their existence." [7]

Recognizing the power of "cultural language" (both written and verbal), Holzer mimics commercial and advertising conventions, breaking down the societal value placed on words in communications and consumerism through mass-media diffusion. In

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[7] Quoted by the author, Anna C. Chave. POWER: Its Myths and Mores in American Art (1961-1991) (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) pg. 29.

turn, her mystifying clichés and anti-clichés are meant to provoke viewers out of complacent reception of information. Instead of presenting a beautiful, digestible message, Holzer introduces apocalyptic voices within a sleek, commercial context.

The "inappropriateness" of each message to its structure (medium) challenges the viewer on several levels; one is forced to question the validity of the technological infrastructure as well as the message itself. This incongruent relationship between text and context distorts assumptions about "truth", such as in the myth of technology that "the camera doesn't lie". The controversial and conscious confusion of roles between structures of commerce and structures of art turns conventional values of art, the artist and the audience upside-down. Holzer's "disguised" art both re-defines the social role of art and de-glorifies it.

Ironically, in overtly breaking down notions of art as rare and unique, artists also risk being misinterpreted and misrepresented. For example, Pop Art relies upon popular icons of American culture to reflect certain cultural values of society transmitted through images. Both Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein suggested through mass-produced, commercial images that people are just as mechanically manufactured as art objects are. Warhol's representation of Marilyn Monroe exemplifies how icons, symbolic images held up for public veneration, project and reinforce cultural assumptions. However, some people argue that they fail to undercut the structures they visually display because, by transforming these mass-media images into Art, they inadvertently become glorified.[8]

[8]Criticism of Warhol's works cited from POWER... Ibid., pg. 20.

According to Barthes, myths--a term used in contemporary American culture to refer to a fictitious story or image--are integral to mass-media advertisements, popular culture and objects of everyday life.[9]   In turn, these basic myths reflect the values we (the viewers) subscribe to as True. By examining how images (icons constructed by societal myths) serve to perpetuate power relationships of race, class and gender in society, artists like Holzer question the literal references conveyed by images, the cultural values placed on methods and materials in art production, and the impact created by the particular context in which the art is shown.

Explicit in Holzer's work is how she uses the relationship between text and image as a means of critiquing modes of representation in popular American culture. Attempting to analyze how social conventions (and thus, information and "meaning") are produced, artists like Holzer, Kruger and Cindy Sherman posit the idea that "identity" itself is an artificial construct, produced through iconic representation. Using the symbols, signs and emblems of mass-media communications which settle into our subconscious as a commonly shared visual experience, these contemporary artists shape urban language to their own ends.

According to Michel Foucault, "Where there is power there is resistance; and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."[10]   Therefore, rather than existing as a monolithic entity, power is described as stemming from a network of institutions which all exert some influence.

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[9]Information cited from POWER... Ibid., pg. 13.
[10]Michel Foucault. The History of Sexuality, Vol.1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) pg. 95.

Comparing this network of institutions to the geo-dynamics of the Earth, Foucault explains that, due to the ever-shifting processes by which power is enforced and replicated, conventional notions of gender and identity are also prone to destabilization. Thus, the most effective way to challenge conventional (social) notions would be to challenge the very way modern societies control and organize knowledge: the mass-media's representation of "universal" images, words and definitions.

These generalized semantic experiences are culturally constructed, yet posed as "natural". Like an advertising tactic, they are upheld under the idea that, if repeated enough, anything becomes TRUE. In addition, repetition also makes it easy to forget the arbitrary process (of classifying, selecting, defining and naming) that is behind these representations. Iconography provides a systematic or regulatory representation of power institutions, both consciously and unconsciously. It is used to construct and maintain conventional concepts about family, relationships, culture, nationality, etc.

With more and more artists using industrial and commercial processes to create their works (which then resemble the commercial images themself), where is a distinction made between the "commercial" and "fine" arts? Are gallery and museum officials the final, legitimating judges? Does the mechanized production of art destroy the fine arts as we have known it, or does this represent a conscious defiance of the elite gallery system that depends upon the rarity of works?

These questions are part of an on-going debate between artists and critics about the role or "purpose" of art. From one perspective,

by pushing viewers into conflict with decontextualized messages like "Labor is a life-destroying activity", Holzer works to deconstruct cultural assumptions and stereotypes by forcing viewers to distinguish fact from fiction. Her use of repetition is but a mirror of commercial tactics, and consciously breaks down traditional notions about the authenticity or original nature of an artistic work. On the other hand, critics like Jean Baudrillard see the havoc wreaked by technological methods of production on contemporary art as "a simulation of its own disappearance."[11]

Justifying the methods of production used by Pop artists-- employing visual and verbal ready-mades--writer Mario Amaya explains how such artists indirectly bring into focus the visual chaos of modern society that we have come to accept without question or complaint. Amaya describes the Pop Art movement as follows:

> A better name suggested might by the New Super
> Realism, as this alludes to the super elements in our
> culture: the supermarket, supermen idols, the supersales
> directive, the super-sophistication of a super-saturated
> society that values the new for its own sake.[12]

By bringing art closer to "the people"--posing art in the familiar structures of commercial ads or public service announcements-- artists also expose the links of art to economic and political concerns.

By adopting and distorting the "official voice" of public service announcements, Holzer destabilizes the cultural authority granted to "universal" representations. Her manipulation of words jolts the

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[11]Ibid., pg. 309.
[12]Mario Amaya. Pop Art...and After (New York: The Viking Press, inc., 1965) pg. 19.

viewer by pointing out the artificiality behind the slogans and clichés we see or hear daily: in movies, television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, leaflets...

In addition, Holzer, like Duchamp, toys with conventional notions about art as an object of prestige. By consciously blurring the distinction between the various functions of an object, artists expose how the display of an object "creates" its importance (that is to say, its value as a commodity). For example, Louise Lawler took a series of photos of the frames, labels and fragments of paintings in museums, suggesting the (museums') emphasis more on the power of owning/showing something rare and unique than on the art itself.[13]

Whether in a gallery display or in a commercial retail display case, the very act of isolating or framing an object (thereby creating a barrier from its "normal" surroundings) gives it an added importance. As one (anonymous) observer sarcastically noted, "...the objects are subsumed by their packaging."[14]

Holzer's public installations and signboards also signal a break from the physical and symbolic isolation of "pure art"; art displayed solely in galleries and museums. Dissatisfied with the (conventional) isolation of art from immediate consequences in our everyday lives, Holzer has managed to bridge the gap between the art world and the general public with her thought-provoking, startling messages.

[13]Information cited from _Pop Art..._ Ibid., pg. 25.
[14] Ibid., pg. 63.

IV. AN ARTISTIC RESPONSE:

> "...teaching itself is so largely a verbal, a classifying, process that the merely intuitive kinds of knowing, the sensing of things which escape classification, the self-identification with great moods and movements in life and art and letters may be lost or obliterated by academic routine...For it is just such inexact knowing that is implicit in the arts."
>
> --Ben Shahn, from _The Shape of Content_

In the three preceding chapters, I analyzed various social, political and artistic components comprised in Jenny Holzer's works. In conclusion, having examined the theoretical implications of the language and imagery that she employs, in this final chapter I am offering an artistic response to questions raised in the course of my research. A creative response is particularly pertinent in light of the fact that Holzer's texts are intended to elicit a reaction and dialogue amongst viewers. By employing a variety of mediums--photographs, drawings, poetry and texts--I am exploring the place and role of language in artistic expression.

Fig. 1
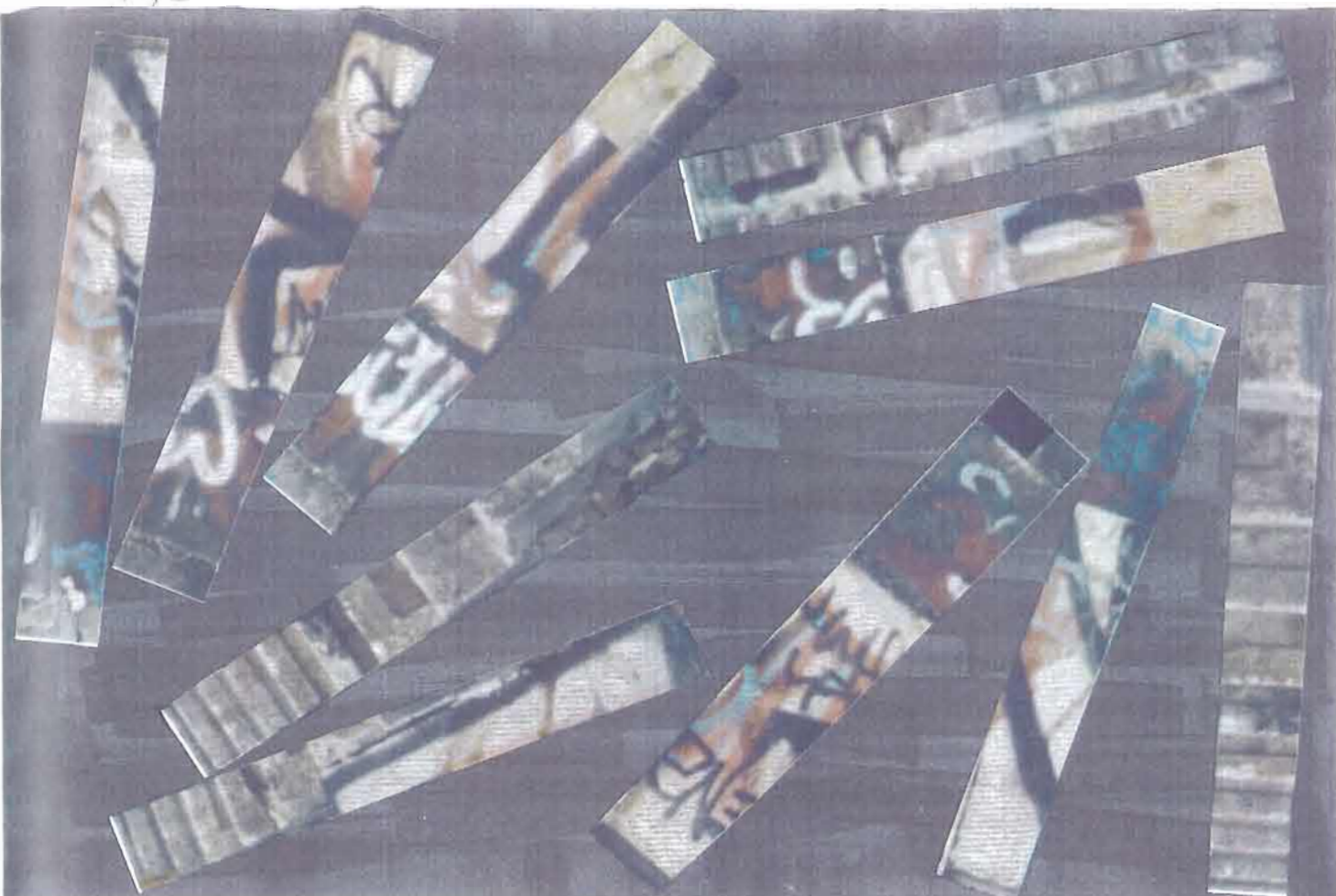
WHEN their work hits the public arena; and when their targets are identifiable, it is considered political — It stands for a kind of oppression, because it's manifestations, fighting against them, both as the areas which they individuals and it is directed against a person — the come out of. It provides a civility and re-claiming of space, language, POWER.

"I don't find this function, assembling colors in pleasing arrangements, very noble. If painting was only that, I should not lose one hour of my time for this activity. Art addresses itself to the mind, and not to the eyes. Art is a language, instrument of knowledge, instrument of communication."
— Jean Dubuffet

"Free... from theory and politics, from austere and calculated forms and suggested messages. To go fast, to express oneself quickly, to understand rapidly: the figure imposes itself."
— Anonymous

GAY Community
SOCIAL SERVICE
A.P.D.K
MOONDAW productions
Techno Speak Out
LAVENDER PANTHERS
FRIENDS OF ACT-UP
Seattle Bisexual Women's Network
FRONT ROOM THEATRE / HEART to ART
ASSOCIATION of PEOPLE LIVING WITH AIDS
GAY + LESBIAN YOUTH ASSOC of SEATTLE
ADVOCATES for ABUSED + BATTERED LESBIANS
GAY + LESBIAN COALITION of SNOHOMISH COUNTY

"Today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, press articles, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilisation of the image — we are still, & more than ever, a civilisation of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full term of the informational structure."
— Roland Barthes

⟨Speaking of T.V. ...⟩
"But when we move closer to the screen, we begin to make out certain figures, figures without bodies — which of course, is the site of the stereotype. It is in this area of representation that the rules of the game can be changed and subtly reformations can be enacted."
— Barbara Kruger

Urban landscapes mushrooming nocturnally --

Framed and caged artificially for posterity, this organic

and furtive dialogue grows and subsides with the crumbling

buildings surrounding it. Space is claimed and challenged,

and visual warring ensues. Style wars between factions
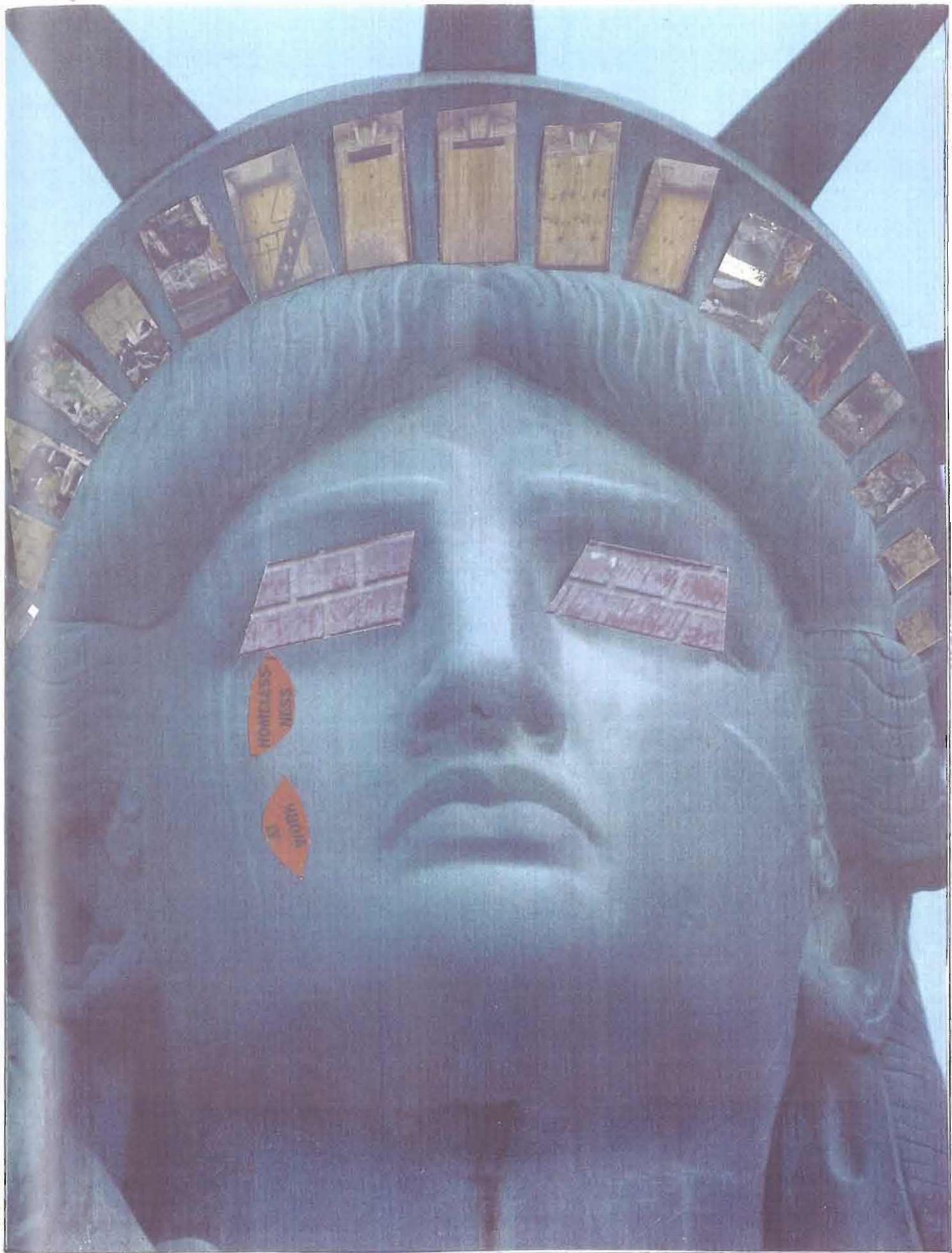
mirror power relationships in the society-at-large.

Fig 3

Urban

Landscape,

Part III.

Images console inside hot wind like concrete underbelly.

5-8-93

Fig 4

Fig 5

The Packaging Subsumes The Product

Velvet Touch®

DISTORTION FREE

Reduced FOR QUICK SALE

So Smooth.

QUALITY AT AN AFFORDABLE PRICE

CRACK RESISTANT VINYL INK

Ae1

EXCELLENT SHELF LIFE

Celebrate human strength, compassion and endurance in the face of challenge and adversity. Education must raise awareness in all communities, galvanizing people to fight a common enemy: AIDS.

Your blind faith in immortality will be your fatal mistake... The loss of talent, energy and creativity due to this disease will ever endure. Open your eyes...

AIDS Doesn't Discriminate... Keep Hope Alive ---> Reach Out.

Get A Life Now, 'cause you Ain't Got it. Engage... Play Safe.

Desperate

Krashing

Sullen limbs Out of Synch.

CALM and Cool as Polished metal.

Shadowed and Enveloped in THICK, Misty Veils

Submerged...

Silence--

Emerging from HOLLOW

Lifted Free From CLAUSTROPHOBIA

INTENSITY to BREAK

rippled glass MIRROR.

Sub, Sub, under I_R

under. D

Powerless

FEAR lies numb

like SORROW to think Fear to

Powerful arcs bend VAST,

Marble Valleys with grace & ease.

Falling short of the cliff leaves you wondering Why and How it all came about.

A sense of crisis horror tears the article from your hands -- descriptions of mad scientists/politicians --

Implied humanity.

Rising UP with every intention to move On and On and ALWAYS looking beyond the Sunset.

Eight reflections on

Agua

"We Cannot Afford to Lose Precious Time;

"The Ultimate Capitalist Commodity of a Lifetime."

Running Out of Time...

Killing time -- Spending time -- Saving time -- Buying time -- Watching time fly -- Passing time -- Out of Time

Spare some time -- Wasting time -- Time Will Crawl --

TV time -- Time is money -- Free time -- No time --

Figure #I: This collage is composed of two cut-up photographs super-imposed upon a black and white background. The use of photographs--taken of graffiti art in Seattle--and texts addresses the political nature of publicly displayed art. It is important to make a distinction here; graffiti art is not political simply due to its illegal nature, but rather, it is a political act in so far as it represents a reclaiming of public space. Essentially, graffiti art gains a public voice through a visual "coup", a refutation of public property rights and institutionalized "Authority".

Figure #II: In this picture, I "framed" a photograph of graffiti art on a crimson background. The black strips running vertically behind and beside the photo, conjuring an image of prison bars, symbolize the caging-in of something that is (precisely) neither intended nor made to be caged-in. On the one hand, it is making fun of the conventional authority granted to virtually anything that is displayed--centered, framed, signed, titled...In addition, it is intended to illustrate the artificiality behind framing this particular, subversive form of art.

Figure #III: In this third collage, I have created an abstract image of an "urban landscape" of the 90s. Here, I am pointing out that everything, even "nature", becomes relative to the space around one. To describe this contextual relativity, I have combined seemingly incongruent images--slices of photographs with bright, "artificial"

colors--together with a description of buildings and walls as "concrete waterfalls".

Often, the separation between fiction and reality, like the boundary between what is or is not beautiful, is simply a question of imagination. Semantic assumptions are cultivated and maintained by society; by questioning the way in which we receive information of any sort, one can understand the conditioned nature of "reality". For example, for someone who has lived all of her/his life in a large, urban environment, the idea of "nature" or a "landscape" could evoke images of this sort: concrete waterfalls, acid rain, barbed-wire brush, reflective glass pools, the thunder of an underground train...

Figure #IV: This collage consists of photo-clippings--depicting boarded-up windows and doors of an abandoned building on the lower east side of New York City--superimposed upon a magazine photo of the Statue of Liberty. In addition, Liberty's eyes are "walled up" with brick, and two blood-red tears stating "HOMELESSNESS AT WORK" fall down her cheek. The magazine photo, appropriated from an American Express advertisement, creates an artificial association between the culturally loaded symbol of Liberty with a financial institution based on a system of credit. The stark juxtaposition of images and symbolism here is a critique of hypocrisy in the United States--the clash between principles in theory and practice, and a critique of the illusory freedom promised through credit.

Figure #V: "The Packaging Subsumes the Product" is another sarcastic look at how presentation of an object or image can

subsume the object or image itself. In framing one drawing upon another, it is also intended to confuse the viewer as an advertising gimmick would, distracting consumers with extraneous and irrelevant information.

Figure #VI: The first of a series on AIDS awareness, this piece combines a photograph of the late Rudolph Nureyev with texts about self-education. As an artistic, public service announcement of sorts, it is representative of my own desire to address contemporary social issues through art. By combining visual and verbal mediums, I hope to touch viewers both intellectually and intuitively.

Figures #VII & #VIII: "Life-time" and "Eight Reflections on 'Aqua'" constitute parts two and three (respectively) of the series mentioned above.
The photograph in "Life-time", taken by Matthew Rolston, was donated to Focus on AIDS, a benefit auction to raise money for AIDS research. After pondering over the monetary associations made in expressions about TIME,
I began to think of the real danger in "lost time". In a society where "time is money", humanity is devalued. This collage calls for a re-evaluation of priorities on a personal and communal level, in which human resources are valued above monetary "commodities".

"Aqua", the photograph in part three by Fabrizio Ferri, is also from the Focus on AIDS auction. Nietzche once said that "The more abstract the truth you wish to teach, the more you must allure the senses to it.". With this in mind, the use of poetry in conjunction

with a visual image, in "Eight reflections on 'Aqua'", is intended to elicit a variety of emotions in regard to AIDS: hope and despair; calm and desperation; power and powerlessness; overcoming and being overcome...

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