

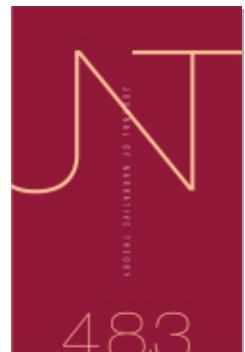


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“Being Alone with Yourself is Increasingly Unpopular”: The Electronic Poetry of Jenny Holzer

Leisha Jones

Internationally renowned visual artist Jenny Holzer has built a storied career appropriating, writing, moving, and projecting text toward both poetic and political ends. She has famously repurposed the advertiser’s text scroll, marquee, billboard, and building surface to engage mass forms of communication in the service of art. Working in and through ‘found’ art practices made famous by Marcel Duchamp’s readymades and Sherry Levine’s appropriations, Holzer re-invents the postmodern sign as ad-poem or public aphorism through text grafts, ranging from the philosophical to the mundane. In her text scrolls, projections, and web works, Holzer dissects the language of the cultural mandate in midair, challenging the weighty dominance of word on page toward a surface of pixel and speed. She also interrogates site-specific locales by literally reshaping them in texts, layering official repositories of history under the contradictory stories of individuals. Holzer’s primary strategy of appropriation, both of form and of content, offers a feminist corrective for the marginal and the margin by recontextualizing and foregrounding noncanonical voices in public institutional spaces. This essay examines the lineage of Holzer as a hybrid producer of electronic literature, and investigates the morphology of her most enduring work, *Truisms*, in light of the electronic literature genre. While some of Holzer’s work falls outside the parameters of this “born-digital” oeuvre,¹ I argue that versions of her *Truisms* series produce

some of the same effects on readers or viewers as they generated for the screen counterparts, such as the experience of text as object, the semiotic fluidity of words in LED motion, the decentering of language as a tool for chronological communication, and a schizophrenia of the ever-present in which the flow of information in the timeless space of the virtual continually exceeds practices of meaning-making.

The technological forms *Truisms* takes across the span of Holzer's more than 40-year career also chart her development as an electronic artist and writer. She morphs *Truisms* from paper flyer to LED text scroll to xenon projection to interactive webwork, and with each incarnation *Truisms* is born anew. Holzer introduced game-changing technologies to reanimate *Truisms*, with kinetic LED signs in 1982 and xenon projectors in 1996 (Schindler). According to an *Art in America* review of Holzer's 15-year retrospective *For Chicago*, in 2008, she "increased the agility of her art, and over the years she has been able to accelerate and slow the words' delivery with increasing precision, opening up a playful range of speed and pattern for writing that is often dark and angry" (Obourn). While the origins of *Truisms* may not strictly adhere to the born-digital criterion necessitated by the genre of electronic literature, the digital milieu and continued innovation of electronic work sustained over the course of Holzer's career situates it in the emerging canon of electronic literature. Like other literary genre canons, electronic literature has key foundational works that are critically acclaimed and meet the born-digital mandate. It may seem odd to turn toward a contested holdover such as a 'canon' in a time when feminist, critical race, and sexuality scholars have all but disintegrated this old hierarchy of white men and token others (in theory more so than practice), but it is precisely this hangover of organized and recognized excellence that can function to familiarize and legitimize the new genre of electronic literature's cultural and academic purchase. As such, the addition of Holzer's *Truisms* to the literary category of experimental women writers, specifically as part of the history of electronic literature, reveals the nexus between the worlds of visual art and literature.

"A Sense of Timing is the Mark of Genius"—Introductions

Jenny Holzer's art is exhibited and collected all over the world in places like Berlin, London, Basel, Hong Kong, Rio de Janeiro, and Istanbul. Her

works are featured on the Museum of Modern Art's website and in their collection, and lauded by venerable art critic Roberta Smith as "singular, consistent, and relevant . . . and influential." *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays, 1979-82*, among other works, have been cited as influential to writers, artists, and musicians such as Douglas Coupland, Camille Rankine, the Illuminator Art Collective, St. Vincent, and even U2. Popstar Lorde sewed an excerpt of Holzer text onto the back of her 2018 Grammy's dress in support of the Time's Up movement. And one of Holzer's most iconic *Truisms*, "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE," is the opening image of the We Are Not Surprised (WANS) website. WANS represents an international collective of women, transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming artists who are allied in this #MeToo moment to interrogate and eliminate insidious and institutional practices of sexual harassment, discrimination, misogyny, and racism in the art world. Clearly, Holzer and *Truisms* are having yet another moment.

Jenny Holzer is a key cross-over figure who helps to substantialize women's place in the early years of digital literary experimentation, and who has demonstrated career-long innovation in the arenas of art and literature. Primarily considered a visual artist, Holzer's electronic text appropriations and kinetic poetry installations function in ways analogous to works categorized as electronic literature. In addition to interrogating the form and function of a selection of Holzer's digital works, with an emphasis on her *Truisms* series, this article highlights the significance of her work as a producer of electronic literature and experimental women's writing. The oeuvre of electronic literature has much to gain from Holzer's feminist electronic language art, with *Truisms* as its most iconic offering.

While there are a number of places, both real and virtual, where one encounters e-lit, the most visible canon-like amalgam is featured by the Electronic Literature Organization.² In the latest edition of their e-lit compendium, *ELO Volume 3* (2016), the editors state that "e-lit does not operate as a fixed ontological category, but marks a historical moment in which diverse communities of practitioners are exploring experimental modes of poetic and creative practice at a particular moment in time."³ Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* reflect the experimental zeitgeist of such moments as she adapts the texts to their appropriated technologies. The *Truisms* of the early Time Square billboards and the *Truisms* of Twitter engender difference in the same, as reborn digital objects. Holzer's mark on this history

is significant because she supplements the genealogy of a male-dominated form with a robust force of feminist proliferation. Despite the presence of Ada Lovelace as a 19th- century founding computer programmer, the intersection between art and technology is still “coded” male, and even the early works gathered in the remarkably diverse *Electronic Literature Collections*⁴ note fewer women pioneers in the field.

“Grass Roots Agitation is the Only Hope”—*Truisms*

Jenny Holzer began her text appropriation experiments while confronting the Whitney Independent Study Program’s intimidating reading list during her post-graduate work. Her interest in monolithic textbook diagrams, which she developed as a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design, drew her attention to captions. In an interview with Grace Glueck of the *New York Times*, Holzer discussed the Whitney’s reading list of great Western and Eastern books. “‘I realized the stuff was important and profound, so I thought maybe I could make it more accessible.’ The result was what she calls her ‘Truisms,’ a lengthy series of one-liners in the form of ‘people’s pronouncements’ that expressed her idea of ‘everything that could be right or wrong with the world’” (Glueck). Holzer compiled a Reader’s Digest version of Western and Eastern thought and stripped it down to forty or fifty aphorisms. She cites Conceptualists, Dadaists, and some utopian social theorists as predecessors who, as she explained in an interview with Bruce Ferguson, “advocated that things be made usable, enjoyable, and comprehensible to anyone” (“Wordsmith” 112). *Truisms* offered philosophical adages in the language of a textbook primer with the style of a mediated ad. Holzer made copies of her transhistorical-sounding lines and posted them around Manhattan. *Truisms* encompassed a large range of directives and commentaries that seemed both particular and intimate, like things your mother taught you about the world, as well as startlingly confrontational reminders of your part in our global community. According to Anne Ring Petersen, Holzer’s content was influenced by books but the form was inspired by Times Square leprosy warning posters with easily readable attention-catching fonts deployed to disseminate information and to communicate a sense of danger and urgency in their spare direct lines (374). Todd Alden suggests that Holzer cribbed texts from such disparate sources as Emma Goldman, Lenin, Hitler, and Valerie

Solanis. In what reporter Brett Sokol calls a “pre-social media” move, local viewers left comments and underlined passages in response. “‘There was some voting, pre-Facebook ‘likes,’ Ms. Holzer said” (Sokol). The interactivity of Holzer’s pre-digital work provides the conceptual scaffolding for the myriad incarnations of *Truisms*, with the multi-authored web work *Please Change Beliefs* (1998) its most salient analog.

The aphorism is the literary genre most readily associated with Holzer’s *Truisms* series. Defined by Merriam-Webster as “a concise statement of a principal” and “a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment,” it captivates readers in its crisp pith. Aphorisms function in a variety of ways, from the philosophical guideposts of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* to advertising one-liners such as Nike’s “Just Do It,” L’Oreal’s “Because You’re Worth It,” and American Express’s “Don’t Leave Home Without It.”⁵ Holzer’s work may seem like it has jumped from such ads to the scrolling screen, but it also possesses the lyricality of a poem on a page. Hannah Brooks-Motl offers the example of the lyric aphorism in poetry, found in works by experimental women poets Anne Carson, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Lyn Hejinian among others. The lyric aphorism features the “kind of thinking that thinks about itself, that countermands and extends its own arguments, that suggests or invites further thoughts” (Brooks-Motl Section I). As such, Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms* is a lyric aphorism mashup somewhere between an advertisement and a poem. In order to invoke the hybridity of her category-crossing work, I am calling these text objects “ad-poems.” The ad-poem carries the persuasive force of finely honed print copy subtended with the euphony of a lyric poem, and describes much of Holzer’s particular oeuvre. The title of the piece, *Truisms*, is itself a postmodern riff on the transtemporal signified, alluding to something that remains the same across spans of time, or language for which meaning is fixed, while also gesturing to the infinite expansiveness of meaning-making—as in not Truths but *Truisms*.⁶ Both *Truisms* and the notion of truthtiness seem genealogically related to the contemporary malaise known as “alternative facts,” coined by Trump administration advisor Kellyanne Conway, to re-characterize what had been traditionally known as lying by government officials (Wedge). Whereas *Truisms* assertions are feminist and poetic, attempting to inspire critical thinking and questioning the nature of truth itself, “alternative facts” remain malevolent aberrations flying in the face of verifiable data points,

producing by cause or effect a divorce from practices of reason and a substitution of propaganda for information vetted by revered institutions and knowledge workers. In the next section, I perform a close reading of two *Truisms* examples, one mundane and one transhistorical, in order to situate them firmly within the history of aphoristic verse, to showcase Holzer's breadth of form within the context of the ineffable pixel, and to highlight her feminist experiments with both.

“Believing in Rebirth is the Same as Admitting Defeat”— Two Close Readings

Truisms today is ever more prescient. Aphorisms such as “Abuse of Power Should Come As No Surprise,” “Hiding Your Motives Is Despicable,” “Fear Is The Greatest Incompacitator,” and “Change is Valuable Because It Lets the Oppressed Be Tyrants,” prove eerie reminders of the current political climate. By contrast, “Everything That’s Interesting Is New” and “Routine is a link with the past” still resonate but call for context. If taken as separate poems, each lyric aphorism expands to fill a universe of thought, with the situatedness of time and place as optional constraints. Every time I read *Truisms*, whether it is in a span of a few days or across a decade, the lines mean something different to me—separately and *en masse*—like many good poems. To showcase this effect, I offer the following close readings of two lyric aphorisms from *Truisms*. The function of my close readings is not to fix their meanings with my own contextual and semantic baggage, or to privilege New Critical reading over newer approaches to textual criticism, but to demonstrate the flexibility of *Truisms*’s aphorisms as both surface and depth objects. These *Truisms* readings attempt to open a portal into the lyrical and mundane possibilities of aphoristic engagement. They are notably rendered through a feminist lens, the comingling of my own with that of Holzer’s. To be fair, Holzer has stated in at least one interview that she is “too reserved” to be a feminist (Kelleher), despite her work being classified as such by many critics; I argue here and later that her work is decidedly feminist in both form and content. My readings behave in much the same way as any close critical engagement with a lyric poem that requires an unpacking of meaning layers as well as recontextualizations across time. They try to take seriously the form of the one-liner.

“A Solid Home Base Builds a Sense of Self”

Beginning with the varied and venerable western Enlightenment philosophies of the self inaugurated by Descartes and Kant, our current sense of self has expanded to include not just a being, a mind, with or without biological imperatives, but a doing, along the lines of a Deleuzian anti-Oedipal becoming unrestricted to consciousness or rights-bearing presence.⁷ Feminist, queer, and critical race theorists have troubled the notion of a self containing an essential gender as well as a sexual and racial identity and have asserted, instead, that our notion of the self as a discrete unit or warehouse of traits and actions comes primarily from recognition via outside channels, through our participation in socio-cultural institutions and practices. In other words, a sense of self comes from elsewhere. There is an important distinction between having a sense of self or an identity that we perform and maintain, which may include histories and bodily memories and everyday activities, and the recognition or interpellation from elsewhere of ourselves as individuals, with phatic relations between ourselves and other identities and institutions. Our statuses as selves may be called into question if we are not hailed by outside agencies and agents such as workplaces, cell phone providers, objects of desire, or people on the street. These philosophical interventions—from Simone de Beauvoir’s axiomatic “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” and Judith Butler’s notion of identity as a performative, to critical race theorists who chronicle and dissect the ways in which institutional racism constructs contemporary subjects—contradict the notion of the self pervasive in the popular imaginary, which implies a unique individual identity, possibly divinely inspired and tasked with a predetermined life purpose or at least a soul. According to this notion, the self is something we already have, and that we are tasked with finding or getting in touch with—as if the self were lost, misplaced, or misrecognized.

If one orders a self through repetition and regulation, a symbiosis of body, time, and space that together produce something recognizable to us and to others as a self, how might we conceive of home? Home is a place of refuge and habit, familiar things, practices, and for some of us people—our people and our pets—a place where we can ‘be ourselves.’ Holzer’s aphoristic “solid home base” evokes the reliability of a space designated as ours, a space from which we depart and to which we return. If our home

is not solid, i.e. not a designated space of safety and comfort, our sense of self is in danger of being challenged, disrupted, or disorganized. Holzer's aphorism begs the question, how crucial is this connection between home and self? If a sense of self arrives from a combination of practices and recognition, even consciousness, what necessitates the home as a foundational base? The category "home" thus defined may in fact describe that key foundational element from which we all arise. Even if this is not the case and the experience of ourselves as unique identities is merely one effect of living as a plurality, contagion, or crowd, home as a foundational category continues to be pervasive in much contemporary discourse. For example, the popular notion of the self as a unified agent, according to sociologists, pop psychologists, and moms alike, suggests that home as a stable and nurturing site is a crucial wellspring for identity development (Alexander). Additional support of this notion may be found in studies of the elderly in transition, who when removed from their primary habits and abode into unfamiliar care facilities exhibit physical and emotional stress, often with a worsening of pathological symptoms (Kate Jackson). Does the loss of a "solid home base" threaten the security of *knowing* who we are? Does this mean that homeless people do not experience themselves as unified entities distinct from others? What of the nomad, hermit, or refugee?

Homes may be configured as mobile or sealed and still function as solid, providing a framework for a sense of self. In the years since Holzer composed this postmodern truism, the notion of the self as a multiplicity has supplanted older configurations of the self as a unique singularity. Almost. Though we orchestrate and maintain digital virtual selves and 'real life' selves, easily shifting between idiomatic expressions and recognitions of ourselves as multiplicities, we nonetheless continue to operate under the smear of an essential specialness, as if the 'multiple' I could function in the same way as the 'singular' I of past eras. This *truism* reading grazes philosophical and theoretical discourses surrounding the concepts of self and home, and attempts to link these together. Again, this is my deep dive, and each reader who chooses to muse upon the aphorism will create a different path. The experience of Holzer's ad-poems or lyrical aphorisms in light of the critical practice of close reading may even be analogous to the hypertextual link-following we perform without much thought via search engines that link us to evermore links with information. Holzer's apo-

risms elicit the deep dive, challenging readers to examine the maxims of the everyday at the expense of the comforts of the intimate. Therein lies the power move of the one-liner — to make strange our habits of language and culture toward an interrogation of founding familiarities.

“Emotional Responses Are as Valuable as Intellectual Responses”

Like Holzer’s other *Truisms*, this aphorism makes us pause to interrogate its cultural and personal significance. How might the value of emotions change over time, especially in light of a positive feminist revaluing of emotion on the one hand, and the exploitation of emotion at the expense of reason on the other, such as damning but vacuous political rhetoric deployed to rev up one’s base? Official histories of western thought from Aristotle forward are replete with celebrations of the triumph of reason. The privileging of intellectual ‘higher order’ response over ‘base feeling’ relegated women to the emotional apex of gender trait division, on the wrong side of history (see Jaggar and Plamber, for a gloss on this area of inquiry). Simone de Beauvoir was both subject to this dichotomy and a fractious proponent of it. Why were emotional responses of lesser significance? Was it because women, the nature half of gender’s nature/culture binary, were thought to possess greater emotional acumen or fewer intellectual skills? Or were women considered lesser beings, and thus traits associated with them such as emotional savvy became tainted? In either scenario, at least since the Renaissance, women from nuns to suffragettes have been associated primarily with feeling, including the symbolic range the figure of woman occupies from the contaminating force of the witch to the guiding light of the virgin. The dualism of reason and emotion, as ubiquitous in vernacular usage now as the binary of mind and body, has informed the provocations of feminist thought since at least *The Second Sex*. In the US it was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s protest aphorisms such as “I am a man,”⁸ and the Women’s Movement in the 1970s insisting “The personal is political”⁹ that brought racial and gender binaries under scrutiny. Civil rights advocates challenged institutional inequalities based on the perception that the white side of the racial divide believes itself to be more evolved, of higher intellect, and able to jettison its useless emotional responses to things in favor of a prescriptive rationality. Gender activists emphasized issues surrounding women’s domain, illu-

minating and politicizing the role of physical and emotional unpaid feminized labor.

The persistently popularized notion that reason and emotion are at odds with one another (see, for instance, John Gray's execrable *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, published in 1992) is under contemporary scrutiny from feminists, neural scientists, and psychologists among others. For example, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has done much to complicate the Platonic antagonism between emotion and reason. In *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1995), Damasio maintains that the processes of conscious thought traditionally ascribed to reason cannot physically occur without the founding and functioning sites of emotion that are likewise produced in the brain (128). And in *The Feeling of What Happens, Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999), Damasio claims that the cause of emotion "may have been the image of an event . . . [or] no image at all, but rather a transient change in the chemical profile of your internal milieu brought about by factors as diverse as your state of health, diet, weather, hormonal cycle, how much or how little you exercised that day, or even how much you had been worrying about a certain matter" (47–8). Damasio's hypotheses support feminist concerns about lingering gender biases based upon the naturalized association between women and a kind of feeling-as-thought.

A little over a decade after Holzer wrote *Truisms*, the concept of "emotional intelligence" has been fully assimilated into popular discourse. Coined by psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer in 1990, emotional intelligence is "a set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and in others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's life" (185). Has the valuation of emotional intelligence actually changed anything to even the playing field for women? Some studies suggest that we import our old biases into this new model, rendering the evaluation of emotional intelligence something in which men will outperform women (Lopez-Zafra and Gartzia). Margaret M. Hopkins and Diana Bilimoria claim that emotional intelligence is desirable and necessary for successful employment, and as such men will 'naturally' outperform women in self-reporting contexts, as well as administrative reviews in which men and women are evaluated at similar EI levels but men in the end are still judged as superior (16, 20). In practice,

many of the women who by this ‘objective’ rubric of emotional intelligence score higher than their male counterparts are still judged wanting because of the biases that come with assessment models. Women are damned if they exhibit emotional dexterity and are unrewarded for it, damned if their emotional connections and judgments are viewed as extreme, leaving them open to manipulation, and damned if they do not exhibit a readable feminine emotional matrix for being pathologically detached, cold, or masculine. There is little room to move for the feminine in this rubric.

This *Truisms* reading takes a journey thorough the philosophical to the realm of popular and social science in order to explore the naturalized knowledges connected to the categories of emotion and reason. There are so many other nodes of entry one could take here, but the point is that the aphorism can be both something that provides a distilled surface and something that one can endlessly unpack because of its seemingly natural, transhistorical nature. At first glance, Holzer’s aphorisms read like easily consumable bits, but they yank away the scaffolding of the adage, leaving us bereft of a place to stand—a stark reminder of the arbitrariness of the signifier upon which language is based.

Truisms as ad-poems sell poetic knowledge designed to be easily consumable with the speed and sensibility of a slogan while providing cultural observation and critique. The meaning of individual *Truisms*, as of any work of art, cannot be fixed. Their iterability, transience, and malleability of form situate them as postmodern art objects; their lexography in digital media marks them as electronic literature, the move from poster paper to pixel notwithstanding; and their interpretive domain, which includes causal and close readings, produces literary signifieds. I chose these two examples to explore because they popped out at me, but I could have chosen any from the group and been able to perform a similar style of close reading as I would with most poems. The difference between analyses of the aphorism and the sonnet, or the free verse poem and the villanelle, has everything to do with the conventions of form and content. It is this kind of literary criticism that shows us Holzer’s retooling of the aphorism as both postmodern sign and modern ad-poem. I also noticed, in true lit crit form, my inability to close read both aphorisms as totally separate entities. It was seemingly unavoidable for me to read one outside of its connection to the other one, though again there is no real order in which one is sup-

posed to approach *Truisms*'s aphorisms. The encounter with Sappho's fragments comes to mind here; one can recognize in their skeletal frames the white space of what might have been and still be unable to engage with them as standalone objects, feeling compelled to read them as interconnected parts of a collective work. *Truisms* such as "A SOLID HOME BASE BUILDS A SENSE OF SELF," "EMOTIONAL RESPONSES ARE AS VALUABLE AS INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES," as well as others such as "ANY SURPLUS IS IMMORAL," "EXPIRING FOR LOVE IS BEAUTIFUL BUT STUPID," "DECADENCE CAN BE AN END IN ITSELF," and "EVEN YOUR FAMILY CAN BETRAY YOU" are distillations of and commentaries upon naturalized transhistorical truths burnished and combined to reflect the contradictory nature of the postmodern era. While these aphorisms refer to signifiers of cultural value, sculpted away from their milieus they productively interrogate and contradict one another in chains of infinite referral.

It has been a mere three decades since Holzer first posted her *Truisms*. For contemporary readers new to them, especially readers who are used to the instantaneous internet speed of information retrieval and the production of 24-hour news in 140/280 characters on Twitter, the posted aphorisms might seem a bit slow and archaic instead of revitalizingly succinct and ironically inconsistent. In their original form, however, they comprise modern ad-poems, headlines of extractable sound bites that use the language of the universal to sell us norms through the demography of the particular. In other words, these ad-poems address us as consumers more than citizens, and highlight the systemic way we are sold what to believe. We are implicated as participants in the process even if merely through assimilation or interpellation. As collective poem of aphorisms, *Truisms* performs the poem-as-ad in both the design and production of its form (the lure of a typographically sleek poster placed strategically in sites with high foot traffic or where communities might gather) and its aesthetic and educational function. It addresses us as collective as well as individual reader-participants with lines so packed they could each spawn one or a hundred interpretive acts. In the remaining sections, I trace the morphology of *Truisms* from paper to LED text scroll, xenon projection, interactive internet app, and finally its emergence on Twitter, that ubiquitous realm of the aphorism offering *Truisms*'s grandest, most symbiotic field of play.

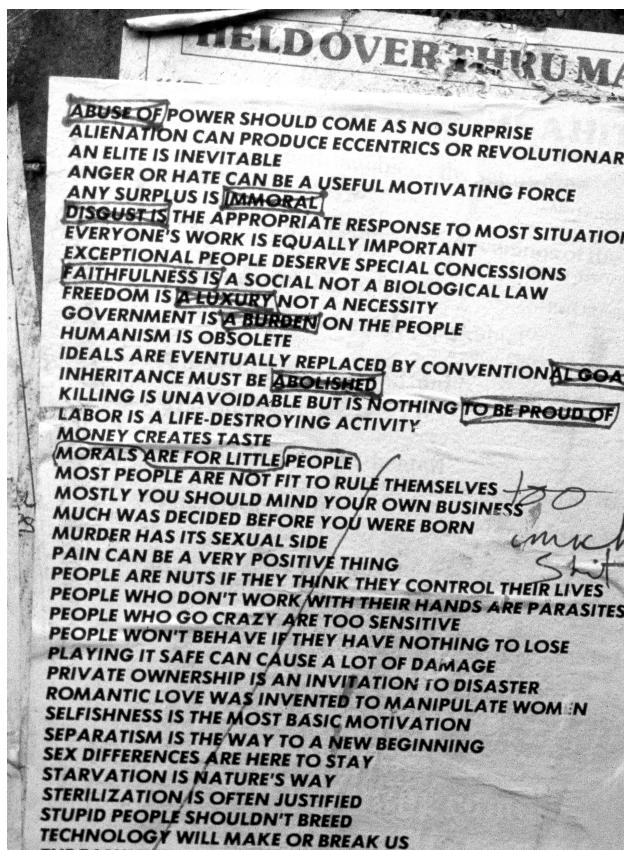


Fig. 1. From *Truisms*, 1977–79. Offset poster. Courtesy: Jenny Holzer/Art Resource, NY

“Statis is a Dream State”— From the electric to the electronic

Truisms photolithographs first appeared around Manhattan on telephone booths, construction walls, bus and subway stations, among other shared public spaces. These text posters became interactive dialogues between community members and Holzer herself. People wrote all over them — checked ones they liked, made correctives and suggestions, etc. (see Figure 1). Instead of being offended, Holzer responded by making updates



Fig. 2. From *Truisms*, 1977–79; *Survival*, 1983–85. Theater marquee. Installation: Forty-second Street Art Project, Times Square, New York, 1993. Photo: Maggie Hopp. Courtesy: Jenny Holzer/Art Resource, NY

and revisions, and replastering. One effect produced by art in this accessible and low rent form was to make visible the function of the aphorisms as support structure, foundational beams for the scaffolding of public life. *Truisms* proffers an invitation to examine not only the didactic function of public spaces and one's participation in them, but also the ways in which axioms of public space construct the public itself. Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard, in "Looking around: where we are, where we could be," situates this stage of engagement: "I would define public art as accessible work of any kind that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment" (121). As a work of public art, *Truisms* does not try to sell you something or corral you into a turnstile or dwarf you in the shadow of its high-rise; the flyer is a mass medium that asks for your attention at the approachable level of the personal. In reading and responding to it, you may become more aware of public space as assembly line of the cultural imperative, co-

ercive and ever-present, but at the same time malleable with an x and an o of the pen stroke. Not the mere automatons of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, people find pleasure in the public streets, and in adjudicating the foundational tenets of public discourse. In addition to calling attention to these collectives in and shaped by space, the material aesthetic of the everyday flyer is open to deconstruction and collaboration in a way many gallery and museum-based artworks, and other public art pieces, are not. *Truisms* is successful because it makes people behave as agents in spaces designed to control their behavior.

In 1982, the Public Arts Fund sponsored Holzer's first LED show, in which *Truisms* took over an electronic signboard in Times Square, marking an early example of critical feminist intervention in a public space using appropriated and recontextualized text to politicize both the aesthetic of the sign and the public sphere itself (see Figure 3). *Truisms* predates works by canonical women e-authors like Shelley Jackson, and some venerable kinetic e-poems that use appropriation as primary strategy, like Brian Kim Stefans's *The Dreamlife of Letters* (2000), in which an exploration of the nature of language arrives in an appropriated kinetic text, or Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* (2001), which translates bird sound into calligrams connected to human adaptations of bird songs for a site specific piece.¹⁰ *Truisms* was reinvented for scrolling LED text boxes (like the kind you would see in stores, vertical text boxes scrolling sales, etc.), columns, marquees, and billboards. The terse declarative poetry installations that littered galleries, museums, urban institutional landscapes and public works with the gnomic roll of electronic letters gesture toward an Orwellian 1984, with the directives of Big Brother interpellating its citizenry, while offering enough textual play to knowingly critique the practice. Even if viewers could no longer interactively engage *Truisms* by altering them directly, the proliferation of Holzer's electronic aphorisms posed a bigger disruption to everyday institutions than the rhizomatic patter of the everyday poster sign.

By the mid-1980s, as Jenni Drozdek notes, Jenny Holzer and her intermittent collaborator, Barbara Kruger, emerged as paragons of postmodern pop feminism, transforming the sexual politics of the 1970s Women's Movement into a display and a splaying of the hypertextual subjectivity machines produced by social regulations, brand marketing, and consumer demographic targeting. Here, the "personal is political" becomes a trade-



Fig. 3. From *Truisms*, 1977–79. *Truisms*, 1982. Spectacolor electronic sign. Times Square, New York. Organized by Public Art Fund, Inc. Photo: Lisa Kahane. Courtesy: Jenny Holzer/Art Resource, NY

mark. Holzer's feminist appropriations of institutional language recode the very spaces they inhabit, not by humanizing them with the voices of the personal or feminizing them with the politics of everyday life but by seizing and intensifying the visual means of ideological reproduction. In other words, Holzer's gesture is not about bringing feminine or domestic life out of the home, but interrupting the visual mechanisms that produce public space as patriarchal, such as with her billboards "SLIPPING INTO MADNESS IS GOOD FOR THE SAKE OF COMPARISON," "IT IS IN YOUR SELF-INTEREST TO FIND A WAY TO BE VERY TENDER" (see Figure 2), and "YOUR OLDEST FEARS ARE THE WORST ONES." These and others like them insert "feminine" concerns such as madness, tenderness,



Fig. 4. From *Truisms*, 1977–79; GOBO, 2012. Light projection. L&M Arts, Venice, California. Photo: Joshua White/JW Pictures. Courtesy: Jenny Holzer/Art Resource, NY

and fear into a domain that must remain free of such attributes to maintain a kind of hypermasculine efficiency and ownership of the means of production. Her poetry installations do not function as parody; rather, they occupy the same territory as a didactic panel, traffic sign, or warning label. When Holzer replaces aphorisms for advertisements, the suturing process between sign and co-sign is interrupted. The collective means toward meaning-making, amassing and decoding the urban semiotics of public spaces, is no longer smooth. The striations of its composition are highlighted, and mechanisms of control and aesthetic delight collide. One stutters at its difference in the same.¹¹ Holzer jams up the advertising function of the billboard by appropriating it for aphorisms that seem like advertisements but behave far more subversively; the billboard is the same device in concept but becomes a different thing when appropriated for feminist art—difference in the same (see Figure 4). The letters coil, the eye blinks, the gentle flicker of LED produces the mass stammer of literature as event. The leap from the original analogue to the digital and kinetic in the

Truisms series does not imply a rebirth of this or any other text, nor an abdication of one textual realm for another. The electronic ephemerality of text scrolls, billboards, and building projections destabilizes our naturalized relationship to the authority of concrete textual objects and the ideological weight they carry as repositories of official culture production and dissemination. Paradoxically, Holzer's electronic *Truisms* manages to trade in the currency of the current by emitting the timeless voice of authority.

Jenny Holzer continues to explore digital interfaces of text and environment throughout her career. In 1995, in collaboration with *äda 'web*, she reinvented her *Truisms* series for the internet. *Please Change Beliefs* invites readers to alter aphorisms, adding some of their own. This prefigures the collaborative zeitgeist of Web 2.0 and what now seems like a sub-genre of Twitter bot poetry,¹² such as "Pentametron" by Ranjit Bhatnagar, which generates rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter culled from random Twitter posts, or John Burger's @HaikuD2, which selects Twitter posts with 5/7/5 syllabic structure, and adds line breaks to structure the tweets into haiku poems. According to Anthony Tran's media lab blog, *Please Change Beliefs* anticipates the "proliferation of single-serving, aggregated, generative websites such as *What the Fuck Should I Make for Dinner*, *This is Less of A*, or even *what would I say?*" Using the link <http://adaweb.walkerart.org/project/holzer/cgi pcb.cgi?change>, you can engage *Please Change Beliefs* by altering or removing *Truisms* and replacing them with your own responses. You can also read other responses in this interactive work. Though Holzer admits to preferring the poster form, she likes it when "people come back at me thu (sic) the computer" ("Transcript of live chat session").

Like many interactive and open-ended web projects in the era of the troll,¹³ not all *Please Change Beliefs* responses engage the work with the veracity it aims to produce. I am not sure if the site is monitored for content or how Holzer feels about subversive, offensive, or reifying engagements with master narratives. Like Microsoft's chatbot Tay who learned to be a racist from Twitter in less than twenty-four hours (Vincent), some users try to interrupt the cultural and aesthetic critique and language play of participants; for instance, in response to "A Little Knowledge Can Go A Long Way" users posted "A Beautiful Girl In Her Early Twenties Is Not Monogamous By Nature" and "A Bitch Needs To Learn Her Place." But most of the entries are thoughtful; those in response to "A Lot of Profes-

sionals Are Crackpots," include "A Lot of Professionals Use Crack and Pot," "A Lot of Professionals Are Just Skilled Actors," "A Lot of Professionals Are Fatslappers," "A Lot of Professionals Are Cracked Pots," and "A Lot of Confessionals Are Chamberpots." The updates, listed alphabetically, reveal a pattern of responses in which the verb and object changes most frequently while the subject stays the same. This could be because of the way users perceive the task, and how much change might be considered too much before the thread between the original and the addition frays. Tran suggests that "the public and its displays is undeniably tied with the nous of our subjectivity," and perhaps the collective 'we' demands a cohesion users are reluctant to challenge.

"It Is Heroic to Try to Stop Time"—*Truisms* go viral

The presentist temporality of Holzer's kinetic lexia situates them astride e-literature's classical canon of nonlinear hypertextual works and the postmodern subjectivities produced through them. Storyspace's mid-90s foundational works such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* coincided with the solidification of Holtzer's electronic installation as hybrid art/text form. While the decentered subjectivities produced through these hypertextual narratives require the participation of individuals, and Holzer's *Truisms* engage the collective you, they do share a common effect: the generation and experience of a kind of nonlinear present—the space/time of the schizophrenic. Hypertext narratives fluctuate; theoretically they have no beginning, no ending, and when open-sourced manufacture an immeasurable space where users, viewers, or readers may locate themselves briefly, in the space and time of a moment. As mentioned earlier, electronic aphorisms demarcate the chaos of ordered spaces and subjectivities. Holzer codes a text of speed, whether her grafts are kinetic running billboards or static building projections. Hypertext narratives shape shift. But who or what is produced through these engines? The viewer who operates in diachronic time, i.e. one who exists through and deploys a linear notion of time as successive movement or an unfolding progression, is supplanted by synchronic performatives that comprise identities both hailed and shunned in the seemingly endless ever-present. Frederic Jameson argues that "high-modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and of memory" (16) re-

cede in light of late capitalist everyday mandates such that space rather than time becomes the dominant category of interlocution. This move from time to space is not the signal of a new age, as it were, but something more ageless in kind.

The psyche of the schizophrenic is coterminous with the plain of post-modern identity. It is shorn from its significatory chain of meaning-making like a structuralist unbound. According to Jameson, the schizophrenic experiences “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time”:

(T)he psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a two-fold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (26–27)

The dominance of text as pedagogical repository for cultural knowledge and identity formation is replaced by the dominance of the image.¹⁴ Electronic sentences are comprised of visual image lexicons that conveniently include (or appear to include) their syntactical referents. French poststructuralists from Michel Foucault to Paul Ricoeur hail the constructed subject, who is made intelligible and visible through force, repetition, subjection, and prostheses. By contrast, the schizophrenic viewer or reader involuntarily traverses the currency of speed and disjunction to inhabit the space of becoming, i.e., an identity or identity consortium in process rather than a unified actor moving in chronological time.

The latest iteration of *Truisms* lives on Twitter. A Twitter feed attributed to Jenny Holzer, started in May 2007, features her *Truisms* and a few other aphorisms. @jennyholzer intermittently tweets an aphorism from the iconic series in the venue most germane to its structure. Carolyn Guertin suspects that Holzer is behind the latest *Truisms* incarnation (4), but Holzer herself denies it: “Maybe it’s somebody’s conceptual art project. I would be embarrassed to do it myself – I like being invisible. But when I

look at the website, I think: Go, Not-Me” (Murg). Does it matter at this point if Jenny Holzer is the person behind @jennyholzer? The viral life of *Truisms* on Twitter serves as evidence of, first, its resonance as cultural text object that has morphed into a verb (as in to “Holzerize” something, to use the language of the text book and the ad to expound with aphoristic brevity in a space with limited character numbers); second, its adaptability of form, the potentiality of this ongoing project to exist and continue to produce effects in multiple media and venues; and third, its capacity to host the voice of the other within the very function of the art/text. Holzer opened the project up for intervention at points of its iterations—a successful attempt to turn the didactic into the prosaic. Of course, Twitter is the environment *par excellence* for this exchange. The new life of the ad-poem-become-tweet harnesses the authority of the crowd, inviting participation in the form of retweeting or mirroring rather than the invitation *Please Change Beliefs* explicitly offers its viewers/users for intervention.

Holzer’s work has inspired fan spin-off accounts that proliferate and reinvigorate the aphorisms. The artist sougwen developed an experimental mashup website, involving an “inflammatory truism generator” that combines snippets from *Truisms* and others from Holzer’s *Inflammatory Essays, 1979–1982* with the word “when” as a conjunction. The text is arranged with solid background screens much in the same way as the installation of *Inflammatory Essays* on wallpaper in galleries and museums, with text in all-caps black font. Mashups include such aphorisms as, “DEVIANTS ARE SACRIFICED TO INCREASE GROUP SOLIDARITY WHEN STRONG EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT STEMS FROM BASIC INSECURITY,” and “DESCRIPTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN METAPHOR WHEN SYMBOLS ARE MORE MEANINGFUL THAN THINGS THEMSELVES.” Jenny Holzer@HOLZERTRON and truisms@holzerisms are fan sites that tweet unaltered truisms straight from Holzer’s work in much the same way as the official Holzer site, but with more regularity. @JennyHolzerMom, according to Jessica Roy “the only Twitter parody account worth following,” uses the format of the original *Truisms* in all capital letters with its authoritative tone of tempered wisdom steeped in the homebrew of Mom’s winsome adages, featuring such tweets as “YOU CAN EXPERIENCE TRUE UNFETTERED FREEDOM WHILE ALSO WEARING A BIKE HELMET THEY ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE,” “BE WARY OF PROMPOSALS THAT ARE

MORE ABOUT THE PROMPOSER THAN THE ONE TO WHOM IS BEING PROMPOSED,” and “SOME PEOPLE THINK THE GIVING TREE IS A ROLE MODEL NOT A CAUTIONARY TALE AND THOSE PEOPLE SHOULD BE AVOIDED.” Twitter *Truisms* invoke the urgency of breaking news. Read against other tweets in one’s feed, they still function like ad-poems, promoted words from our sponsor offering cultural warning labels instead of products. They manufacture a positive disruption in our rapid consumption of news and chatter with the lyrical precision of a surgical strike.

“Your Awful Language is in the Air By My Head”—Conclusion

I have argued for Holzer’s alignment with the enterprises of electronic literature, not only by virtue of the delivery vehicle of poetic text encounter but also because of the effects and subjectivities produced through engagement with her digital aphorisms. One can see this in the evolution of *Truisms* to *Please Change Beliefs*, and then again in *Truisms*’s move to Twitter with spinoff fan sites tweeting ad-poems in a seamless melding of form and function. According to N. Katherine Hayles:

Much as the novel both gave voice to and helped to create the liberal humanist subject in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so contemporary electronic literature is both reflecting and enacting a new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations.
 (“Electronic Literature: What is it?”)

Please Change Beliefs is both entreaty and command, and emits these characteristics on a small scale but with aplomb. *Please Change Beliefs* is the distributed realization of Holzer’s original *Truisms* project gone global. The results reveal shifts in open platform accessibility toward crafting collective poems, and to-the-minute updates on culture postulates that seemed true decades ago. Not entirely born-digital, this literary work nevertheless exists only via the vehicle and parameters of the network. As the latest iteration of this career-long project, Twitter *Truisms* showcases a sustained commitment to the integration of ad-poems in the everyday lives

of readers, using the authoritative voice that remains simultaneously institutional and intimate.

I have made the claim throughout that Holzer's work is decidedly feminist in both form and content despite the artist's reluctance to embrace the term. The *Truisms* form, initially crafted at the height of the US Women's Movement in the '70s, deploys the feminist strategy of appropriation to interrupt patriarchal organizations of public space, be it the city street, the privileged walls of the gallery, or the troll-laden domain of the internet. Holzer disrupts the disembodied aphoristic voice of authority designed to establish and regulate norms of civility and commerce. By appropriating that male-coded voice as a rhetorical and poetic performative through a mimesis of form, *Truisms* takes on the voice of authority and uses it to question itself. In a doubling of appropriation moves, the content of her aphorisms shifts the focus of the subject typically hailed through public discourse, the collective masculine 'one,' by troubling it with the concerns of the many. The content disposes the *history* of the powerful through the interrogative concerns of the powerless. She also addresses the problems of gender discrimination and violence directly in some of her *Truisms*. In addition to deploying appropriation as a feminist strategy, *Truisms* counters the voice of the one by opening itself up to collective public authorship. As critic Barbara Page suggests, "Among contemporary writers, women are by no means alone in pursuing nonlinear, antihierarchical and decentered writing, but many women who affiliate themselves with this tendency write against norms of 'realist' narrative from a consciousness stirred by feminist discourses of resistance, especially those informed by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory" (1). Holzer is no exception; her writing, an 'algorhythm' of collaboration and proliferation.

Despite the integral differences among Holzer's text object repetitions, they continue to mark with electronic light digital events of literature. They allow us to think through the canon-building of electronic literature differently, and coexist across taxonomical aesthetic boundaries. But more than that, each feminist iteration of her project appropriates texts, spaces, and even itself, reinvented through platform technologies to produce a dissonance in the patriarchal configurations of public space and the collective subject. In the words of Jenny Holzer, "REPETITION IS THE BEST WAY TO LEARN."

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Notes

1. Rafi Metz claims to have coined the term “borndigital” in 1993 with the domain website name <http://www.rafimetz.com/borndigital/>. Its vernacular use typically refers to works that were created by and remain within a computer (Hayles, “Electronic Literature: What Is It?”).
2. The Electronic Literature Organization (<http://eliterature.org/>), whose tagline reads “To facilitate and promote the writing, publishing, and reading of literature in electronic media,” was founded in 1999 by Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Bal Lowe, and now resides at Washington State University Vancouver. Members helped to produce and support online curated e-lit selections in the *Electronic Literature Collection* Vol. 1 (2006), edited by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and Stephanie Strickland; the *ELO Collection* Vol. 2 (2011), edited by Laura Borràs, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans; and the *ELO Collection* Vol. 3 (2016), edited by Stephanie Boluk, Leonardo Flores, Jacob Garbe, and Anastasia Salter.
3. Editorial Statement (<http://collection.eliterature.org/3/about.html>).
4. See endnote 2.
5. James Geary, in *The World in a Phrase, A Brief History of the Aphorism*, describes the world’s shortest form of literature as brief, definitive, personal, philosophical, and including a twist (8-20). He also suggests that Holzer, like her feminist cohort Barbara Kruger of 1980s print fame, uses the world of advertising for inspiration (192–198).
6. “Truism” refers to “an undoubted or self-evident truth; especially: one too obvious for mention” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truism>), while “truthiness” refers to “(t)he quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true . . . coined in the modern sense by US satirist Stephen Colbert” (*English Oxford Living*

Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/truthiness>). On “truthiness” as word of the year for 2006, see James Klatell, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-word-of-the-year-truthiness/>.

7. According Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, there is no longer a subject performing a kind of Kantian synthesis, but a synthesis of actions that produces, among other things, a subject.
8. This slogan challenged the white institutional power that relegated Black men to second-class citizenry by virtue of color and history of enslavement. Black women were not formally addressed by this slogan, no matter their similar status and background.
9. For a succinct history, see Linda Napikowski's “The Personal Is Political.” *ThoughtCo*, Dec. 31, 2017, thoughtco.com/the-personal-is-political-slogan-origin-3528952.
10. Shelley Jackson is also a non-electronic experimental woman writer. Her 2003 project *Ineradicable Stain* (Skin) involved over 1500 volunteers who tattooed one word each of a story she wrote; *Snow* is an 805-word story, which she attempts to inscribe in real snow.
11. I borrow from Deleuze's notion of difference and repetition, in which “a concept can always be blocked at the level of each of its determinations or each of the predicates that it includes. In so far as it serves as a determination, a predicate must remain fixed in the concept while becoming something else in the thing . . .” (12).
12. “Bot” or computer-generated poetry is text “that is generated through an algorithm, which is executed by a digital, electronic computer, which is intended, by whoever it may be, to be read as poetry” (*bot or not*, @scarschwartz and @benjaminlaird <http://botpoet.com/what-is-computer-poetry/>).
13. According to the *Tech Terms Computer Dictionary*, a troll is “a person who posts offensive, incendiary, or off topic comments online . . . in Web forums, on Facebook walls, after news articles or blog entries, or in online chatrooms” (<https://techterms.com/definition/troll>).
14. A compelling hypothesis is offered for this move in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*.

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