



The Visual and the Verbal in Postmodern Art Practice

Hay K. G.

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The Visual and the Verbal in Postmodern Art Practice

The Truisms of Jenny Holzer

K. G. Hay

University of Leeds

“Why should a description which is admirable in a poem become ridiculous in a painting?...Why should the god (Neptune) whose head is so majestic in the poem (Aeneid 1, 126-7) - rising out of the waves, look like a decapitated head in a painting of the scene? How is it that something which is pleasing to our minds is yet displeasing to our eyes?”¹

“Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?”²

Horace's famous simile, in the “Ars poetica”: “Ut pictura poesis” — (as is painting, so is poetry) in fact prioritised painting over verbal discourse, by holding up the former as the example on which the latter is modelled. As R.W Lee has argued, the dictum has been consistently mistranslated by theorists on art from Horace's day onwards such that its reverse, “as is poetry, so is painting”, became the classic definition of the relationship between the arts, the legacy of which continues to cause confusion on the part of both theorists and practitioners alike³. This wilful historical mischief in fact reverses the priorities which Horace had clearly outlined, and makes of visual art a mere copy of words. I will not be attempting here to “redress the balance” by ascribing epistemological priority to the visual rather than verbal signifying practices (although the temptation as a practitioner is strong). To do so would be at best a reiteration of idealism, and at worst perverse, given the nature of this forum.

For, as is obvious, the debates concerning the classification of the various arts which followed from Horace's day have been further complicated by the fact that the medium in which they have been carried out through the centuries, and are still being carried out, has been, necessarily, that of verbal language, which itself constitutes the domain of several types of art: poetry, drama, the novel or prose poems, to name a few. It is this peculiar position of the verbal as “master discourse” able to both constitute art, as well as the critical and analytic discourses about art, which has rendered the relationship between ordinary and poetic words, between words and music, words and dance, or, for the purposes of this talk, words and images, so complex, and for most practitioners and critics alike, so confusing.

Part of my contention, which I hope to illustrate in this paper, with reference to the work of Jenny Holzer and others, is that any such attempt to categorise the arts by such abstract linguistic definitions is mistaken, self-defeating, and falls into the errors of hypostatisation typical of philosophical idealism.

The great idealist attempt to classify the arts and their various competences was of course Gottfried Leopold Lessing's “Laoköon”, published in 1766.⁴

For Lessing, Ariosto's poetry is overabundant in descriptive detail with the result that the purity of the poetic genre becomes clouded or clogged (*Laoköon*, XX). The central drive of the “Laoköon” was directed against just this type of artistic transgression, whether of poetry or of the figurative arts, that Horace's dictum “Ut pictura poesis” might seem to encourage.

When the Laocöon of Virgil shouts, who would consider that in order to shout he must have his mouth open and that this would render the figure ugly? It is enough that the “clamores horrendos ad sidera tollit” appeals as a noble image to our ears and minds, and the visual aspect can be left to your imagination.⁵

¹ Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Oeuvres Complètes de Denis Diderot, Paris, Herman, 1978, Vol. 4.

² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, Oxford, 1940, § 250, p. 90.

³ R. W. Lee, “Ut pictura Poesis, The Humanistic Theory of Painting”, *Art Bulletin*, pp. 196-269.

⁴ G. L. Lessing, *Laoköon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, 1766.

⁵ Lessing, *op. cit.*

In answer to Diderot's question; "How is it that something which is pleasing to our minds, is yet displeasing to our eyes?"⁶, Lessing replies with his system of categorical distinctions between the proper competences of each genre: Painting can only do what painting can do; words follow different rules. It is as wrong to expect words to provide an equivalent for visual art as it is to expect poetry to be replaceable by dance, or architecture.

In the current century, Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic* (1905) was the last major attempt of Idealism to codify what he saw as the proper competences of the abstractly separate realms of Art, Ethics and Logic.⁷ For Croce, as indeed for formalist criticism from Clive Bell and Roger Fry through to the later Clement Greenberg, the visual was a distinct terrain from the verbal, which had to be grasped, ultimately, by intuition alone. "Check in your mind with your umbrella, and go in with a naked, innocent eye", was Greenberg's comment on the recent Monet show at the Royal Academy in London.⁸

A close reading of Greenberg's "Towards a new Laocöon" (1940) reveals just such a series of categorical booby traps as have befallen many an attempt to distinguish the proper competences of the various arts, not the least of which is the glaring assumption that the various art forms are in some sense categorically fixed in the first place.⁹

This irrationalism is nothing new: for Croce, the central feature of "art" is that it is not reducible to rational thought (Logic), but takes the form of "images". As with Hegelian idealism, Croce's romantic idealism stressed the primacy of Mind or Spirit. This is identified as an activity which in turn can be of two types - knowing and doing. Doing can be directed towards either the useful or the good, which are the domains of the "practical sciences", of economics and ethics respectively. Knowing, on the other hand, is directed towards either the logical knowledge of concepts obtained through the intellect, whose proper "Science" is Logic, or to the intuitive knowledge of things, obtained through the imagination, whose proper "science" is, he claims, Aesthetics. The problematic nature of this apprehension of knowledge through intuitions (i.e. its claim to scientificity, its position as "value-free" or "non-ideological") is quickly glossed over by Croce in a thoroughly unsatisfactory way, by appealing to just that postulated "common sense" which Gramsci was later to demythologise.¹⁰

As Galvano Della Volpe has effectively argued in the *Critique of Taste*, this is an irreducibly abstract, idealist, illogical, and irrational project, which materialism has long since refuted.¹¹ Della Volpe's *Critique of Taste* is, in effect a materialist anti-Croce, reappraising Lessing's "Laocöon", in the light of Engels' materialism, the structural linguistics of the Copenhagen School, and the specifically Italian post-Hegelian tradition from Bertrando Spaventa and Antonio Labriola through to Gramsci's *Prison Writings*.¹² For Della Volpe, such abstract categorisations as Art, Logic and Ethics are ultimately conservative ploys to mask the precise rootedness of art in culture and society as a whole. Art is thus concrete, rational discourse, whose only meanings are derived from and firmly embedded in a concrete, material, and hence irreducibly political existence. The various genres contribute to knowledge in different ways such that a precise mapping of the one onto the other is not possible, although more or less crude "translations" from one genre to another are always possible. At their core

⁶ Diderot, op. cit.

⁷ B. Croce, *Aesthetic as General Linguistic and Science of Expression*, trans. D. Ainsley, London, 1905.

⁸ C. Greenberg, interviewed on "The Late Show", BBC, TV, 1991.

⁹ C. Greenberg, "Towards a new Laocöon", 1940, in *Perceptions and Judgments 1939-44*, ed. John O'Brien, Chicago, 1986.

¹⁰ Cf. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare & David Forgacs, London, 1976.

¹¹ Galvano Della Volpe, *Critique of Taste*, trans. J. Rothenstein, London, 1990.

¹² cf. K. G. Hay, *Italian Materialist Aesthetics*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Wales, 1990, for a fuller discussion of these themes.

however, is a rigorously materialist Logic which roots all signifying practices in the ‘stuff’ of real material, and thus, social, historical and gendered existence.

In opposition to any kind of idealist theory of art, Della Volpe proposes a rigorously materialist aesthetic, subtle enough to steer between the twin pitfalls of a “vulgar “historical determinism”, which would ascribe an overly simplistic relationship between “superstructural” phenomena and the corresponding material “base” (such as that provided by Socialist Realism), and the equally erroneous reassertion of the idealist theory of artistic autonomy, (“the art for art’s sake” argument), which attempts to circumvent the historical, material, basis of art altogether. — What Della Volpe proposes, then is a defence of the formal or semantic autonomy of art, which must be seen as formally but not logically distinct from other artistic “means”.

Modernism’s “Will to Silence”

Tom Wolfe, in *The Painted Word*, argued that modernism in the visual arts has, since the mid 19th-century seen a progressive shift of emphasis away from autonomous pictorial structures whose terms of reference have been formal/visual towards artifacts whose principal function is to illustrate a verbal/philosophic discourse extraneous to themselves, and that increasingly, this “master-text” takes over from the material product whose visual qualities become merely incidental: in short, that Visual Modernism has been gradually displaced or taken over by Verbal Modernism.¹³ An art without a text to explain it is he argues, impossible to see:

Not ‘seeing is believing’ you ninny, but ‘believing is seeing’, for Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.¹⁴

This as Wolfe notes this is a rather odd fate for an art such as visual Modernism which so vigorously opposed the “literary”.

In his introduction to a recent collection of artist’s writings, organised, precisely, around the theme of the visual and the verbal, Brian Wallis notes exactly the opposite trend to Wolfe: Wallis argues that since Abstract Expressionism, the visual has in fact been seen to prioritise the verbal — art is seen as beyond or prior to verbal language, and the myth of the “inarticulate artist”, unable to verbalise about his/her mysterious and semantically autonomous practice, has become the norm. Wallis, ironicising Nietzsche, characterises this tendency within Modernism as a “will to silence”:

In this persistent stereotype”, says Wallis, “the artist’s work is itself the exemplary form of expression, transparent in its communication, opening directly to intuition, and not reducible to literary equivalence.¹⁵

With Wallis, I would like to refute Wolfe’s limited notion of the dialectic operating between visual and verbal codes, using Holzer’s “Truisms” as counter-argument.

This “will to silence” was represented within Modernism as an appropriate analogue to the formalist content of abstraction and as one aspect of the refinement of modern art into specific disciplines, each with its own set of competences. Abstraction which was characterised as being “hermetic” or “mute”, was seen as steering the artist away from the concreteness and materiality of the real world, by which language might bind art to everyday experience.

Wallis continues: “In part this silence was imposed as a repression of the verbal in favour of the visual, a process which can be traced back to the Enlightenment. But silence was also promoted as an active agent of Modernism, as a representation, in the form of ellipsis, enigma, and the void.”¹⁶

¹³ Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, Bantam, NY & London, 1975.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Brian Wallis, “Telling stories: A Pictorial Approach to Artists’ Writings”, in B. Wallis and M. Tucker eds., *Blasted Allegories*, New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

Seen in this light, the separation of verbal and visual discourses which Wolfe appears to detect, no longer appears as an absolute development; Rather, it can be seen to be merely the result of a particular hermeneutic tradition which depends upon the central notion of the indivisible Self, or isolated monad, understood as locus, transmitter and receiver of all meanings. Within this tradition, the circulation of meanings within the production and consumption of culture depends on the dialectical pair: Transmitter/Receiver, and takes the form of a hermeneutic contract between the one who intends, and the one who, receiving, experiencing, witnessing (“viewing”), the material evidence (trace) left by the one who intends, deduces (interprets) this trace, as a set of intentions, traditionally, the “meaning” of the trace. Whether or not this transmitted “meaning” has any relevance to the receiver, will depend on the socio-cultural ‘common ground’ which transmitter and receiver share. According to this hermeneutic tradition this state of affairs has been the dominant trend of the circulation of meanings within Modernism since the separation of visual and verbal discourses which saw the rise of the critic-as-intermediary between artist and public in mid 19th-century Paris, with Baudelaire as the key figure.

Duchamp, so the argument continues, brought Modernism to its logical conclusion in the middle of the present century, where the visual phenomena set before us by the artist, let us say the “Bottle rack” or the “Snow Shovel” function less by merit of their visual qualities, the material “stuff” of perception, than by the verbal/philosophic discourse which they purportedly set in motion in the receiver’s/viewer’s mind as to the nature of art, artistic intentionality, seriousness, humour etc. According to this tradition, Duchamp’s works function almost as visual acrostics, whose material forms are meaningless in themselves. Their purported “meaning” lies in the verbal-philosophic debate which they give rise to in the minds of those who receive/witness/experience them, and which is geared at deducing and fixing Duchamp’s supposed intentions. Moreover, they only give rise to this debate because the act of placing them in a particular environment, on the part of the artist, draws attention to them in specific ways as being worthy of the viewer’s particular attention. In the hardware store, away from the hermeneutic gaze, the bottle rack and snow shovel revert to their material positions as mute objects in a mute world, artistic signifiers only in the Lacanian sense that all mute objects can be structured by desire into meaning. With Duchamp, so the argument goes, the visual matter is purely subordinate to verbal explication; to regard it phenomenologically, without engaging in this verbal- philosophic discourse is to misunderstand it, to overshoot it, or to miss it altogether.

What Wallis is arguing, I think correctly, is that the separation of the visual from the verbal within Modernism, its “will to silence”, is symptomatic of the larger destabilisation of the principal sources of social identity which had existed in Europe for hundreds of years - primarily centred around the notion of the irreducible Self, as locus, receiver and transmitter of all meanings. It is precisely this monadological unity which, I would maintain, the mixing of visual and verbal codes in the work of artists such as Holzer, Kruger, and Baldessari disrupt, confound and interfere with. This interruption, which may operate on the level of ‘interrupting’ the process of reification in Adorno’s terms, is operated through the very material practices, whereby categorical distinctions between the visual and the verbal are actually breached. And it is precisely this interference with the process of reification which, I would argue, renders their interventions positive epistemological contributions. Questions as to whether their works are primarily “visual” or “verbal” are, in this light, quite simply irrelevant.

And yet there is a distinction to be made between different types of disruption, differing degrees of interference; between ‘deferment’ and excess’ of meaning; between Derrida and Baudrillard, for example. As Wallis observes, Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” recognised the links between silence and the rise of Modernism. I would argue the existence

of further links between some aspects of Postmodernism and a more profound silence: the inner silence of simultaneous babble - the superimposition of multiple voices such that all are relativised. Benjamin noted that soldiers returning from the First World War were literally dumbstruck on returning from the front, language had deserted them. Benjamin traced to this fact the virtual death of storytelling as a social form of communication or information exchange: what I have described as the breakdown of the hermeneutic contract between transmitter and receiver. Since there was no longer any experiential “common ground” between the ones who had stayed at home and the ones who had gone to the Front, no everyday language could describe the horrors of what the latter had experienced. This too was the root of Adorno’s question: “Is art possible after Auschwitz?”. To continue to use the same, prewar language and forms after the war, seemed to be a wilful attempt to ignore or circumvent the gravity of the historical catastrophe.

In storytelling, on the other hand, meaning resides not in the work or artist but in the viewer. Storytelling presupposes an active relation of listener/teller. Its recourse to tradition, its rejection of originality, its lack of psychological inflection, foregrounds a preexistence of meaning, as opposed to a search for an essential truth in the artwork/novel.

As opposed to formalism’s “will to silence”, Wallis highlights storytelling’s “inhabitation of useless forms, the circulation of stories without origins, the imprecise repetition of unoriginal tales, the wilful confusion of truth and fiction, the primacy accorded pleasure and fantasy, the ability to exchange experiences and not just information: all these qualities recommended storytelling as a form to be rescued from modernism’s will to silence”.¹⁷

Holzer

And so to an event, or grouping of events: The setting is an electronic bill-board on a building, above the street, the Time Life Building on Times Square in New York, to be precise. The ‘Spectacolor’ billboard is, in its material substance, indistinguishable from those ordinarily used for conveying advertising slogans before and after the event we are discussing, and which the slide apparently records, to the citizens passing in the avenue below. The building and the street maintain their ontological purity, no substantive change here. The message on the sign, (one of the events we are discussing), caught in transition by the photographer of the slide, reads “Private property created crime”. Further down the avenue other signs read: “Tow away Zone”, “Clear Fire Lane for Emergency Vehicles”, “No Turns”, and “One Way”. What are we to make of this? If I had said, affirms, contests or declares, instead of reads, I would already have been setting off the hermeneutic chain for you. Various readings are possible. We could simply note this message phenomenologically, as a neon flash, pause for an instant, perhaps, and carry on with our shopping. Or again, are we to interpret this message, agreeing or disagreeing with it in substance or in part? There are other signs within the slide, are they arbitrary or important (significant?). Does the one imply the other? And yet, very probably, our concrete, 20th century experience soon tells us that such signs as Holzer’s are not the norm. There is a possibility, we might think, that this could be the start of some new advertising campaign, that the punch line will soon follow if we wait, and our curiosity now aroused, (because it’s new, and maybe the others on our block haven’t caught on yet?) we might pick up something new, before slipping back into the comfortable miasma of consumption, reassured that this, was after all, just another ad., telling us to go ahead and consume something to complete our fragmented, but profoundly authentic, selves. If it is not an ad., and we work out that it’s art, in some guise, are we to judge it visually or verbally? As good formalists, do we praise it on the finer points of style, or as worthy MacLuhanites, or neo-Barthians, do we query the medium or the message? Would the later

¹⁷ Wallis, *ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

Baudrillard be able to tell the difference between the two, one wonders; are not both just glittering pixels on the screens of our alienated Spectacolor selves?

What then are we to make of artists like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, John Baldessari, Richard Prince or Eric Bulatov whose work irretrievably mixes verbal and visual signifying codes? Barbara Kruger: “I shop therefore I am” Is this a statement or a lament? Are the jokes in Richard Prince, “just jokes”, or are they actually dark and melancholy reflections on the empty seriousness of a now exhausted Modernism? Are Eric Bulatov’s paintings ‘combinations’ of words and images, or are the words images, and the images texts? If irony is ironised only a contextual reading can render the irony transparent. In reply to Wolfe, (here taken as representative of a commonly held view) what I am suggesting here is that rather than inquiring whether these artists have transgressed categorically distinct signifying practices, and are therefore to be condemned or praised, we should be asking whether the framing of such questions of transgression is a progressive or retrogressive step. Wittgenstein’s observation that “A dog cannot be a hypocrite, but neither can he be sincere”¹⁸ can be used to remind those who would embark on such a fool’s errand, of the dangers of inappropriate categorisation.

“Truisms” and the cataloguing spirit of capitalism

Holzer’s early work, mostly impermanent and undocumented, took the form of interventions in the social sphere. Breadcrumbs laid out in geometric patterns for the birds to eat, and the passers by to ponder at; paintings on fabric left on the beach to the mercy of the elements.¹⁹ They were attempts in their way, to interrupt the reified consciousness of the everyday, but were not, as she admitted, “beautiful enough, or compelling enough, or understandable enough to make most people stop.”²⁰ The move to the crystalline quizzicality of the neon sign came from her collection of diagrams, gathered from all manner of scientific manuals in Brown University. “At that time I thought that diagrams were the most reduced, the truest way of visual representation”, but eventually it became apparent that: “the captions, in a clean pure way, told you everything”.²¹

The “Truisms” of Jenny Holzer take the form of one-line sentences, listed alphabetically, some provocative, some bland, others contradictory, inflammatory or exhortational. They grew out of a ‘suggested reading’ list issued to her as part of her course on the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. The list included hundreds of primary texts which represented in some sense a distillation of world culture from Plato onwards. Holzer realised that “this stuff was important and profound”, and also that she was “reasonably bright and well-educated”, but recognised that, “if I couldn’t plough through it, certainly a lot of other people couldn’t either”.²² She hit upon the idea of condensing the content of all this literature down to a series of one-liners, arranged alphabetically, so that they could be easily assimilable and accessible — a sort of Reader’s digest of the mind.

Initially, the Truisms were pasted up all over Manhattan, anonymously. For Holzer this was because: “I thought that for the posters to be effective, they had to be anonymous. ... Authorship blows your cover”.²³ This is a telling phrase. The alienated self we are given to believe is our person, depends on such notions of authenticity as are enshrouded in the notion

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, Oxford, 1953, p. 229. See also, § 249.

¹⁹ in “Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer”, by Bruce Ferguson, in *Jenny Holzer: Signs*, Exhibition catalogue, ICA London, 1988-89, p. 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of authorship. If authorship blows the cover from the existential self, then the stripping away of this notion of the self likewise blows the gaff on such existential notions of authorship.

The Truisms were eventually exhibited in the Marine Midland Bank NY in 1982, and, despite being sponsored art-works, they were subsequently removed by officials of the Bank. The offending phrase “It’s not good to live on credit”, apparently blew the gaff on the corporate Self of the Bank - it’s authorship (as manipulator of our consciousness) was revealed. Here, at least, actions speak louder than words.

Using the same discursive tone throughout (a rather featureless monotone), the Truisms reflect, symbolically, all points of view, simultaneous and conflictual. Like Kruger and Bulatov, Holzer uses the same typeface throughout, and each Truism occupies its own conceptual space - a line of its own, radically alienated from its preceding and subsequent fellows by the aleatory nature of the alphabetical arrangement. “My thinking was, that the whole could be a fairly accurate portrait of the way things are in the world, because all these conflicting opinions exist simultaneously”. Of course, simultaneity, from Bergson, Boccioni and Braque, has long been part of the formal repertoire of Modernism, but with Holzer the effect is one of such dizzying alienation as to render the very moment of alienation almost palpable. Like Warhol’s refusal to refuse, the “Truisms” of Jenny Holzer, fracture any attempt we might make at hermeneutic containment, the onus is put firmly on the viewer/receiver to make what sense of the contradictory messages, as s/he is able or willing to do, and in so attempting, to recognise the scope and limitations of her own ideological stance and power; his own capacity for irony and self critique.

In the early years of Modernism, Max Weber proposed, in his study of the “Protestant Ethic”, that a particular social formation was possessed of a ‘spirit’ which characterised or underpinned it, and that in the case of modern Capitalism, this spirit combined the traits of methodical accumulation and a rationalistic ethic.²⁴ Weber argued that this spirit, which he called the “Protestant Ethic”, is found only in Western Europe and only after the 16th-century, in Protestant countries or among Protestant sects within Catholic countries. By singling it out, Weber hoped to prove that contemporary capitalism results from these qualities of parsimony and productivism, although he fell short of arguing that it depended on them for its survival.²⁵ This notion of Weber’s was developed by later theorists in a surprising direction.

In 1925, the psychoanalyst Karl Abraham, in his classic study of personality formation, *Psychoanalytic Studies of Character Formation*, contrasted two character types which he claimed to have isolated in the course of his therapeutic practice - Firstly, he said, there were those types of people who were benign and sociable, generous, outward looking, extrovert and optimistic. The other type he detected was hostile and sarcastic, reacting with rage when his/her requests were denied, and deeply envious of others more successful than themselves. Abrahams designated these two types “Oral” and “Anal” character formations. He further noted that “oral” characters were readily open to change and new possibilities, while those of an “anal character formation, “were possessed of a”conservative attitude that is hostile to any form of innovation”.²⁶ These character types, observed within individual patients, were expanded, synechdochically, by later theorists, particularly by the neo-Freudian group within the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Reich and Fromm) to describe the general characteristics of larger social groupings, such that a particular personality type could be seen to be prevalent in a given societal strata or class, and given historical developments could be related back to the prevalence of particular character traits in society as a whole.

Chief among the Frankfurt neo-Freudians, Erich Fromm observed that the same spirit, of manic thriftiness, compulsive list-making, and obsessive tabulation which characterises the

²⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (1905-6), trans. Talcott Parsons, London, 1930.

²⁵ see S. N. Eisenstadt, (ed.), *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization*, NY, 1968.

²⁶ Karl Abraham, *Psychoanalytische Studien zur Charakterbildung*, Vienna, 1925, p. 44.

“anal-hoarding” personality type, also suffuses the Puritan ethic, the maxims of Benjamin Franklin, and the conduct of the nineteenth-century Burgher.²⁷ In short they are intimately tied up with the productivist ethic which Weber identified as providing the psychological backbone of the capitalist mode of production. Franklin’s *Autobiography*, for example tabulates each hour of the day with structured activities, from “work” “going through my accounts” and “putting things on order”, down to designating the time for conversation, relaxation or sleep.²⁸

What I would like to suggest in this comparison, is that the “Truisms” of Holzer should be seen as operating critically and ironically on just such ideological externalisations of the “spirit” of late capital (whether rooted in class position, gender, or deep in the psyche). They operate as a counter-signature to the prevailing ideology of reified authenticity — they are its critic.

The work of Holzer, Kruger and others offer alternative ways of reading and writing to both author and consumer, by blurring or over-riding the differences which formerly separated, or seemed to separate, the two. The highly charged expressive personality of the artist/creator, in its protective coat of style, is replaced with a self-effacing neutrality which uses the quotation-as-comment as its fundamental trope. Their textual proposals offer no self-contained solution, they are disparate, fragmented, evasive, polyvalent and polysemous, utilising language, fragments of language and stylistic tropes which are already ‘given’, and in that sense objective. They demand the active participation of receiver to work on, decode and interpret their messages. Insofar as their artworks ironicise aspects of contemporary reification, they are also, inescapably allegorical. Allegorical texts say one thing so as to mean something else — The allegorical text places particular emphasis on the critic or interpreter, rather than the author or producer.²⁹ “Authorship”, as Holzer says, “blows your cover”: The persona, one’s monadological Self, seeks shelter, in its reification, under the protective veil of authorship. There is no claim to master truth in such texts; “Rather,” as Giles and Guattari remarked elsewhere, “there isn’t a subject; there are only collective assemblages of enunciation”.³⁰ The “Truisms”, take on board the language of capitalist administration and juxtapose it with the mottoes and slogans of Marxism-feminism. “Private property created crime”, jostles up against “There’s no sense being anywhere but the top of the heap”. Precisely because they are presented in an apparently uncritical way, the Truisms demand the active intervention of the viewer/receiver, to select, edit, even reject or ignore. “It was necessary that the form be non-judgemental in order to encourage the viewer to sort through the texts and maybe become tolerant.”³¹

As Brian Wallis points out: “In the language of Jenny Holzer or Matt Mullican, for example, language masquerading as conventional or official speech is used to foreground the hidden social and political assumptions of everyday speech. In the face of this obsessive list making, a consideration of the texts as allegories suggests that they contain not the false hope of a utopian wholeness and surety, but the opposite: an exposure of the contradictions of our social mores”.³²

These writings demonstrate alternative capacities to generate ambiguous, complex and experiential forms of knowledge which are collective and cultural but not equatable with bourgeois norms.³³

²⁷ Erich Fromm, “Psychoanalytic Characterology”, in *The Crisis in Psychoanalysis: Essays on Freud, Marx and Social Psychology*, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 203.

²⁸ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, cited in Fromm, op. cit.

²⁹ Wallis, *ibid.*, p. xiv.

³⁰ Giles and Guattari, “What is minor Literature?”, P. 18, in Wallis, op. cit.

³¹ Holzer, op. cit., p. 76.

³² Brian Wallis, in *Blasted Allegories*, op. cit., p. xv.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

Adorno's critique of existentialism centred around the "jargon of authenticity" in which it was couched: Existentialism posited the individual as an isolated monad, whose irreducible subjectivity enveloped the social persona in an isolating membrane, stretched like an alienating screen between the Self and Others.³⁴ What is punctured, specifically, by the neon radiance of a Holzer sign, is just such a jargon.

³⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will, London, RKP, 1986.