

LISA HOLZER

Constructed through pictures¹ and texts that may take the form of titles, press releases, dialogues, song lyrics, poems or scripts for performance lectures, the work of Lisa Holzer speaks a language that constantly refers back to itself, critically imbued with a strong sense of self-irony. Holzer seems to put the world outside at a further degree of distance, simultaneously acknowledging a profound desire to grasp it and give it back anew through her artistic production. Through the complex relations that Holzer pulls together between images and texts, her works converge in picturing – in a figural rather than figurative fashion – her singular approach to the relationships between language, desire and art. Photography provided from an early point in time the lens through which she captures this relationship, later met by other artistic operations such as reading and rereading, copying and writing. Holzer has since repeatedly staged possible encounters between the production of images and the broad field of language, multiplying the potential perspectives from which to understand how a picture functions in the world of readable signs and interferes with it in a perpetual game of re-invention.

Repetition, slippage and desire

Holzer likes to see the pictures as protagonists, subjects with a “voice” of their own. The texts and performances may address them quite literally, staging fragments of dialogue that the artist may pick up again later. Her exploration of language appears inextricably rooted in both popular and literary sources; her constant movement between German and English influences her practice of reading and writing and produces sounds as much as images, and different rhythms that play an important role in her work. Holzer usually works with series of four pictures to imply multiplicity. These series produce repetition, redundancy, but also alteration, transformation and slippage, as it is made manifest in works such as (*objet petit a / monochrome green*) (2011)², where in the second and third edition the strawberry-jam stain on the white passepartout of one of the pictures continually slips further down. “As series these works deal with repetition as multiplied pleasure, as well as redundancy, otherness, distinction or distribution. But I like to use series also to slow down reading and to exhibit reading of pictures itself.”³ Stains and holes, as in Holzer’s series of a (*objet petit a*), “holes” of little *a* letters that appear as stains in monochrome or colour gradient pictures, through their references to the writing of psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan, recall ideas of lack, of irreducible otherness, and of desire (the *objet petit a* after Lacan is the

¹ All pictures are pigment prints on cotton paper

² http://www.lisaholzer.net/Alle_3_Auflagen_von__objet_petit_a_monochrom_gruen.html

³ Conversation with the artist, September 2011

object-cause of desire). They are formal elements that even if sometimes almost invisible (*objet petit a / monochrome green*) or (*objet petit a / monochrome white*) repeatedly occur in Holzer's works⁴, physically appearing in her images, and which she insists on naming through titles and other textual elements. Holzer remarks that stains and holes are related to photography's analogue process, as they might be read through the entangled relation between positive and negative. The stain and the hole disturb the redundancy of the series, introducing fragments of narrative within the process of repetition; they are images within images, source of reading pleasure, embodying singular details to be found and deciphered. *The Song of the Happy Bakers* (2011) and *Das Lied von den Traurigen Bäckern* (*the song of the sad bakers*) (2008/11), are textual works in the form of pop song lyrics, illustrated with pictures of raw or freshly baked pretzels, each with a small « text-stain » or a « picture-text-stain ». The « text-stain » on *Das Lied von den Traurigen Bäckern* is an excerpt of an interview with Paul McCarthy about talking to oneself during performances, and the « picture-text-stain » on *The Song of the Happy Bakers* is a picture from the Internet showing the artist Mark Leckey during a performance at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York. The text accompanying this picture describes that the colours of the exhibition⁵, the red colour – which is also the colour of Ketchup and strawberry jam, and the bright green colour - all referred to colours used in the works, are borrowed from this very picture. *The Song of the Happy Bakers* recounts in English that the bakers are happy because they have a little *a* (the object-cause of desire) in their name and *Das Lied von den Traurigen Bäckern* recounts in German that the "Bäcker" are unhappy cause they just have a little *ä* and not a little *a* in their name.

Unstable temporalities

Like in spoken language, Holzer's images introduce flow and movement, and generate forms that echo a circular and non-linear conception of time inherent to her working process. Her thinking of time and her playful way of disturbing chronology becomes evident when considering the relations between various related works such as *Carrot Juice* (2010 and 2011), series of photographs of the surface of carrot juice, which are later referred to through the silver gold plated necklace in the shape of a carrot in the work *Untitled*⁶ worn by the gallery director during the course of the exhibition *I am in the middle of your picture* at Galerie Emanuel Layr, and then revisited again through a poem made up of a list of the names of carrot juicers and a not-yet-performed lecture performance titled *The Rabbit of Jeff Koons*, during which Holzer might be seen squeezing the juice of carrots while talking about

⁴ http://www.lisaholzer.net/Alle_bis_heute_verwendeten_a-Loecher,_Sommer_2011.html

⁵ The exhibition is titled *I am in the middle of your picture* and took place at Galerie Emanuel Layr in July and August 2011

⁶ Commissioned by Lisa Holzer, Design Melanie Haarhaus 2011

the Lacanian notions of the little and big “Other”.

Within the redundancy of images and their apparent abstraction, Holzer subtly, and humorously, might weave in references to idiomatic forms of language, such as in *Cocoa Cocoa Cocoa Cocoa* (2007) or *Carrot Juice* (2010). Holzer pointed out that “cocoa” comes from the German saying *etwas oder jemanden durch den Kakao ziehen*, which would be translated in English as “to tear something or someone through cocoa”, meaning to make fun of something or someone; while “dangling a carrot” triggered another constellation of forms. Yet Holzer’s images might also index fragments of plots, like in *Drunken B-Holes (Summer Dreamin’)* (2009) and the B-hole songs⁷, or theoretical references as in *a (objet petit a)* (2009) and *(a objet petit a / monochrome green)* (2011). These playfully staged dialogues between images and their multiple layers of text, work together to construct various visual configurations and performative moments.

In *Drunken B-Holes (Summer Dreamin’)*, Holzer explores another letter, which embodies the most elementary material of language, to unfold its visual potential. Her images virtually act as a lens that blows up details often overlooked, offering them a new autonomy and thus an imaginary voice. From these abstract details, Holzer unfolds a constellation of other pictorial and textual elements that gradually create a space of reading and potential performance. The B letter takes on a fabulous figural character that the viewer/reader is invited to encounter in the meanders of works’ titles, songs lyrics (*Das Lied von den Traurigen Bäckern* (2008/2011); B-hole songs), in list of words such as the B-word list, which functions as one of *Four Press Releases* for the exhibition*BBBB*, or performative moments like the B-language readings for Westphalie⁸ together with David Jourdan.

Holzer’s storytelling is not dependent on the immediacy of the voice, and its so-called authentic presence; she moves her narratives between different spaces: the distanced space of photography and language-turned-image, through which she slows down reading, and the space of the performance. Despite the formal simplicity of many works, Holzer’s oeuvre taken as a whole reveals an acute sense of eccentricity in the fragmentary dialogues and tales that it gradually constructs. Her work disturbs traditional hierarchies, within language itself, but also between text and image, by connecting popular forms of language, culinary experiments, art historical and theoretical references. The baking of pretzels and their selling for ever varying prices was performed at *Economy of Plenty*, an evening with Westphalie and at *LISA HOLZER/DAVID JOURDAN/WESTPHALIE: "Bread-and-Butter, Ditsies and Dumb Dumb."*, a recent exhibition of Westphalie at Cneai de Paris. Then the pretzels produced

⁷ http://www.lisaholzer.net/B_Song_the_feeling.html

⁸ Since 2007, Westphalie is the publishing imprint of Lisa Holzer and David Jourdan to issue artist’s books addressing language. www.westphalie.com

during this event reappeared as photocollage elements in *The Song of the Happy Bakers* and *Das Lied von den Traurigen Bäckern*). The sound of making black popcorn (*Black Popcorn Talk* (2011)) figured as opening-speech for the last of the four *Yes Or Yes, Yes Or Yes* evenings at Croy Nielsen, Berlin, April 2011. As a consequence, a strange sense of irony emerges in the subjects of Holzer's visual narratives. Although they seem to play with ideas of banality and the mundane, they nevertheless demonstrate an out-of-the-ordinary deployment of imagination, repeatedly pushing further the possibilities opened up by "the mutual influences that language exerts on pictures, and pictures have on text"⁹.

In social light

Lisa Holzer produces situations of enunciation that she invests by giving singular voices to her works through this constant dialogue between images and texts. Within this situation, the artist is herself often an essential protagonist, acknowledging that in the present context, an artist cannot avoid fulfilling a role that seems to be expected from her as a sort of "performative responsibility"¹⁰.

In 2010, Holzer and fellow artist Chiara Minchio have launched a series of four one-night exhibitions in Berlin under the title *Yes Or Yes, Yes Or Yes*. This Berlin-based project was following a similar collaborative endeavour in Vienna titled _____ *ho is no substitute for anything*, which directly referred to "A Picture is No Substitute for Anything", the name that artists Sherrie Levine and Louise Lawler worked under for their collaborative projects in 1981 and 1982. In the short text presenting the project, the two artists make the following claims: "Subtly dressed up, we will also exhibit ourselves as artists and thus, also in this manner, standing beside ourselves so to speak, take into account in a performative way, the tragicomical nuances in this alleged vocation-profession and all the embarrassment and dignity of exhibiting oneself or something of oneself."¹¹

Holzer and Minchio take ownership over their own expectations and intend to bring their work and the one of fellow artists into light by producing their own social space within the framework of an established network of galleries and exhibition spaces. Art historian Molly Nesbit had described Levine and Lawler's situation in the 1980s in terms of *wall-lessness*¹², stressing that their collaborative effort was the decisive mark of the production of a new visibility for their individual practices. If today's art world does not lack walls and exhibiting

⁹ Conversation with the artist, September 2011

¹⁰ Conversation with the artist, September 2011

¹¹ <http://www.lisaholzer.net/Yes.html>

¹² Molly Nesbit, *Bright Light, big city : the 1980s without walls*, Artforum, April 2003

spaces, the performative interventions proposed by Holzer and Minchio propose ways of interfering within given situations and inserting, often with humour and a chosen lightness, one might even say goofiness, their own narratives.

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