UNDER ERASURE: Jenny Holzer's *War Paintings.*

In an interview with Margit Rowell and Sylvere Lotringer, Nancy Spero summarised the thematic concerns that dominated her extended scrolls throughout the 1970s: "…I wanted to enter the repressed and violent world of subjected women". (Rowell 1996:137) Coming immediately after her immersion in the scatological texts of the French poet and playwright, Antonin Artaud which culminated in the vertical and horizontal 33-panel work *Codex Artaud*, her research into the documented accounts and histories of violence and torture of the female body produced four monumental scrolls: *The Hours of the Night* (11-panels, 1974), *Torture of Women* (14-panels, 1976), *Notes in Time* (24-panels, 1979) and *The First Language* (22-panels, 1981), all of which were first exhibited at A.I.R gallery in New York.

Born in Chicago in 1926, Spero was a key figure in the first generation of post-war American feminist artists for whom not only was the personal political, but who made the complex relations between issues of gender, sexuality, motherhood and the social, political and cultural formation of subjectivity, central to their art. In particular, Spero focused her practice upon investigating how these external and internal pressures and histories impacted upon the bodies of women, telling in words and images a narrative of oppression and empowerment, violence and freedom, fatality and hope.

Spero and her husband, the artist Leon Golub, had relocated to New York after a five-year period in Paris, in 1964. Still under the dominance of New York Abstraction but already opening up to younger artists engagement with the repertoire of popular cultural themes and mass media, Spero experienced all the isolation and dismissal of first-generation feminists, but found solace and solidarity with other women artists (and male fellow-travellers). She was a co-founder of the first all-women gallery in New York, A.I.R (Artists in Residence), which opened in SoHo in 1972. Consequently, by the time Jenny Holzer arrived in the city in 1976, the women's movement had a history and a politics and, under the influence of Conceptual Art, a shift by some artists from the representation of the political to the more linguistically determined, politics of representation.

Holzer, the generation after Spero (she was born in Ohio in 1950), went to New York from graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1976 to study on the Whitney Independent Studies Programme, then under the leadership of the legendary Ron Clark. Initially trained as a painter, she recalled , in discussion with Joan Simon for her Phaidon monograph, the moment of her linguistic turn: "Sometime in the first session of the Whitney programme I tossed the painting with captions and started writing…", a move which led to her first text works, the *Truisms,* 1977-79. (Simon 1998:22)

What defined the political and cultural landscape in the 1960s and early 1970s New York were the twin struggles around Civil Rights and the War in Vietnam. (1) Holzer arrived at the moment when the traumatic after-effects of Vietnam were subsumed into a fiscal crisis that left the city on the verge of bankruptcy. So, as the Women's Movement approached the end of its first decade, New York was a contradictory maelstrom of urban degeneration, violence and political corruption, and the location of choice for the cultural vanguard. And the street was frequently where these oppositions and tensions were paraded and contested, from the blitzing of lower Manhatten to create the ground area for the erection of the Twin Towers – completed in 1973 – to the spread of graffiti across the surfaces of the city and the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. From the early 1970s, women increasingly adopted combative and interventionary roles in the institutional policies of the artworld. 1976 saw the founding of the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Ad Hoc Protest Committee and demonstrations against discriminatory museum shows: *Drawing Now* at MoMA with five contributions by women to forty-one male artists, and *Twentieth Century American Drawings* at the Guggenheim with only one woman artist amongst the twenty-nine exhibitors. (2) Although it is not my intention to trace either the stages of New York feminism nor Holzer's history and position within this broad and frequently contested terrain, it is important to note that the 1970s were characterised by a politicization of art practice and that the Women's Movement and theoretical feminism offered a range of alternative and critical possibilities for artists. (As Joan Simon argued in a catalogue essay for Holzer commenting on the art of the 1960s-1980s: 'Conflicting as these many voices are, and untranslatable and inscrutable as they

at times might be, they have allowed contemporary art-making an unprecedented richness in experimentation and experience' (Simon 1986)

In order to engage with my subject – Holzer's War paintings – my way is through the scrolls of Nancy Spero as I will argue that there are significant parallels and informative differences in the way both artists find a visual and textual language for figuring the impact of state sanctioned violence upon the body, and in contesting the silencing and invisibility of the victim. There is also a personal, autobiographical, dimension in that my two encounters with Jenny Holzer were both a direct result of my long-term association with Spero and Golub – that is, dinners in SoHo restaurants favoured by both artists. Also, their studio apartment in La Guardia Place, below Washington Square, boasted a Holzer LED work which hung prominently in Spero's section, acquired through an exchange between the artists.

In 'Subversive Signs', Hal Foster's influential account of this period in American Art, he groups Holzer with Martha Rosler, Sherrie Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum and Krzysztof Wodicizko as artists who intervened in 'public space, social representation or artistic language', manipulating the signifying systems defining identities and institutions, paying particular attention to the interactive relations between location, audience and event. (Foster 1982) From this semiotic mix, Holzer's *Truisms* (Fig1*)* and her following *Inflamatory Essays* (1979-82) emerged, relying upon contradiction to awaken the viewer/reader to language – specifically discourses of power – as ideology. Now, more than three decades on from Foster's account there has been a plethora of publications revisiting the art of the 1960s/1970s – the moment of art's linguistic turn – and the relations, alignments and priorities that once appeared self-evident, have had to be readjusted and rethought, not the least the catch-all term Conceptual Art and the place of the visual in the text-based art of the time. In fact, even the most analytic wing of the Conceptual Art pantheon (Joseph, Kosuth, Art&Language, Lawrence Weiner, Hannah Darboven…) appears on reflection to favour an aesthetic of the word and the document– a particular 'look' to the typographic layout, the materiality of the xerox leaflet, the B/W 'realism' of early video; as Anne Rorimer

observed 'Conceptual Art…never lost sight of its concerns with the visual and the very nature of visualizing'. (Rorimer 2001:9)

Holzer certainly paid equal attention to the form of the message and the content, evidenced in the range and diversity of medium selected to carry informational, provocative and ambiguous texts: on A4 leaflets, public information posters, T-shirts, electronic signs, billboards, engraved in stone and cast in metal, medium and message combine to engage, confuse and alert the viewer to the discursive effects of language as a mechanism of power. Spero and Holzer both rely upon language-based source material for the content of their art. Holzer described her *Truisms* as originating from the lengthy reading list prescribed by the Whitney program, producing her own 'Readers Digest version of Western and Eastern thought' (Holzer 1986:75) Both Spero, with her increasingly expanding scrolls, and Holzer with the public positioning of her subversive signs, reinforce an axiom of Conceptual Art, in Michael Newman's expression, ' for the conditions and limits of spectatorship to become a reflexive part of the work'. (Newman 1996:98) In this respect, factors common to each artist are issues of location and scale – the lateral spread of a Spero scroll which the viewer has to negotiate to visually apprehend in its entirety, Holzer's scaling-up her paintings from the original declassified documents existing in official files; and fragmentation – Spero's scattering of texts and images which can be 'read' linearly or accumulatively, Holzer's attention to painterly devices – touch, texture, colour and tone – to arrest and hold the viewers attention.

Several years prior to Holzer's *Truisms*, Nancy Spero had begun to incorporate text into her work from the late 1960s, developing her signature-style scrolls during the period of Conceptual Art's ascendency. However, her interest lay in the literariness of language with the Artaud works and she increasingly appropriated quotations and information from cross-cultural historical and mythological narratives, employing text to emphasise language as the corporeal structure of lived reality: of the (female) subject produced through language. And, always, she paid attention to the word as material presence, hand-printing from wood-block alphabets, reproducing Artaud's fractured prose and copying out first-hand accounts of torture victims compiled by Amnesty, on a bulletin typewriter. (3)

Common to the works of this period, the 1970s, was Spero's intention to find a voice – initially a means to express her own angry sense of isolation and disempowerment - which she found in the texts of Artaud, then to give voice to the hidden, lost and suppressed histories of women across periods and cultures. *Torture of Women*, made between 1974-76, is Spero's first explicitly feminist work, an art of witness to trauma combining personal accounts of torture with the ancient Sumerian myth of origin – Marduk and Tiamat – interspersed with found and invented images to '(address) pain as isolation'. Each typed account, however, is also a record of resistance and survival: 'As the torturer seeks the negation of the self – the concentration of pain obliterates the capacity for representation...the voice remains the sole extension of the self beyond the body.' (Bird 1996:56)

Torture of Women (Fig.2) was first exhibited at A.I.R. Gallery, New York, in September 1976, with a catalogue and essay by Lucy Lippard and an extensive review in The Nation by Lawrence Alloway. I don't know whether Holzer visited the exhibition or read the reviews at the time, however, there are clearly correspondences between Spero's framing of the anguished writings of female victims of the oppressive actions of totalitarian regimes, and Holzer's later reworking of the redacted US Government documents recording the secret progress of the 'war on terror' and military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prison camps. (4) Where the difference lies is in each artist's particular strategies of transformation ; from factual horror or administrative procedure (the original source material) to artwork. In Spero's case the journey is via allegory, contrasting each harrowing statement with a visual narrative of fantastic and mythological creatures as symbolic evidence of the capacity of the human imagination to transcend the imprisoned body; for Holzer, an aesthetic of negation: the faithful painted or printed reproduction of redacted documents, of handwritten description and printed accounts placed 'under erasure', sections of text crudely obliterated by black over-printing.

In an essay written for the exhibition *Face a l'Histoire* staged at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 1996, the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere considered the possibility of making art in the face of evil: 'So we have to revise Adorno's

famous phrase, according to which art is impossible after Auschwitz. The reverse is true: after Auschwitz, art is the only thing possible, because art always entails the presence of an absence; because it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the inhuman perceptible, felt.' (Ranciere 2014:49)(5) It is my contention that, in their respective scripto-visual practices of word/image combinations, their sensitivity to the materiality of language and its performative dimension, and in their commitment to bring the invisible into the arena of visibility, that Spero and Holzer 'make the inhuman perceptible, felt.'

Two examples can serve to make this apparent. Panel XII of *Torture of Women* contains closely-typed first-person descriptions of physical violence against women in Turkish prisons in 1972: 'After a short while they forced me to take off my skirt and stockings and laid me down on the ground and tied my hands and feet to pegs. A person…beat the soles of my feet for about half-an-hour…later they attached wire to my fingers and toes and passed electric current through my body…' The blocks of text are interrupted by tiny, collaged heads and the repeated, printed outline of Tiamat, the Sky Goddess. There are spaces between the texts across the paper surface as if silence, or a pause, were required to break the pattern of atrocity – an absence to signify the suffering body. (Fig.3)

In section five of Holzer's five-panel painting *Jaw Broken/Green White*, 2006 (oil on linen, 33"x127.5"), the artist reproduces, enlarged, the handwritten sworn statement of an Iraqi male prisoner who died in Abu Ghraib in 2003: 'Q. What was happening one hour before you got hit? A. They were hitting me. Q. Where? A. Stomach, neck, back. Q. With what? A. With hands and boots. Q. Were people talking to you in Arabic? A. Yes. Q. What did he/they say? A. One man saw that I was crying. He asked me why I was crying like a woman….' Redacted elements run across all five sections, concealing all names of victims and interrogators.

If the accounts themselves in these two artworks make the reader/viewer an unwilling witness to torture, it is absence and negation that introduce questions of legal and moral responsibility – of what can or cannot be voiced, what can or cannot be shown. Through their attention to modes of figuration,

Spero and Holzer give body and substance to the word, they bring what is absent into a regime of visibility.

Holzer, aided by the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Security Archive, has spent over a decade researching declassified government documents which, since the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, have been available for public access. The common thread is the event of September 11th, 2001 and the resultant Bush Administrations declaration of a 'war on terror'. Working closely with another artist, a painter, (a collaborative working method which is similar to Spero's reliance upon printer-assistants), she has, since 2005, transformed original documents into the 'War' series of paintings ('Redaction' paintings 2005; 'Endgame' paintings 2012; 'Dust' paintings 2014). These are variously sized oil on canvas works reproducing the censored accounts of official investigations and interrogations, and the words of military personel, civilians and prisoners of war. Some of these documents bear the weight of historical significance, most are the everyday narratives of ongoing State oppression but which, in their incremental accumulation, represent the global reach and frequent venality of American foreign policy since 9/II.

Beginning with silk-screened copies of redacted documents, Holzer's work shifts register from bureaucracy to terror, from the censored language of officialdom to the voice of the victim – oil on canvas paintings accurately reproducing handwritten testimonies of prisoners and interrogators. Much enlarged and partly obscured, emerging from the richly textured surface, these calligraphic marks are, initially, hard to discern, then, even harder to absorb: a dialectic of form and content, word and image that resonates on many levels. Holzer's term for these later works is 'Dust Paintings', an expression derived from the Arabic for traditional calligraphy – 'ghubar', or 'dust writing'. However, as works of commemoration and of mourning – '(making) the inhuman perceptible' – their naming also invokes the catastrophic event that initiated the 'war on terror', the two planes flown into the Twin Towers and the resulting dust cloud rising above lower Manhattan on 9/II. In fact, just a couple of weeks after the fourteenth anniversary, the media are now reporting the death, from cancer, of the woman known globally as the 'Dust Lady': Marcy Borders, whose photographic image, elegantly dressed but covered head to toe in white dust,

open-mouthed, hands outstretched, became the iconic picture of human vulnerability and incomprehension caught up in the defining moment of twenty first century apocalyptic horror.

I wrote about this and my own experiences of that day, in an article for the Journal of Visual Culture: '"dust fell steadily and persistently on lower Manhattan in the aftermath of 9/II, its location and density determined by the wind and occasional rain…This fine, white choking powder that blanketed everyone and everything in the immediate vicinity became the representational summation of the event – the dust of vaporized bodies, buildings and their contents…'(Bird 2003:92) Part of Holzers achievement in these paintings is to reclaim and resignify our collective memories of the 'dust of the dead', transformed through the association with script as the trace of the hand and, thus, the individual, and the domain of the aesthetic, to become commemorative documents to the universality of victimhood: the stranger, the powerless, the refugee, the other.

And just as Spero draws the viewer into her scrolls – moving close to read the printed texts, Holzer's articulation of the materiality of the painted surface and the intermingling of figure and ground, demands viewer proximity to decipher the image, as if through a glass, darkly……..

So, consider Nancy Spero laboriously inking up each individual wooden letter-block and then pressing it onto the paper with hands already showing the signs of the rheumatoid arthritis that was to inexorably disable her body, carefully forming the words and sentences to describe female suffering. Then, Jenny Holzer and her collaborators meticulously copying the scrawled handwriting of a prisoner in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo, another violent encounter of flesh with the weaponry of interrogation. There is something in both artists attention to, and respect for, the speech of the victim, of figuring word as image, that attests to the capacity of art to witness and remember what would otherwise be lost or ignored – of turning absence into presence.

In another essay from the Ranciere collection already mentioned, 'On Three Forms of History Painting', the author is led to conclude that 'the felt outrageousness of history never ceases to find pictorial expression.' (Ranciere

2014:93) Central to Ranciere's thesis, indeed to much of his writing on art and politics over the last three decades, is the potential of the image – across media and genre – to expose the boundaries and limitations of representation and in its modalities to define what can or cannot be shown and what remains hidden at any historical moment. Ranciere's expression for this is 'a certain distribution of the sensible' , that is, the forms of inclusion and exclusion that enable or exclude 'participation in a common world'. (Ranciere 2004:85) Examining the development of the 'aesthetic regime of art', he argues that axiomatic to artistic modernity is an alteration in the conception of surface, a space defined by changes in the interrelations between all forms of graphic expression, but also the revolution in the literary text – the relations between characters, location and temporality, a flattening and fragmenting in the quality of lived experience and social life. Add to this new technologies (photography, film, mass media, etc) and aesthetic modernity is characterised by a relation to the past: 'In the aesthetic regime of art, the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly restages the past.'(Ranciere 2004:24)

If this seems something of a detour then it makes sense in the context of a broader debate on arts capacity to encode and reveal, at some deeper affective level, a relation to the historical subject and the emancipatory potential of that subject within a community of subjects: a politics of the aesthetic. This also touches upon history painting as an ongoing and vital project – an ambition shared by Spero and Holzer. (And here I should mention Spero's partner and a powerful advocate for the necessity of contemporary history painting, Leon Golub.)(6) Of course, this begs the question of what, today, might be meant by such a categorisation given the definitional instability in both terms – 'history' and 'painting'. At the very least, this has to imply a properly reflexive critical practice, in fact, a historiographical practice that reflects upon the production of historical representations and its own structures of representing. (7) Holzer's background in Conceptual Art suggests that she is well aware of the problematics invoked by a return to painting. Thus, drawing attention to the surface as a mode of inscription beyond that of simply communicating information, is fundamental to their meaning. More than anything, the 'Redaction' paintings foreground the evidential status of the document as a record of the discourse of

war as bureaucracy, a discourse whose primary aim is not disclosure, but concealment . Holzer gives it a certain look that, magnified and reproduced, with crucial facts negated, is an aesthetic of power to which we, the viewer, should pay attention. Indeed, the real content of these documents is written between the lines – what is absented here is absented from the historical record. When Spero gives form to the voice of a victim she inserts that subject into her historical narrative – here, she affirms, across this space of inscription, you can speak and be heard. Holzer does likewise as the repetitive language of state and military oppression overwhelms in its abusive normality, as if what is relayed are acceptable standards of human behaviour: 'Phone Book Strikes'; 'Low Voltage Electrocution'; 'Closed-Fist Strikes'; 'Muscle Fatigue Inducement' – all of which document 6627 assures 'cause no permanent harm to the subject'.

At the Museo Correr in Venice, Holzer positioned this section of the 4-panel work *Wish List/Gloves Off* (2009) (Fig.4) on an easel to the right of the doorway leading into the main gallery containing the *War* paintings. On the left wall, countering the message of *Wish List*, hung two early Renaissance Madonna and Child paintings establishing a dissonant visual narrative of maternal love against state brutality. Furthermore, an arresting visual sightline led the eye across the gallery to the far exit doorway where, just about discernable, hung a small crucifixion – the road to Calvary negotiated via Holzer's mapping of the terrain of man's inhumanity. Thus, in this reading, the *War* paintings existed in the symbolic space between the maternal and the crucified body. This arrangement of visual encounters – and I am assuming a degree of intentionality here – complicates any over-simplification of subject position or moral authority. Holzer does not make accusations or construct binary oppositions – victim/oppressor; good/evil – but (and, again, her grounding in Conceptual Art's linguistic turn and her awareness of the competing semiotics of public space are contributory factors), she seems to suggest that ethical responsibility resides in the act of paying attention to the voice (the words) of the traumatised other.

In a number of paintings the crude blocking-out of lines of text, notably in reproducing secret FBI and Criminal Investigative Task Force documents, the roughly defined black rectangles create a semi-abstract patterning of surface. For example, across the third panel of the four-panel *He Did Not See Any Americans*

(2006, oil on linen, 33"x102") all that remains from the redacted statement are two, succinct sentences: 'He did hear planes flying' and 'He did not see any Americans'. The other three panels fill in the narrative, inviting the attentive viewer to decode this as originating from the interrogation of a prisoner in Guantanamo, the account of a young man travelling 'to Afghanistan to participate in jihad'. The statement ends with a plea for normality that jars with our media-derived picture of the war and the function of the Guantanamo prison camp: 'When he is released…….would like to go back home…"chill out" and possibly return to school to study either psychology or computers'. As observers, we wonder if there is some correlation between the extensive redactions and the eventual fate of this detainee, and whatever in his account necessitated – in the eyes of the censor – doing such violence to his voice. However, as I am arguing, it is not the informational content of these works that is of primary concern – this is all publically available to the diligent researcher – rather, in painting after painting Holzer assembles a corpus of works testifying to the remorseless and numbing economy of the 'war on terror', actions that are self-justifying and apparently limitless. We are not put in the position of seekers after truth but, rather, witnesses to the particular grammar of rendition: its post-factor justifications, dull conventionality (and here we have echoes of Hannah Arendt's observation on the 'banality of evil'), and operational structure. This is not the terror of the battlefield (we might compare Holzer's approach with that of Leon Golub in his *Mercenary* and *Interrogation* paintings), but an attentiveness to the role of negation as a weapon of war; the proliferation of black spaces evidence of absence – silencing the voice of the victimised other.

Around 2008, Holzer introduces another element into her compositions – areas of flat colour replacing the black. In her own explanation, she wanted to reference the colour abstractions of Russian Suprematism – Malevich, Lissitsky, Rodchenko, (Albers colour squares also come to mind)– producing elegant canvasses that retain the bare minimum of textual inscription necessary to signify meanings other than a purely formal aesthetic. (Fig.5) In fact, with her return to painting, she re-introduced art's histories as an additional syntax to her artistic vocabulary. There is, of course, the question of her choice of colour and its function within the image. The reference to the Soviet Avant-Garde is

suggestive; in those paintings and graphic designs, colour has symbolic value although moving in the opposite direction to Holzer, that is, towards its elimination from the composition: 'In its perfect state, suprematism freed itself from the individualism of orange, green, blue, etc. and won through to black and white...', wrote El Lissitzky in 1922. (Clark 1999:234) Russian abstraction bore the weight of signifying a possible future, a role for art as far removed from the present day as imaginable. (The art and design of this revolutionary moment participated in the manufacture of modernity, not as a 'bit player', but as key signifiers of how 'newness' enters the world. Its most extreme manifestation was Malevich's *Black Square* of 1915, a work which dramatically proclaimed its reductive nihilism and which continues to haunt all critical theories of the crisis and/or end of painting today.) Perhaps what Holzer is intending in her paintings is to convey the thought that abstraction offers some kind of equivalence to aspects of the contemporary world, specifically, the world of American military hegemony.

Holzer's paintings join a line of connection from early modernism in the Soviet era to the American modernism of Clement Greenberg and his emphasis upon surface flatness as the primary factor in the post-War, New York School. Indeed, as T.J.Clark has argued, '...within modernism, making convincing pictures seemed to depend on an ability to lay hold again of the fact of flatness...'(Clark 1999:235) In Holzer's most recent paintings, for example *Shifting to Softer Targets* (2014-15) exhibited here, this reading is supported by further painterly techniques: the clusters of overlapping, swirling brushmarks that emphasise the materiality of surface, a process whose aesthetic genealogy lies in Expressionist abstraction and colour-field painting or, as in the *Dust* series, with Mark Toby or Cy Twombly. Now the essential traces of text serve to focus the viewers gaze upon the surface and to shift the register from abstract figure-ground relations to testimony and the word. In these recent paintings Holzer explores text/image combinations differently in relation to surface and space, creating ambiguities between the discursive (the textual) and the immediately visual. That is, the letters and other scriptural components appearing in the hard-edge colour abstracts occupy a different space – lying on the surface – to the *Dust* paintings where they are embedded in the surface. Thus a group of paintings from 2008:

'1.4(A)'; B.7(A)'; 'B.1 1.4' and 'Endgame', treat colour, flatness, surface and inscription as contradictory elements creating a complex interplay of machine-like precision and hand notation which demand of the viewer a conceptual shift to imagine the original redacted document .

If we compare these works with the predominantly grisaille *Dust* paintings displayed at the Museo Correr, (Fig.6) we encounter the body; writing interlaced with sumptuously layered pigment, a corporeal aesthetic of touch, texture and material presence. And this is not just *any*body but a historical subject – an Afghan soldier, Jamal Naseer, who died under interrogation whilst in the custody of the American Special Forces. This brings us back to Spero and the stories of female victims of torture in *Torture of Women*. For Spero, these acts of retrieval – the testimonies of women – are works of commemoration and, in the interplay of fact and fiction, history and mythology, ways of representing 'otherwise'. *Torture of Women* figures parallel worlds, case histories of abuse and imprisonment staged against an imaginary bestiary spread across extended surfaces where absence, the spaces between texts and images, signifies the pain and elimination of the victim. And, just as Spero remakes these shattered worlds through the laborious work of hand-printing narratives of horror, so Holzer, in the *Dust* paintings, gives weight and substance to the word. However, here it is in art's *materia prima* – pigment – that what was originally scrawled handwriting is transformed, materially, into presence: a writing of the body. Against the censors erasures – something that was there is no longer there – Holzer makes time for the slow work of transcription and revelation. What was originally written quickly is now rendered slowly in brushstroke, asserting that this matters and we should pay attention.

There is, in effect, a form of doubling; just as the original hand-written documents are transformed, through the act of transcription, into an image, so the painted surface carries the trace of the artist's hand attesting to the authenticity of experience. Holzer is, of course, fully aware of the risks attendant upon privileging authorship – the Benjaminian *aura* haunts any aesthetic not succumbing to mechanical (or digital) reproductive technologies – and that any serious claim for contemporary relevance for painting addresses, implicitly or explicitly, what counts as painting. (8) How Holzer embeds elements of critical

reflection into her practice might include her collaborative working method; although not necessarily wielding the brush herself, she acts as director of a group of studio assistants overseeing the work's production. Thus, it is Holzer who determines scale, colour and tone, figure/ground relations, erasure, correction and re-painting (these are layered surfaces), plasticity of medium – the whole range of material, technical and compositional elements that are the works facture, that convey meaning, and that, if successful, express an encounter of inner experience with external world.

These are paintings, then, that rely upon the various recent histories of painting as a self-conscious practice, recognising both a definitional and provisional status to painting as painting. And Holzer's grounding in the components of Conceptual Art – language, documentation, process, appropriation, politics, institutional critique – are all elements informing and directing her shift to painting and the production of meaning through the image. (9)

NOTES

1. Exactly the period documented in critic Lucy Lippard's influential study *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972*, NY 1973

2. Spero was a contributor to a number of activist groups at the time, including the Art Workers Coalition, Woman Artists in Revolution and the Women's Ad Hoc Committee, founded by Lucy Lippard in 1971, from which the group of women artist's who founded A.I.R gallery emerged.

3. I discuss Spero's adoption of Artaud's fractured and agonised voice in 'Dancing to a Different Tune' in Jon Bird, Jo Anna Isaak, Sylvere Lotringer (eds) *Nancy Spero*, Phaidon, 1996. See also Chris Lyon *Nancy Spero: The Work,* Prestel Verlag, 2010.

4. In a recent conversation with the artist, Holzer confirmed to me that she regularly visited A.I.R. gallery in the late-1970s and first became aware of Spero's work at this time.

5. 'In the Face of Disappearance' in Jacques Ranciere *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose, Polity, 2014, pp49-50. Ranciere here refers to paintings myth of origin in Pliny's *Natural History* and the tracing of a shadow outline cast upon a wall, then reassigned in Alberti's *Della Pittura* to Narcissus. Thus, in Book Two, Alberti writes '...Narcissus who was changed into a flower...was the inventor of painting...What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?' Leon Battista Alberti *On Painting*, trans. John R.Spencer, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967 edition,p64. The two descriptions of paintings origins in classical antiquity are traced in Hubert Damisch 'The Inventor of Painting', trans. Kent Minturn and Eric Trudel, Oxford Art Journal, vol.33,n3, 2010: 'Painting conceived as a remedy for absence, the latter either as separation, death, or as a distance between men and the gods: in all cases *mimesis* is at work.' p304

6. Holzer confirmed to me her interest in Golub and she closely followed his career and attended exhibition of his work in New York over two decades, from the early 1980s.

7. Numerous accounts of the origins, ascendency and decline of history painting as the pre-eminent genre in the Western pictorial tradition, concur that its dissolution paralleled the fragmentation of the very notion of a public sphere and a retreat into an aesthetic of private sensibility and possessive individualism in the late nineteenth-century. This decline was, briefly, interrupted by Courbet's realigning of the scale and ambition of history painting with contemporary subject matter – the labourer and the structures of social life, but then further displaced by the formal prioritising of modernist formalism and Greenbergian essentialism, etc

8. In fact, the implication is 'painting after...(and here we might insert any historical, technical or thematic term)

9. As Peter Osborne observes: 'Indeed, is not all contemporary art in some relevant sense, 'conceptual''. Peter Osborne *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon, London, 2002.p15

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Margit Rowell and Sylvere Lotringer, 'A Conversation with Nancy Spero' in Rowell,M (ed)*Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*, NY, Museum of Modern Art and Harry Abrams, 1996

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Jenny Holzer Truism, Times Square, New York 1982
2. Nancy Spero Torture of Women, panel XII (detail), 1974-76. Cut and pasted typed text, painted paper, gouache and hand-printing on paper, 14 panels, 20" x 120'
3. Jenny Holzer Jaw Broken/Green White, panel 5, 2006. Oil on linen, 5 panels, 33" x 127"
4. Jenny Holzer, installation view, Museo Correr, Venice, 2015
5. Jenny Holzer Envelope, 2008. Oil on linen, 58" x 44"
6. Jenny Holzer Dust painting (detail). Oil on linen, Museo Correr, Venice, 2015

ABSTRACT

This article examines Jenny Holzer's painterly reworkings of redacted American military documents, comparing her practice with some of Nancy Spero's extended visual narratives of torture and victimization. As two artists immersed in a feminist visual politics (and poetics) of representation where language is both vehicle and form of expression, they adopt contrasting strategies of transformation: for Spero via allegory and the mythic, for Holzer through an aesthetic of negation.

I read their work partly through Jacques Ranciere's notion of the necessity for bringing traumatic events into visibility, and I argue that in their respective scripto-visual artworks and sensitivity to the materiality of language and its performative dimension, they 'make the inhuman perceptible' (Ranciere).

I also consider their practice as evidence of an on-going project of foregrounding arts responsibility as witness to history and the historical subject, seeing in their respective modes of figuration and emphasis upon surface (presence/absence, colour, writing) a means of inscribing the body in the text

JON BIRD (bio)

JON BIRD is a writer, curator and artist. He is Professor of Art and Critical Theory at Middlesex University.

A founder-editor of BLOCK magazine (1979-89) and the Futures series of books on visual culture (Routledge), Bird has written extensively on, and curated exhibitions of, contemporary visual art. These include the first Nancy Spero retrospective (ICA, London, 1987), two Leon Golub retrospectives (Dublin, London, Buffalo, New York 1999/2000 and Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, 2011), and an exhibition of Golub's Political Portraits for the National Portrait Gallery (March-September 2016).

Books include *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real* (2000/2011); *Otherworlds: The Art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith* (2003); *Leon Golub Powerplay: The Political Portraits* (2016), all published by Reaktion Books.

His most recent exhibition was a solo show of drawings, paintings, objects and photographs at the Ply Gallery, London, 2016.

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