

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

June/July 2004

CONNECTICUT

Housatonic Museum of Art at Housatonic Community College/Bridgeport

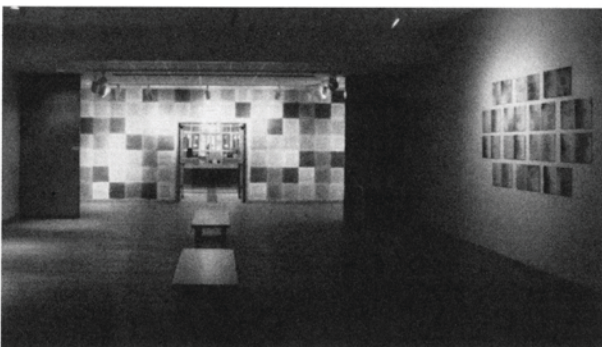
www.hctc.commnet.edu/artmuseum/

INTERFACE: JENNY HOLZER AND MEDIA ART

It is no small undertaking to give a new reading to the work of Jenny Holzer, whose high-profile international career has spanned more than twenty-five years to date. Housatonic Museum Director Robbin Zella has done just that in this exhibit of twelve of Holzer's well-known media-based text works—including LED displays, a stone bench, posters, and a magazine—accompanied by a scholarly catalog essay.

By connecting Marshall McLuhan's ideas regarding the role of media and technology in our lives with Holzer's work, Zella suggests that the message inherent in the media itself is as critical to our understanding of Holzer's art as the content it delivers. While acknowledging that McLuhan's work has been disparaged in recent years, Zella argues that during the '60s and '70s, when Holzer came of age, McLuhan's ideas were current and permeated the culture, and are therefore still germane.

The exhibit is introduced by work installed outside of the gallery in the building's atrium. Two electronic signboards insinuate themselves seamlessly into the existing media fabric of this public space: television monitors, racks of brochures, and an information desk.

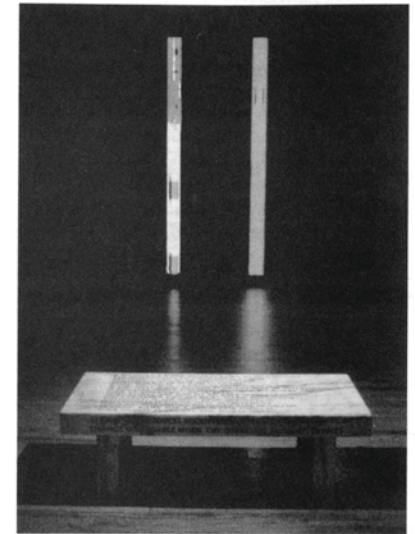


Jenny Holzer, *Interface*, media installation. Photo: Paul Mutino.

On Holzer's signboards, factual information such as class registration instructions is periodically interspersed with such sentences from Holzer's *Arno* series: I PRAY, I PRAY ALOUD, I SMELL YOU ON MY SKIN. A medium that initially seemed to be transparent is suddenly opaque—we cannot look through the medium to the content but must acknowledge it and the expectations it gave us about the content's message. We are thus eloquently prepared to enter the gallery.

The works in the gallery highlight the different ways in which a medium can convey its own innate message. A marble bench with text from Holzer's *Truisms* series carved into it and a cast-aluminum plaque from the *Survival* series have the feeling of official signage and a memorial, respectively. They enter our consciousness not as transparent media but as weighted cultural artifacts before we are close enough to read the text (THINKING TOO MUCH CAN ONLY CAUSE PROBLEMS and SILLY HOLES IN PEOPLE ARE FOR BREEDING OR ARE FROM SHOOTING). Three 4-by-5-inch mini LED pieces—*Erlauf*, *Under a Rock*, and *War*—deliver their rapidly scrolling text messages a few letters at a time, which makes them frustratingly difficult to decipher; but the feelings of panic and urgency that precede any understanding of the text's content are, in contrast, clear.

Zella's reading of Holzer's work leads inexorably to an awareness that the gallery is itself an enveloping "meta-medium"; juxtaposing work in situ with works presented in a gallery setting suggests that the gallery is not a neutral space but one that conveys its own message, regardless of the artwork contained within. *Mary Bucci McCoy*



Jenny Holzer, *Untitled*, from the *Survival Series*, cast aluminum, 6 x 9", 1983–1985. Courtesy of the Lewitt Collection. Photo: Paul Mutino.