

Why is Jenny Holzer Hiding Things from Us? (Essay), Bee Wertheimer

Walking down East 88th Street on my way to the Guggenheim, I saw several Israeli flags proudly displayed in apartment windows as well as posters pasted to streetlights reading “Release the hostages.” These artistically amateurish manifestations of Zionism stick with me more than anything in Jenny Holzer’s latest exhibition, because they tell me a lot about these particular Upper West Side dwellers, namely that they passionately and unequivocally stand for something.

Holzer’s 2024 *Light Line* exhibition at the Guggenheim is a modern adaptation of her 1989 installation *Untitled (Selections from Truisms, Inflammatory Essays, The Living Series, The Survival Series, Under a Rock, Laments, and Child Text)*. *Light Line* features a collection of Holzer’s works from the 1970s to 2024, including updates to her older pieces. For instance, the LED centerpiece that now lines all six stories (as opposed to three in 1989) of Frank Lloyd Wright’s rotunda has been inexplicably modified to include the use of artificial intelligence to generate backgrounds for the piece’s six hours’ worth of scrolling text. Another addition to the 2024 exhibition is *Cursed (2022)*: a collection of weathered metal plates engraved with tweets by President Donald J. Trump. By creating physical (and occasionally toxic) manifestations of these digital throwaway posts, Holzer attempts to hold President Trump accountable for the harm caused by his words and ideas since his inauguration as the 45th president of the United States while he (successfully) runs for reelection in 2024. Holzer displays Trump’s tweets in the exact same format as one would view them on Twitter (currently owned by Elon Musk and renamed to X—a far more interesting phenomenon to interrogate through this permanent toxicity lens, in my opinion), meaning Trump’s full name and

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Twitter handle preface every tweet. Here, Holzer's art declares, the author is just as important as the writing itself.

For more than 40 years, Jenny Holzer's work has been defined by her use of the written word. In 2001, she began incorporating text written by others into her work, a practice which she continues to this day. What I find most interesting about the *Light Line* exhibition is when and how she decides words are worth attributing to their authors. In the case of *Cursed*, it is important that Trump's name is attached to each of his writings. He is responsible for the existence of these ugly, occasionally toxic metal plates that culminate in a heaping pile of trash. However, with *the beginning* (2024), Holzer makes the equally important decision *not* to include the names of the people who wrote the works. Who is responsible for the suffering described in *the beginning*?

Made in collaboration with Lee Quiñones, the paint marker text on top of Holzer's *Inflammatory Wall* (1979-82) contains testimonies from citizens of war-torn countries. In order to locate the authors of any given account, one must seek out the label for *Truisms*, *Inflammatory Wall*, and *the beginning*, a confusingly written label that, on the left hand column, contains: the titles, dates, authors and materials for the pieces, as well as a QR code that unhelpfully leads to the home page of the Guggenheim's online guide. On the right hand column: *the beginning*'s testimony authors' names and countries, with no mention of the extremely varying sources of the accounts nor the year they were written, and three of the 16 testimonies being completely anonymous.

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According to the Guggenheim's description of *Inflammatory Wall*, "these posters were presented anonymously so that readers would focus on the content rather than the author." Due to how difficult it is to find information about each testimony, this concept of content over context persists in *the beginning*.

Created and displayed in 2024, *the beginning* invokes the suffering of Palestinians under the genocidal Zionist regime. If a viewer chooses to read the label, they will find that there are, in fact, three Palestinian testimonies in the piece, including this 2023 account from Abu Shaker, a disabled man who struggled to help his children during an Israeli airstrike: "I just stood there for an hour screaming my childrens' names." There is also an excerpt of a poem from German-born Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, published in 1994: "My child wafts peace / When I lean over him." Amichai fled from Nazi Germany with his family to Palestine and served in the Israeli army during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, during which approximately 711,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their homes. Despite the 30 years of time and oppression and death between these two writings, they are displayed alongside each other with no indication that they are describing different circumstances, in a horrifically misguided attempt at concluding that all suffering is equally bad for everyone, and nobody stands to gain anything from it.

The Palestinian and Israeli testimonies are displayed side by side as if their suffering is equal, synchronous, and imparted by a greater ineffable being: War. By purposefully obscuring context from these accounts, Holzer refuses to hold Israel accountable for the genocide it is committing in Palestine, let alone acknowledge that war

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disproportionately affects and reinforces the oppression of marginalized communities.

By saying that war is equally terrible for everyone involved, Holzer declines to recognize that war is orchestrated by the oppressive class because they stand to gain something from it: even more power.

Since October 7th, 2023, approximately 43,508 Palestinians have been killed, compared to Israel's 1,139. If Holzer wanted to fairly represent the suffering in Palestine and Israel, even without acknowledging the ongoing genocide, she would have added 37 more Palestinian accounts to justify the inclusion of Amichai's piece. If this seems unreasonable, consider that there are two Ukrainian testimonies featured in *the beginning* and zero writings from Russia.

Obfuscating information always benefits oppressors and undermines the plight of the oppressed. War is not a tragedy that emerges from a sociopolitical vacuum, and it will not be remedied by focusing on vague, idealized suffering. If Holzer truly wants to update her work to keep up with the contemporary political climate, she will take inspiration from the people displaying Israeli flags and Zionist propaganda posters for everyone to see on the walk from the subway to the Guggenheim. At least they know which side they are on.