

PART 1

DIANE WALDMAN

— (inaudible) set up for Jenny Holzer. Can you hear me?

AUDIENCE

Yes.

DIANE WALDMAN

Okay. Good evening. I'd like to welcome you to the Guggenheim Museum. I am Diane Waldman, curator of the Jenny Holzer exhibition. Before I introduce the artist, I would like to make a few brief comments on her work, and her background. It is now over a decade since Jenny Holzer began to communicate her messages on modern culture, in both indoor and outdoor spaces. Born in Ohio, Jenny studied painting as an undergraduate, and at graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1977, she moved to New York, and began to work with language as her primary medium. The installation that you see at the Guggenheim was conceived especially for the space. It includes [00:01:00] (audio drops; inaudible) a series of red granite benches which you have seen on the main floor, and another series of white benches for what we call the High Gallery. Coinciding with this exhibition is another exhibition based on her series, the *Laments*, which I would urge you all to see, if you have not already done so, at the Dia Art Foundation. I would also like to point out that Jenny will be the first woman to represent the United States at next summer's Venice Biennale, and that audiences there will have an opportunity to see yet another body of work. And now it gives me great pleasure to introduce the artist to you, Jenny Holzer. [00:02:00] (applause)

JENNY HOLZER

Hi, I'd like to thank you all for coming. What I'm going to do tonight is show you a number of slides of my own work, and also work by friends and peers, work that I would characterize as public art. These are things that were done that were very influential to me, and I think are just plain good art, and certainly good public art. I'll start with the public pieces, and then I'll roll on to my things. And I'll probably just talk for 30 minutes or so, because I'd like to answer any questions you might have, either about the slides that I show or about the installation that's here, and actually, since this is hardly a formal lecture, if I'm not making any sense as we go along, feel free to ask me a question as we go. I can't always see you, but (laughs) speak up and we'll try it. Okay. Oops.

What I'll lead with [00:03:00] is a piece on the light board at Times Square. This is a piece by Barbara Kruger, and it's one of the best things that I think ever happened at Times Square, and certainly has the distinction of being one of the few things that was censored at Times Square, which I always find kind of funny given the general tenor of Times Square. (laughter) So, in this piece, she leads off trying to set the record straight — she's not selling you anything — and then she marches right into her theme, which is "Wars happen when the men who lead the nations of the world get their egos bruised," and she goes on from there. I'll show you some of the rest of the piece. And it's amazing that this was deemed worthy, or necessary to censor. (laughter) And I unfortunately don't have the last slide, but it runs, "We are all being held [00:04:00] hostage by

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Jenny Holzer, 1990

a bunch of greedy guys who are worried about the size of their weapons, worried about their manhood,” and this had to go; it couldn’t be tolerated.

And I’ll just talk (laughs) a little bit about the program that let Barbara, and me, and a number of other artists, have access to this board. This project I think is one of the most elegant public art projects that have occurred in New York. Every month, an artist has access and puts their pieces up, and the piece runs every 20 minutes or so, throughout the day. I think this project is nice because it uses an existing sign, it certainly shows things to a lot of different people, and it is a nice mix to have your work in with advertising, real public service announcements, and so on and so forth, and for me, it was very important because it began my addiction to electronic signage. So it showed me what to do with the rest of my life, or at least a couple of years.
[00:05:00]

Move on to Keith Haring, who did the first piece in the series, organized by the Public Art Fund and Jane Dickson, who is an artist who worked there as a graphic designer for a while. Keith had a piece that showed, of course, his radiant baby, and although unfortunately I don’t have all the slides, it showed people running up to the top of a hill with crosses. This was at the time of the ascendancy of the Moral Majority. When his people got to the top of the hill, they killed each other with the crosses. So this was Keith’s commentary on the morality of the Moral Majority.

Another piece, this is by [Chris Koellhoffer?]. This is just an excerpt from his piece, but I think it’s another nice one. It used text and image, and then it proceeded to an animation of a cocktail glass breaking. Slides don’t really do these pieces justice since they were in real time and animated. The end of the glass. [00:06:00]

And these things have exceptional power when they are in Times Square. They’re nice in and of themselves, but you have to imagine what they’re like if you’re just cruising by in a cab and you see something like this, instead of “Wednesday is Prince Spaghetti Day.” (laughter)

We’re out of Times Square and into the South Bronx. This is a storefront museum called Fashion Moda that was started by artist Stefan Eins, who wanted to have a place to show art, unconventional art, to a non-art-world audience. He first started his museum in SoHo, and then that quickly got to be an art audience. So he thought it would be interesting to take his project to the South Bronx to see if anybody could make any art that would be of any interest or any use to the inhabitants of the South Bronx, and also to provide a showcase for local [00:07:00] artists, and I’ll show you some projects that went on there. This is the Fashion Moda raincoat, assuming the position. (laughter) This is the front window of Fashion Moda that figured prominently in a number of things that occurred. The first project, and one of the best things that happened there, was a casting project by John Ahearn. What he did, he just started hanging out at Fashion Moda, and he began to ask people if they would like their portrait done, people that were hanging in the street or people that would come into Fashion Moda wondering what it was, and the process involved was a little frightening. You would lie down and get a straw stuck up your nose, (laughs) and get coated in plaster, but (laughs) once you survived that, the end result were very tender, and very dignified portraits of people that usually, unfortunately, are shown in *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, Paul Newman movies.

I think this project of John's was particularly [00:08:00] nice both because of the process that was involved in the making of the pieces, and in the final result, the pieces themselves. John would make two casts. He would give one to the sitter and would keep one himself, and at the end, all the heads were shown in Fashion Moda. So it was a great moment because all the people in the crowd were the same people on the wall. It was a (laughter) very pleasing thing. There's another one.

And I'll say, before I go any farther, I think although the work that I'm showing you uses, or has a lot of different styles, and some is sculpture, some is language, some is this or that, I think you'll find that all this work is united by a desire to make something that's meaningful to a lot of different people, that's presented in a non-art location, that's [00:09:00] about issues that are important to anyone. These are the sort of concerns that my peers were dealing with and these are the things that are still important to me. I think it almost was a movement, and hasn't been recognized as such just because the media, and the forms that people use are so different, but in my mind, it's a movement.

And this is a more recent Ahearn. This is a public mural in fiberglass, called *Double Dutch*.

This is an early piece by Justen Ladda in the basement of a show at Times Square called the *Times Square Show*, logically enough, that took place in an abandoned massage parlor. An artists' group called Collaborative Projects organized this and a number of other artist-initiated shows that would let anybody who came in the door and wanted to make something, make something, and then again, the impulse was to put it in a neighborhood where you normally would find no art at all. This [00:10:00] was Justen's piece, which was in the sub-basement, and the title of this piece was *Against the Reduction of Women to a [Hole?]*. You would enter through — which seemed right for a massage parlor — you would enter through a side door, and as you entered, even though this shows how the piece was literally drawn, as you entered, the woman would stand up and line up. Justen deals with a lot of illusions like this, and then the other part of the piece were hands and feet, which I always found graphically nice, but kind of chilling when you think of hands and feet all over the women.

And this is a later piece by Justen, in the South Bronx. This is called *The Thing*, and although you can't tell in the slide, he also was drawn the same way the woman was. He was drawn with his toes appearing on the seats of the auditorium, and again, you would only see him line up and become the true thing, the real thing, when you entered through a side door. So, Justen worked on this piece by [00:11:00] lantern light for a year, in an abandoned school.

I'll tell you a little bit what it was like to find this piece: You would get a guide and a lantern at Fashion Moda. You would walk through a number of decaying blocks. You would enter the school. You would go down crumbling steps. You'd pass a flooded basement, then you'd go by the library that was full of burned books — it had been torched — and then you would come to the side door of the basement auditorium, and you would see *The Thing* coming at you. (laughter) Which was good in and of itself, but I think when you think about it a little bit, I think Justen did something that is not only amazing looking, but it was pretty decent commentary on the state of Western education and the economy in a certain neighborhood, and so on. And once

you recuperated from seeing *The Thing* drawn as an illusion on the seats, you would turn to the stage, and there on the stage, Justen had gathered a number of the burned books from the library, and done a [00:12:00] fire behind them. There it is again. And I think this probably was one of the world-beater public art pieces to happen in the last 10 or 20 years. What's nice about it, too, now, is it's walled up again, so someone will have the pain and the pleasure of finding it again when they break through the cement wall.

John Fekner's piece. We're in Queens now. John is another artist who worked with Collaborative Projects, by himself, of course, too, and in and out of Queens and the South Bronx. His practice is deceptively simple. He just names things, so, he calls it what it is. He also did some research and found out a lot of the major arteries to Manhattan were actually Indian trails, so he called it *Wheels over Indian Trails*. Again, there's an Indian, and a cowboy, or a cowboy, anyway. [00:13:00] And sometimes he would go around to various sites, and again, just label what was there, and I think his work is great because it has no extra stuff, it just says it. *Broken Promises*, this is back in the South Bronx. And then, (laughter) I don't know what to say, but (laughter) it says it all. This was, I think, interesting to show that if you are persistent enough and dogged enough about getting your work out, that sooner or later, it will get some attention. In this case, the national media carried this, and Mr. Reagan was campaigning in the Bronx saying that he was going to fix it. And then, I think any discussion of public art is not complete in New York without a good nod to the graffiti [00:14:00] artists.

This is graffiti master Lee painting the set for a movie by Charlie Ahearn, *Wild Style*. Lee, I think, is particularly great because he can handle scale, and his work a lot of times has good, hardcore, real-world subject matter. Here is a wide shot, and Lee is capable of doing these things quickly and very well. I think the graffiti movement is interesting because it came from a different place. It's not a bunch of art school people trying to figure out something to do in the public. Lee just went straight to it and knew what to do. Project by Tim Rollins, an early project by Tim Rollins, and his kids, this is when he was teaching, and this was a project done for the Collaborative Projects Christmas store, that for a number of years, had art for sale for usually \$20 or less, or sometimes \$50 or less. This [00:15:00] was the best-selling item for one year — actually, probably for two years — and what he had the kids do was scavenge bricks from abandoned buildings and rubble-filled lots, and paint them as buildings, and not surprisingly, the kids did paint them as burning buildings, or — here's a burning building — or freezing buildings. And I don't know whether you can read it, but on the top of the bricks they say things like "cold," or "rent late," the sort of things that these kids would encounter in their homes. On some of them, there are people jumping out the window. They're a combination of wonderful and horrible.

Here is one of the proud (laughs) brick painters, but I should tell you, the theme of Tim's lesson that he set up for the kids for these Christmas store objects, it was "white people will buy anything," and this, (laughter) this was borne out, [00:16:00] as I said, that these were the number one hot seller. (laughter)

And then finally, again, any discussion of public art is not complete with — I don't quite know how to categorize this poster, but it's just people who have an axe to grind and who go out there and do something about it. This was a man who was — (laughs) influenced me a lot, who

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decided that he wanted people to stay home with their families, and he wanted to stomp out vice in Times Square. So, he ringed Times Square with these posters, warning that you would get leprosy and tuberculosis, and he was tireless in placing these posters. For a number of years, you couldn't go anywhere without being admonished. I didn't always entirely agree with what he was doing, but it was clear to me that if you were dedicated, you could figure out something to say, and relatively inexpensively. I guess that only [00:17:00] at the cost of your own shoe leather, you could get things out to people.

So that's the end of my lightning tour of public art of 10 or 15 years ago. I realize these slides are a little dated, but so am I, by now, so. (laughter) These were the things that were really important to me to see that other people were doing. It was a nice time to come to New York because so many people were trying something like this.

And I'll now quickly go through a lightning tour of my slides, starting with the *Truism* work. This will show you where some of these bodies of writing went before they went on the sign that's in the rotunda now. The material that's on the sign in the rotunda is a distilled version of a lot of this writing, of all the series. Okay, can we have the next one? Thanks. Ooh good, a dissolve, (laughs) we're getting high tech here. (laughter) [00:18:00]

This is my first poster. I'd come to New York in '77, after doing a number of very bad public art projects in Providence, Rhode Island, and I had done bad, kind of abstract things that people might puzzle over when they would encounter them in the street or wherever, but projects that would probably mean nothing, once the people were through puzzling. I didn't give them enough information; there wasn't enough emotional content. There just wasn't enough there, and I also was frustrated because I found that I wasn't having any luck being explicit about some of the concerns that I had, some of the concerns that I imagine almost anyone has about getting blown up, or about the politics, or about this or that. So I thought, perhaps it would make sense to just simply write what I was worried about, or what I thought was funny or what I thought was dreadful, [00:19:00] and I thought that language was of course a reasonable way to communicate these concerns to other people. So I came up with the theory of simply writing down things, and then once I had that figured out, I wanted to write to the big topics, but I, probably, because of my own inability to sustain anything for longer than a paragraph, and also because I know a lot of people have short attention spans, I thought it might make sense to do things as one-liners, to do a series of clichés that I thought maybe were very distilled versions of people's belief systems. I thought this was maybe a way to not only address important issues, but to do it in a way that would be intelligible to myself and to a lot of other people. So, hence the *Truisms*, and once I had the *Truisms*, I had to figure out how to put them out, hence, a poster.

And people would go through these things, which, by the way, were written from many different points of [00:20:00] view. I had another theory at this stage that perhaps it would be interesting, rather than make them entirely didactic, make them all one point of view, or whether to make them the standard, right wing versus left wing, that that might not be productive. I thought people might be more willing to think about these things if all the thoughts were presented as having equal weight. I thought it was maybe a more accurate picture of the way the world really is, as well as a fairer and a more egalitarian way of presenting ideas. So, people would go

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through and check things they liked, and finally, as you can see at the end, just said, “Too much shit,” and gave up. (laughter) So.

Oh, the other important thing about this work and all the subsequent work was that it was anonymous, that it was not attributed to me or to anyone else. I find that when people can categorize things, they’re more likely to dismiss them. So all [00:21:00] this work is important that it just, people have to take it at face value that they don’t know where it comes from.

Another place where the *Truisms* eventually appeared, this is a Photostat half eaten by a dog at Fashion Moda. In this installation, I did it in Spanish and English, and I also had an audio tape, so that everyone wouldn’t be stuck reading. I did this with a number of installations of this period, so that you would hear it on the street when you would round the corner, and you had the option of either hearing it or reading it.

This is my one deluxe Photostat installation. This was my first official public art project when I was invited to do a piece at Marine Midland, which lasted for, I think, five days before they found a sentence that said, “It’s not good to live on credit,” and then it landed in the (laughter) janitor’s closet, so, I was demoralized, because I was happy to be invited indoors for once, and I’d made nice, silver Photostats to match, but, it [00:22:00] didn’t work.

Another place where the *Truisms* wound up — this was a favorite: *Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise*, modeled by graffiti artist, Lady Pink.

Another place where *Truisms* — this was on the side of a building. This was at *documenta 7*, I believe. I wanted to do something that looked like normal advertising. In Germany, a lot of buildings they will paint white, and then paint a logo or what have you. I had the idea that it would be interesting to have ideas on the side of a building rather than just simply an ad. And because it was Germany, it, of course, made sense that they were in German.

Finally, we’re getting up to 1982 and my first use of the sign at Times Square, my formative moment or something. I had, by the time I did this, done two series of posters, the *Truisms* and the *Inflammatory Essays*, [00:23:00] and I was interested in trying to find a format that, rather than having the underground connotations that posters did, that would seem to be the voice of authority, or at least the voice of advertising, or both, and that then my contribution would be to put very unexpected content in this. I was interested in that kind of play, rather than it always seeming like basement radical stuff with the posters. And so, when I did get the chance, I put up some things that I thought would be good in Times Square. Some series things, and...

Now some really serious things. (laughs) This is another public signboard. This is at Dupont Circle in Washington, which was a nice project, because I was able again to mix in my material with the normal programming, and then at night, it [00:24:00] ran an entire block of my things, and it was, I guess, at that time, the only retrospective of the work till it came here.

Oh, this is at Palladium, not a good place to try to save the world, but it was a (laughter) interesting installation that, it had signs on both sides of the stairwell, and there was dark black

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or blue glass, and so the signs would go back and forth, in reflection, and finally go in infinite regress, which was nice, visually. I sometimes like just the visual stuff.

Oh, this is at the airport in Las Vegas, in the baggage area. (laughter) This was mixed in with [See No See?], Bill Cosby at Caesars Palace, and so on, so, I was tickled when somebody set this up for me as well. It's been very nice recently because a lot of times, people will have a sign in their town, and they'll invite me to put some material on it, which is wonderful for me.
[00:25:00]

Baseball game, my only sports appearance, (laughter) at Giants Stadium in San Francisco, Mets versus Giants. Mets won. (laughter) This was the high point for me. I was able to put this in a ballpark which made me feel like I was doing something. (laughter) That's the end of the *Truisms*.

This is a poster from the *Inflammatory Essay* series. These, again, were street posters, and until they appeared on the sign here, remained street posters. They never appeared any other way. I decided to amplify some of the thoughts that had been in the *Truisms* and to extend it to paragraph length, and I also decided, since maybe the *Truisms* had cancelled each other out, that I would up the ante and do things on unspeakable topics in really hot language.

This was a poster [00:26:00] that got mixed reviews again, as you can see. This was a text that starts out, "Don't talk down to me. Don't be polite to me. Don't try to make me feel nice. Don't relax. I'll cut the smile off your face," etc. This one, I always thought was a good kind of get-off-my-back one for women, or for anybody that has an axe to grind. These posters appeared singly, initially. They were each on a square, and they each were a hundred words long. I wanted people to be able to begin to recognize them, that they would see one, and then start to notice that it was part of a larger series. And then at the end of the series, I would put them up in a block, so that you'd have a chance to see them all together, so they could bounce off each other. And this is how they looked when they're brought inside an art situation. It wound up being a little more like going to the library. When you would encounter these things in the street, you, of course, wouldn't even be thinking about art, and again, you'd just read them at [00:27:00] face value. Again, that was art; this goes back to my background as an abstract painter, I suppose. I figured out how to order them.

This is probably the world's tallest *Inflammatory Essays*.

On to the *Living* series, which appeared as bronze plaques, stuck in places where plaques might go: on the facades of buildings, or over water fountains, or by elevator buttons. I had started this series about the time that I gained access to the sign at Times Square, and the same thing was at work. I wanted to use a format that is usually considered an official one, you know, used for a historic marker, or a doctor's office. I thought it would be interesting to put peculiar content in that kind of a format.

This is a text on cooking that I wrote early on. A lot of these had very flat language, and they were on everyday topics, but there would be some kind of a twist at the end to [00:28:00] hopefully make them interesting.

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Another one about what little girls can do, they put their minds to it. This is kind of my 12-year-old, Napoleon girl text. (laughs) And with a nod to Chuck Berry, kind of. Had to rock as well as be righteous. (laughs)

Oh, and this one was on 57th Street, which was nice, kind of. A random aggression, I suppose. (laughter)

And this is about trying to sleep in the twentieth century, or, (laughs) or New York.

And then, there were some completely stupid ones, like this. This is just dating advice or something. I had some very serious ones and then some really off-the-wall ones. (laughs)

Okay, [00:29:00] out of the *Living* series and into the *Survival* series. This was the first work that was written exclusively for the electronic signs. Before then, it had all been made for posters or plaques or silver stickers, or what have you. I had gone to the Yellow Pages and had found various makers and distributors of little signs, and had started to work exclusively with them. So I'll just run through a few of the things that were in the *Living* series. This is a *UNEX Sign*. This I wrote when I noticed how many more people were on the street with nothing to eat, in the last eight years, but then it wound up being kind of half funny. It's like how you get people to line up at an art opening: you feed them or, (laughs) I don't know. Oh, this is just a personality test, how to scan someone quickly, see what you're dealing with. And then, more sinister ones. [00:30:00] Oh, and kind of how to put fun back into activism, how to make it fun to do what you need to do.

Oh, my tractor hat innovation, (laughs) that happened when I moved to the country, another place for work to appear. This was from the *Survival* series as well. I'm always looking for places that are appropriate for text. This is another thing from the *Survival* series. This was at Wembley, for the Mandela birthday concert that they organized.

This is an applied art project that I did with a number of different artists in '84, on the occasion of the presidential election. What we did was to make a number of videotapes that would play on the *Sign on a Truck*, was the name of the project, and was what the project [00:31:00] literally was. At that point, this kind of technology had only appeared in New York once: it had been in Central Park for a Diana Ross concert. So it was kind of new and glittering and marvelous, and what this truck could do was to display an image, and it also had a sound system, so the artists' tapes could both show and say something, and it also let us have a live microphone session where we had two emcees circulating in the crowd to ask people what they hoped for in this election: what they hoped would happen, what they hoped wouldn't happen. It was an interesting thing. We found many people wanted to speak and were very eloquent, and very concerned about what was going on or what they were afraid would go on.

This is a piece by Vito Acconci, in which Mr. Reagan said, in Vito's voice, "Let's say religion, let's say babies, let's say family," [00:32:00] and it went on and on, and this was the favorite piece of the entire project. Everybody laughed at this one.

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This was the beginning of the live microphone session, and then we had a video hostess inviting people to speak, and explaining how it would work. And this is how it actually worked. Two staff members of *Artforum* were kind of to pretend to be emcees, and they came with the microphone in the crowd and talked to people, and had them state their piece, and also talk among themselves. This was a man from Missouri who was saying everything was perfect in the country and was only going to get better, and fighting with him was a woman from New York who said everything wasn't perfect in the country, and was only going to get worse. So they went back and forth, and as they spoke, they appeared on the screen.

A piece by Keith Haring of an elephant rampant. One of mine's just the bottom line. (laughs) [00:33:00] And another one by Keith urging everyone to vote, at the end, and a piece by Mark Stahl that wound up saying, "We are united in the tolerance of our differences." This is my only venture, I think, into something that was topical, but I think it's interesting to try that as the need arise.

Okay, out of topical and into regular, it looks like. This is an installation I did with Keith in Vienna. We did it at a funny time. It was right after we'd bombed Tripoli, and Chernobyl had blown up, so there was a lot of subject matter around. So we did a number of things addressing those issues and others. I did some texts and Keith made some drawings. This was his South African part.

Okay, this brings us up to the next [00:34:00] to the last series that I did called the *Under a Rock* series, which consisted of electronic signs and stone benches. After I had worked with the electronics for awhile, I wanted to do something that was entirely different, also something that wouldn't break down. (laughs) Sometimes I was tired of worrying whether I'd plug something in and it would actually light up, and I also wanted to be able to extend the writing a little longer, so that I wouldn't always be writing one-liners for the signs. So I thought of using stone, stone benches in particular. I came up with the idea of the bench simply so people wouldn't have to stand up and read my things. I thought it was not polite to leave people standing in a museum or a gallery. I think it's only reasonable to sit down and look at the stuff. So this is what the first installation looked like. This was at Gladstone, and it was comprised of three signs — there were [00:35:00] two on a back wall — and I believe 10 benches, and the material that appeared on the sign also would appear on the benches. And these texts were a bit longer than the things I'd written before. These were about paragraph length.

And a spin-off from those, or that body of work, and those benches were benches for parks. This is in a Baroque park in Münster. The bench looked better later when it grew moss, and that was the first day it was in.

And this is a slide of Dia; I just have a couple of these since the installation is still up, and it's a lot better to see than it is with a few slides. This installation I wound up being entirely about death and dying. It was, I suppose, triggered in part because of the AIDS epidemic. It probably also had something to do with my [00:36:00] just having a baby and suddenly being very worried about anything that could hurt her. I was spending all my time trying to keep her well, so I suppose I was extra sensitive to any external threats to her well being, and then I suppose the other part of it was my ongoing worries and thoughts about the results of bad politics, how that

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people may or may not be interested in your well being, and the possibilities of death from that. So, what I did, I wrote 13 texts that were the *Laments*, or the last remarks, of people who had died. It was as if the people could have one last say about what was important to them or what they should have done, or what could have happened, and again I used the combination of stone and electronics. There, the sarcophagi. There [00:37:00] was one text per sarcophagi, and one per sign, so there was a one-to-one correspondence between the text that would rise from the floor and go up, and the ones that would just lie there. That's a little better shot of what the room looked like. As a whole, it was a wonderful space to work in. It was a space that in a way was very easy because it was such a simple, clean space. It almost told me what to do, the same way that eventually, this museum told me what to do.

It took longer for this museum to tell me. (laughs) Took a number of months for me to figure this one out, but... I don't think I'll talk about the piece here other than in response to your questions, because it's here and doing whatever it does, and I won't explain it other than just saying, as I did at the beginning, that it is a survey of the writing. It has everything [00:38:00] from the *Truisms* up through the *Laments*, a few of the *Laments* that were at Dia, and up to a piece of new writing that will form the basis for the texts that will be in Venice. And again it has some [rocks?] proceeding. And I think that's the end of the official blurb, now, please help me out and ask me something. (laughs) (applause) Mm-hmm.

MALE 1

(inaudible) as far as (inaudible) for you, when you showed in Vienna, were you paid for that, or just do it voluntarily? Do you have an agent who pushed you into the (inaudible) of this (inaudible) the [artwork?] into this possibility of show?

JENNY HOLZER

No, I started myself just putting street posters up, so that work was, I suppose, self-initiated. I do have a gallery who helps me with a lot of the art [00:39:00] projects, and sometimes if I have a public project that seems insurmountable, she will help me with that. So, started by myself and assisted by a number of people.

MALE 1

Do they get you buyers?

JENNY HOLZER

Sometimes, yeah. Yes.

MALE 2

Yeah, I'd like to start my question (inaudible) politician Jesse Helms [not?] Ronald Reagan. [It's not?] I want [a sensitive?] [apple?] for it. It's that I thought back Helm's [meeting?] late last summer that it was a too-attractive woman wearing miniskirts, (inaudible) that I would have liked (inaudible) — my question is, what do you do when people say you are a lighting engineer, or a propagandist, or an advertising executive rather than an artist?

JENNY HOLZER

No one's ever called me an ad executive. (laughter) And if they knew my technical skills, they wouldn't call me a lighting engineer. What was the other one?

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Jenny Holzer, 1990

MALE 2

Propagandist.

JENNY HOLZER

Propagandist. [00:40:00] I hope I'm not a propagandist, because propaganda usually doesn't work. That's one reason I've tried some things like the *Truisms*, presenting all points of view simultaneously, because people don't like to be hammered with things. One, it's not polite, and two, it's not effective, so I don't see any reason for handling it that way. I like to put out information about things that I'm concerned about and that I hope other people are concerned about, but I wouldn't call it propaganda per se.

MALE 2

Can I have a follow-up on that?

JENNY HOLZER

Sure.

MALE 2

Why did you choose to try to get famous with things that don't (inaudible) your technical skills rather than the other way around?

JENNY HOLZER

I don't know how to deal with the "trying to get famous" part of it, but (laughs) I understand how to program the signs, and make them do exactly what I want. I don't pretend to be able to build them myself, but that's not really a big issue. You probably can't make your car run, push come to shove, and you don't care. I'm in the same position with my signs. [00:41:00] (laughs) Yeah.

MALE 3

The (inaudible) [of all?] your writing, I mean for the ones up there in the museum, is a [text?] of that available (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

I suppose that I could make you a print-out. It's miles long and has lots of little dots and for every space, (laughs) but I suppose we could get you one. Sure.

MALE 3

[What will I do?]? How will I get (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

Yeah. (laughter) Yeah. Yeah, we could do it; it's not a problem. Talk to the boss, yeah.

MALE 4

By what standard do you call this art?

JENNY HOLZER

I think it is, but it's a really more complicated answer. (applause) When it is, for instance, on a sign at the ballpark, or at Times Square, it's probably not art, and I'm happy nobody's even

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Jenny Holzer, 1990

thinking about art; I'm wanting them just to pay attention to the message. [00:42:00] But I also think when it's inside and it's an installation like this one, that it is art. It's been a long time since art was just oil painting, for instance. I think there's plenty of visual stuff. I think there's plenty of content. It may not be perfect art, but I think it's art. Yeah.

FEMALE 1

How (inaudible) this work (inaudible) by writing in other languages?

JENNY HOLZER

All I can do is hope that translations work out. I'm not fluent in anything. I speak some bad Spanish. So what I try to do, when the work is translated, is spend a lot of time talking to the person who's going to translate it, so that I can explain as much as I can about what it's supposed to be about, and what the style and the form should wind up being, and then I just hope.

FEMALE 1

(inaudible) your writing [has?] its own rhythm and (inaudible) on American [00:43:00] culture. And so I was wondering what you need to (inaudible) translation.

JENNY HOLZER

Yeah. It really depends on the series. With the *Truisms*, for instance, it's relatively easy to explain because there are clichés, or maxims, in almost any language. I would say, for instance, with those, they have to be original truisms. They just shouldn't look for an equivalent existing truism in their language, that it has to be like mine are, that they're written to sound as if they were truisms, but they're new, and they have a particular slant on things. I would tell them, "It has to be very short and smoothed over the way a real cliché is." It's been said so many times that it's reduced to just the right number of words, and everything's pared down, and I would say that "they should be as punchy as possible, that they seem like people's strongly held beliefs." Those would be the sort of things I would say, and then, like I said, [00:44:00] hope. Yeah.

MALE 5

Yeah, I believe my question is kind of, almost [legalistic?], when I was working in [Stockton?] here in California when [we?] [first?] (inaudible) [being free?], [Coos?] were working (inaudible) computer (inaudible), and the [freedom?] (inaudible). This [I did?] (inaudible) work. (laughter)

JENNY HOLZER

And it worked? (laughter)

MALE 5

And, I guess what I wanted to ask [you?] is, was this, in a technical sense, plagiarism?

JENNY HOLZER

I actually am tickled if anybody will run off with the stuff, because it saves me a lot of work in distribution. (laughter) Please, put it on a — what do you call it — a bulletin board someplace for me, and leave it around. Yeah.

MALE 6

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Jenny Holzer, 1990

I read a few years ago that you had (inaudible) [response?], without your name, and, I also read the comment that you thought your work was most [00:45:00] interesting or effective when you didn't have authorship. So I'm wondering what, if you're working on this now, of new spots, or (inaudible), or if that's changed over these past [few months?].

JENNY HOLZER

No, all the actual outdoor public stuff, including the television things, is not attributed, is anonymous, and I think that remains crucial to it being effective. When it's in a museum, it has my name on it, but the gig is up, in the art world, anyway. But the kind of nice thing with the public stuff is that very few people either know about, care about, or think about art, especially if they just see some kind of statement hanging in the air. So, it's still quite possible and entirely desirable to work that way.

MALE 6

So [if you?] —

JENNY HOLZER

Oh yeah, the television thing. Sorry, I wafted off. The only thing I've done with the television are some things for MTV, which are not attributed, and that just go in [00:46:00] between the music videos and the ads, and I did some on public television in New Mexico. It's the next thing I want to try to figure out how to do. I'd like to get them on network, like in between the soaps, and 15-second ad slots, but I haven't gotten that off the ground yet.

MALE 7

(inaudible)

JENNY HOLZER

Well, sooner or later, you know. Yeah.

MALE 8

I think the kind of work that you're doing is very — [and the?] people you also show, which [maybe?] people feel but don't really [perceive?], or don't really articulate, I think it's very generous and giving of yourself, and I'd like to thank you for it.

JENNY HOLZER

Oh. Thank you very much. Appreciate it. (applause) Sorry.

FEMALE 2

I find your writing extraordinary, and have two questions: Where did that come from? Because your background has been [00:47:00] art, rather than — it seems, rather than in writing or poetry or literature. And also, how do you feel about showing the same words in different media?

JENNY HOLZER

I actually have more of a liberal arts background than an art's background, but I didn't write very well in college and still, a lot of times, can't write the way I want now, but sometimes I can get it to fly. (laughs) It depends on the series, again. For instance, the *Inflammatory Essays* never made any sense on anything but posters, street posters, and I never even tried in any other medium until I just quoted them here, and in a way, it was just kind of a quote. This installation

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Jenny Holzer, 1990

is sort of a survey, and so it seemed fair to include them, but they only fit on crummy posters, and they never should be in bronze [00:48:00] or in any other form because they're meant to be like scary, and vicious, and hopeful, and whatever. Some of the other things like the *Truisms* are more promiscuous. (laughs) They can go on a tractor hat, or go on an electronic sign, or go on a T-shirt. It really depends, but it's a concern, you're right, and you have to be careful about the format.

FEMALE 2

I'd like to add, too, that both my husband and I are ar—

PART 2

JENNY HOLZER

— that are conceived as art will be shown to an art audience in an art space. I like to be able to do both. It's only recently though, that I think I figured out how to put some of, for lack of better description, visual stuff, in it. I missed that for a long time with some of the public pieces. I like visual things. I like — (laughs) I'll sound like a moron — I like colors. (laughter) I like stones. (laughs) I like electronic science, but I actually did miss that with some of the public things, and I like working with specific spaces, in trying to do a total environment. And so, that's what is possible to do in an art setting, and I like it. I like to try it.

MALE 9

[James?] has made some of the [00:01:00] (inaudible) [causes?], like the one that blinks off and on. (laughter)

JENNY HOLZER

Isn't that painful?

MALE 9

It's, I found after sitting, watching it for a long period of time, I got like a [floor servant?] (inaudible). (laughter)

JENNY HOLZER

That's pleasure. (laughter) People go to great lengths to achieve that, yeah. (laughter)

MALE 9

(inaudible) really [hard?], (inaudible).

JENNY HOLZER

Mm-hmm. I like it to be aggressive in a way, but hopefully not to the point of doing real damage. (laughs) Also, I maybe don't have a lot of perspective on it, because I have sat for so many hours with one three feet away from me on my kitchen table, and that's really painful. (laughs) Seeing it here isn't nearly as bad as doing it for 12 hours when you only have a cable that's three feet long, and it's just before you. Yes.

FEMALE 3

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Jenny Holzer, 1990

Heard you speak two years ago at Smith College there, and I remember one of the things that you had [00:02:00] said was that you wanted people — you made the benches so that people could sit on [them?]. You said that (inaudible). The way that they are [so?] upstairs, I think in the rotunda, you do sit on the (inaudible), and the other installation was like (inaudible) you're not supposed to [go?], (inaudible) —

JENNY HOLZER

Yeah, you're just supposed to die in those. (laughs)

FEMALE 3

— but, the ones in the High Gallery upstairs, and I think, seems to me, create a sense of reverence, and I was wondering if that's what you intended or whether you just laid them out that way so they would be easier to look [in?] all together. It just seems to me that if I walked into that room and saw someone sitting on a bench, I'd be like yeah, you know.

JENNY HOLZER

No, it wasn't intended that way, although you're right; it's a more formal installation there. It's more logical to sit on the red ones in the circle, but I kind of thought as that [00:03:00] room as kind of a nook, kind of a reprieve space where you could, if you wanted to, kind of sit around the corner and have a little privacy. I often think museums don't have enough benches, and maybe I overdid it with how many I put in, but it's not really meant to be the Chapel of the Benches, or something. (laughter) Yeah.

MALE 10

(inaudible)

JENNY HOLZER

A little louder, I'm sorry, it's hard to —

MALE 10

(inaudible)

JENNY HOLZER

Not really so much. Well, at Dia, in particular, I suppose that's inevitable, [usually?], just by the fact that there's sarcophagi that, that's a kind of somber, or sober thing, but with [00:04:00] the use of the benches and the electronics, I want it to be more just a contrast, rather than the stone being any holy kind of thing. I was hoping that the fact that it's just a bench and you just sit on it would cut any kind of connotations that the stone would have, or not any kind of them, but the worst of them. Yeah.

FEMALE 4

Can you talk something about the creative process (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

Sometimes, if I'm lucky, it will just kind of come, and I'll write down a rough draft of it. More often, embarrassingly enough, I just have to lock myself up at my desk for *x* number of hours, and try to think hard about either what's worrying me, or what I think is particularly wonderful, or... It doesn't usually flow. I have to go to jail, (laughs) to do it. [00:05:00] Yes.

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Jenny Holzer, 1990

FEMALE 5

Are all [four?] [proactive?], more [violent?] or do you ever find things written on [some other wall?] (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

No, they're all new. Yeah.

FEMALE 6

(inaudible) seems to be that our reading of (inaudible) relies on our (inaudible) reading of advertising (inaudible), and it almost (inaudible) has the same social [effect?] (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

No, I don't think I said that. I didn't mean to imply that. It's a different, obviously, a completely different situation, and I don't make really as hard and fast division between the two enterprises. I think I always emphasize that I don't want people [00:06:00] thinking about art in the public projects. I want them just to read the stuff, but they're not entirely separate activities in my mind, and I would maybe even go so far as to insist that the public stuff is good art practice. Those were kind of the things I'm trying to make clear, and probably not. (laughs) Yeah.

FEMALE 7

You've talked about the different (inaudible), published a book (inaudible) I believe (inaudible) two of them says here, and it was a very different experience [to read?] the work (inaudible) writing by other authors, sitting in my home, on my couch, [it's?] very comfortably (inaudible). And video is, [and?] video tape of a (inaudible) of taking words and put it onto video (inaudible) experience (inaudible) [00:07:00] [will find a couch?], (inaudible) watching it on [television?].

JENNY HOLZER

For Dia, we did something in that direction, one, because it wasn't possible to make an accurate catalog of the installation. We put it on tape, and it was kind of a cross between a documentary video and an MTV piece. (laughs) It was somewhere in between, just for those reasons. But I think, although I might do some things like that so that it does work out being as a document or a catalog, I think the most interesting stuff would be for me, what we're talking about, the things for MTV or stuck between the soaps, things that you don't really take home, you just see in passing, in real television. Yeah.

MALE 11

The only reaction of criticism we get to see (laughter) that comes from [our magazines?] and (inaudible). What kind of reaction do you get from your public art and the [masses?] (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

[00:08:00] Really, across the board, everything from people laughing out loud, to people having arguments, to people just reading. I've hung around a number of places where I've had things up, and it really runs from great response to... And I wouldn't say a bad response, but happy to sad, (laughs) to mad. What usually happens though and what's gratifying for me is that there usually is a response, which is kind of the first thing you're after when you're doing things in

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Jenny Holzer, 1990

public places. You have to at least get people to look, and then hopefully to spend some time with whatever it is that you're doing. Yeah.

FEMALE 8

With those [voice things?], they talk about the sort of tribal circle of bitches [downstairs?]. What do you think about that sort of (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

Wouldn't have [00:09:00] jumped into my mind as tribal circle. (laughs) It's not bad, because you do kind of sit around and have to look at the person on the opposite side, so I suppose there's some inevitable powwow overtones, and I suppose it is kind of a ceremonial configuration.

FEMALE 8

But [you're always thinking about that?].

JENNY HOLZER

Somewhat. I kind of like the idea that you would look across the circle, but I'll sound like an artist here, I liked the way that it looked in this round museum. (laughs) Yeah.

MALE 12

Your style is very didactic. I'm trying to figure out whether your [fictions?] are behind this, whether you stand behind each one of these [idiots?], or whether you're sometimes typically citing other people's beliefs. In other words, do you always agree with what you're saying?

JENNY HOLZER

It depends on the series. The first two series, the *Truisms* and the *Inflammatory Essays*, across the board, they [00:10:00] at least represented almost every possible opinion, and what I stood behind was I thought it was worthwhile to show all these opinions, and to give them equal weight with the end, hopefully, being that it would instill some kind of greater sense of tolerance in whoever's reading them, and would make people consider all these positions seriously. That's where my position lay in those series. In all the subsequent series, it's been pretty much, if not my voice exactly, it's been all about things that I am concerned with that I think need pointing out, or curing, or acting on, or that I think are funny.

MALE 12

Do you think there's some [ingrained?] connotations (inaudible) in your work?

JENNY HOLZER

Well, in the *Truisms* and the *Essays*, yes, and deliberately so. Yeah.

MALE 13

Do you have any feelings or comments about the difference between men and women as artists today?

JENNY HOLZER

[00:11:00] Not so much as artists, maybe, as how they're appreciated. (laughter) Yes.

FEMALE 9

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(inaudible)

JENNY HOLZER

Just by hanging around, that's about the only alternative when the things are anonymous. You can't say, "Oh, this is mine," (laughs) or sometimes you wouldn't want to. So I just stay in the places where it is. Yeah.

FEMALE 10

Would it be possible (inaudible) [audiences?] (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

I haven't done that yet, but there's a public project contemplated in Minneapolis that the feedback will be part of the entire project. So in a way, I'm a little leery of it because I've always kind of done the anonymous thing, but I'm maybe getting brave enough that I'd try that.

DIANE WALDMAN

(whispers) I think we should stop.

JENNY HOLZER

Okay.

DIANE WALDMAN

I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that we have to stop. I think this has been a wonderful interchange, and perhaps [00:12:00] Jenny could take just one more question, and then I'd like to say thank you all very much for coming.

JENNY HOLZER

Yes.

MALE 14

(inaudible) —

JENNY HOLZER

My —

MALE 14

— (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

I'm sorry?

MALE 14

[I was wondering?] (inaudible)?

JENNY HOLZER

About half. I think it's fair to say that it's in flux, too, but it will be in two parts. There will be kind of a formal art installation within the American Pavilion itself, and then it'll be comprised of electronics, and a new series of writing, and some stone pieces — benches and inscriptions on

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a stone floor — and there will also be a number of public projects in the city, and maybe some television stuff.

MALE 14

[Will you?] [usually?] [wait for?] (inaudible) [DFS?] directly as well?

JENNY HOLZER

I'm sorry, it's —

MALE 14

(inaudible)

JENNY HOLZER

Sometimes, yes. Yes. Okay. (laughs) (applause) Thanks. [00:13:00] (applause) (background chatter; inaudible)

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