

“When examined, answer with questions.”

Susannah Thompson interviews Jenny Holzer

A number of my questions are related to the idea of site-specificity and ‘audience’. Your work, and your self-confessed approach is almost characterised as being at odds with the established gallery/museum ‘system’, choosing instead to locate work in the urban environment. In an interview with *Wired* magazine in 1994, for instance, you stated that you were ‘always trying to bring unusual content to a different audience—a non-art audience’, describing your Guggenheim show as an ‘aberration’. Do you still feel that you are ‘running in the opposite direction...trying to get out of the art world and go someplace else?’

I practice inside and outside the art world. About 3/4 of what I do is for a general public, and I would like to be considered a regular artist, too. The Xenon projections are a relatively new way to show my text, and sometimes other material, to non-art audiences. These projections often are unannounced, and anonymous, so that people can concentrate on the content, and not worry about whether what they see is art or not.

In relation to my last question, do you feel any sense of conflict in your involvement in commissions and exhibitions which are very much part of ‘the canon’ and appeal specifically to the ‘art world’. For instance, much of the work experienced by a UK audience has been almost exclusively located in large, National Lottery-funded arts venues such as Baltic and Tate Liverpool.

Choosing to show in an art venue doesn’t necessarily exclude the general public. For example, because my projections are outdoors, a non-art audience always attends. I would enjoy having projections in unexpected locations, as well.

In terms of the ‘site-specificity’ of your works, have your commissions for Baltic and Tate Liverpool been site-specific in terms of the immediate architectural ‘site’ or have you also addressed/considered a wider (but also ‘site-specific’) socio-political context in the creation of the works?

Hopefully these projections take the architecture and the site into account, and speak to socio-political concerns.

In works such as ‘Truisms and Survival’ the initial success of these works was partly (for me) dependent on the fact that you had so adeptly manipulated the ‘traditional’ spaces of advertising in the presentation of your work, which was sited so that passers-by or consumers would ‘happen upon’ or ‘stumble across’ the work almost by accident. It shares a lot of common ground with hip hop graffiti in this respect, and I know you have collaborated with graffiti writers in the past and been very much part of this kind of ‘subversive’, yet democratic, art activity. How does this compare to your works, again with particular reference to Tate Liverpool and Baltic?

One difference is that I was invited, and it was legal, to work at the Tate and the Baltic. What might be democratic about the projections, though, are the varied points of view in the texts, and the accessibility of the work. What could be subversive is the meaning and the subjects of the writing, and the fact of presenting this material outdoors.

These installations seemed to be experienced in a radically different, almost opposite way, in which crowds were almost invited to ‘gather’ as though in attendance at an ‘unveiling’ or an ‘illumination’. In this way, these commissions were, to my mind, very much an art world spectacle or an ‘event’. Are you comfortable with this kind of presentation and its intended audience, given your previous approaches and antipathy towards the art world ‘elite’?

My preference always is for the Xenon to be stumbled upon rather than announced, but I don’t mind the occasional presentation as artwork. Even when organizers invite people; however, there always is an accidental audience, too, and that pleases me.

You obviously work very much with an ‘audience’ in mind (as opposed to ‘working for yourself’). I find it ironic, and successful, that these works look totalitarian and commanding (in terms of scale, the manufactured ‘look’ etc.) but are in fact often suggestive and questioning rather than ‘imposing’.

I am happy to know that this is how you find the Xenon, as commanding and questioning is a good combination.

Would you say that ‘reader-response theories’ are a motivation in the creation of your work, that once you put it ‘out there’ your audience will complete the work?

I don’t know much about reader-response theories, but audience reaction is critical to me, and to every artist who works in public. I study what people do or don’t do at my events, try to overhear what is said and watch people’s faces. Yes, I rely heavily on the audience to create part of the meaning of the work, and so to complete it.

And, if so, are you pre-occupied with the individual response or engagement (or ‘solitary decoding’ as Edward Said terms it) or are you more interested in Stanley Fish’s notion of reader-response in terms of collective responses or ‘interpretative communities’?

I am pre-occupied by both.

Your Truisms obviously convey some firmly held beliefs and concerns, do you ever worry about audiences’ ‘misreading’ messages about issues such as rape, violence etc.?

Yes, this is a concern. It is a delicate matter to address hard questions and not have the work be sensational, or worse, stupidly provocative. On the other hand, it would be counterproductive to pretend—by ducking the subject—that violence doesn’t occur.

Is there any element of attempted ‘control’ in how your work will be ‘read’, and if not, do you think there should be?

I try to choose the right media and venues for the tough texts, and the cruel writing is surrounded by sentences that are not.

You have spoken about the need to ‘occupy the Big Brother media as well as the basement workshop’ Do you intend to continue to work within both contexts?

Yes, I like everything from small stickers to large scale high tech projects.

I’m reminded of Dave Hickey, discussing Christopher Wool in asking the next question, ‘The interesting question is whether Wool’s pictorial appropriation of the Congregationalist kunsthalle actually constitutes an endorsement of its politics’. In terms of your own work, can you consider this comment in relation to your work at Baltic and Tate Liverpool. Is there an element of ‘subversion from the inside’?

I don’t think there’s much need to subvert art spaces. Art institutions are the least of the world’s problems, and deserve much support. Although I never know how effective anything I try is, I would rather try to subvert the sort of thinking that leads to war, and to routine assaults.

You’ve said that ‘there’s nothing wrong with art for art’s sake’. I agree, but do you find it restrictive to be considered as an artist who wholly embraces the idea of public ‘access’ and ‘inclusion’, and opposed to art world elitism?



I am delighted to be considered an artist who embraces public access, and I am happy when my site specific installations in buildings such as Mies van der Rohe’s new National Gallery in Berlin, or the Guggenheim’s in New York and Bilbao, are recognized. I have little control over how I am considered.

I was interested to see your work and the work of On Kawara in the group show *Ill Communication* at Dundee Contemporary Arts. Your work from the ‘70s was juxtaposed with ‘contemporary’ new media work. How did you feel in being placed as a new media ‘pioneer’ or ‘exemplar’ to these younger artists, and was it odd to see your cutting-edge use of technology exhibited as a new media ‘artefact’? Do you think there was an element of attempting to construct a lineage of new media art there?

I didn’t see this, so I don’t know exactly what was attempted, or how I would have reacted. Pioneer is not bad, but I want to believe I am not a dead dinosaur yet.

Can you tell me more about your new media work? Do you view the web a resource, or a new ‘tool’ in which you can document work and make it accessible (in the way you once used posters, stickers, t-shirts etc., or the way Land Artists used documentary photography in galleries)?

Yes the web is a useful new way to hang work where people stare. The web pieces function somewhat the way that the posters did, when people would write on these street works. In the (now very old) web piece I invited visitors to comment on my texts by rewriting them. Then their responses were saved, just as I would keep, and then ponder, comments scrawled on my posters.

What are your current pre-occupations and can you tell me about any forthcoming projects?

I am trying and failing to write something adequate about the war. I have a number of projections and installations in progress and in disarray.

Jenny Holzer,
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