

# PRINT CULTURE AND THE SPECTACLE 2.0 – A POST-PANDEMIC VOICE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes creative printmaking practices that employ art as a platform for alternative voices that critique DeBord's modern-day exploitation systems in the *Society of the Spectacle*<sup>1</sup> (Debord, 1967). The specific art practices discussed aim to tempt mainstream participants caught within the Spectacle's cycle to recognise, evaluate, and reconsider the impact these systems have on contemporary society.

The creative industries have spent much time 'on mute' throughout the past two years. While navigating the ever-changing lockdowns and restrictions, art practitioners – whose role is often to bring people together physically – have been forced to operate in isolation from behind a keyboard. As visual practitioners, we must speak out in response to these COVID-related paradigm shifts with the most effective post-pandemic voice we can muster: our art practice. This paper suggests that a potent reaction to our impacted creative lives comes from understanding how the *Spectacle's* mechanisms operate in a contemporary sense during this pandemic. At the same time, it discusses how art can be used to challenge the principles and ethics of a culture caught within the *Spectacle*.

The paper also discusses historical and contemporary artists and art practices that utilise the same techniques, mediums, and frameworks employed by the Spectacle to expose the mechanisms of present-day *Spectacle 2.0*. These artists, who draw from print culture, utilise methodologies that successfully navigate the risks of becoming part of the ongoing cycle that the Spectacle perpetuates.

## INTRODUCTION

Art has long been used as a platform and vehicle to critique society and provide an alternative voice for discussion and change. The artist responds to

the world around them and presents ideas and concerns in ways that encourage critical dialogue. In contemporary society, where the speed of transfer of information is only limited by one's Wi-Fi connection, the practice of printmaking has become essential to artists' creative response. The speed at which the artists' message can be delivered has become paramount. Printmaking practices, both established and those enhanced by technological advances, have become an essential tool in contemporary artists' repertoires. To understand the effectiveness of art and its capacity to critique and provoke discussion, it is

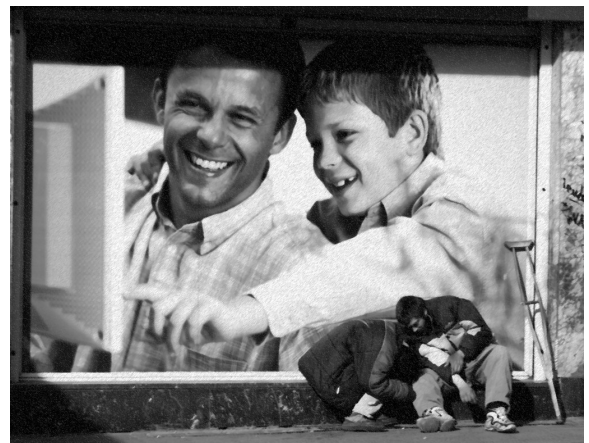


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Image 1. Society of the Spectacle  
 Figure 2: Francisco José de Goya – The Disasters of War, 1863

<sup>1</sup> Debord, G. (1967). *Society of the Spectacle* (K. Knabb, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Black & Red.

essential to contextualise the society within which it operates. This paper uses Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1967) and its contemporary counterparts as a lens through which to view the artist's practice.

It also considers historical and contemporary artists and art practices utilising techniques, mediums, and frameworks similar to those employed by the systems of today's present-day *Spectacle 2.0*. To understand and decode the mechanisms and processes used by artists to combat the *Spectacle*, the aesthetics and language in which they are conveyed are presented. Finally, how these artists – who are informed by and draw from print culture – successfully navigate the risks of becoming part of the ongoing cycle that the *Spectacle* perpetuates is discussed.

## DEBORD'S SPECTACLE

In post-World War II, the Situationist International's artistic movement stood alone in its ongoing, hard-line claim to transcend art into a revolutionary act<sup>2</sup> (Rasmussen, 2006, pp. 5-15). The Situationists maintained a solid link to the works of Karl Marx and claimed that capitalism, particularly in the West, had reduced all things to commodities.

Historically, art has been seen as a means to encourage critique and instigate change. However, the Situationists believed that art and all other certainties had been relegated to mere representations to acquire capital. Art was no longer seen as avant-garde and had been reduced to one of the empty gestures of the spectacle<sup>3</sup> (Rasmussen, 2006, pp. 5-15). Situationist Guy Debord's (1967) critique of capitalist society *The Society of the Spectacle*<sup>4</sup> articulated this manipulation and sought to break or expose how systems maintain the status quo.

Debord formulated his theory of the *Spectacle* as a movement describing a state of affairs where the commodity has achieved the status of dominating the central meaning of life. He stated that *The Spectacle* is not a collection of images or a display, as the word implies; instead, it is a social relationship between people mediated by images<sup>5</sup> (Debord, 1967). Debord argued in the *Internationale Situationiste* journal that through television and technical advances in the flow of information, capitalism controlled the very conditions of existence. Hence, the world we see is not the real world but the world that we are conditioned to see<sup>6</sup> (Durham and Kellner, 2012). *The Spectacle* emphasises the control that dominant voices have over others for political and commercial or economic gain, highlighting the obstruction to engagement and involvement of others in society. Debord claimed that the *Spectacle* is ingrained into every facet of our lives; it is a celebration of choices already made for us. His intention with *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the Situationist International agenda, is to explain how this process operates so that people can become aware and make informed decisions to break the ongoing cycle.



Figure 3

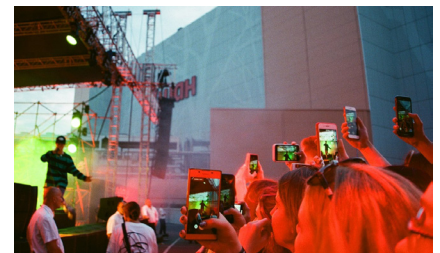


Figure 4



Figure 5

2 Rasmussen, M.B., (2006). Counterrevolution, the Spectacle, and the Situationist Avant-Garde. *Social Justice*, 33(2) (104), pp.5-15.

3 Rasmussen, M.B., (2006). Counterrevolution, the Spectacle, and the Situationist Avant-Garde. *Social Justice*, 33(2) (104), pp.5-15.

4 Debord, G. (1967). *Society of the Spectacle* (K. Knabb, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Black & Red.

5 Debord, G., (1967). *Society of the Spectacle* (K. Knabb, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: Black & Red.

6 Durham, M.G. and Kellner, D.M. (eds.), (2012). *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks*. John Wiley & Sons.

Figure 3: Dada 4-5, Zurich, 1919

Figure 4: Spectacle 2.0

Figure 5: Banksy on West Bank, Palestine

## METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

### Semiotics

To understand and decode the mechanisms and techniques used by artists to combat the *Spectacle*, it is essential to be familiar with the 'language' they use.

Ferdinand de Saussure founded semiology as a method of comprehending language at the end of the 19th century<sup>7</sup> (Saussure, 2011). The study of semiology developed in 1930 and progressed through the work of people such as C.S. Peirce, who sought to understand nonlanguage sign systems (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005, pp.111-121).

Semiotics is now used to examine the operation of all sign systems. It examines the logic and process of communication and demonstrates how we might decipher what communications mean in a systematic way using the semiotic method. The semiotic method is concerned with meaning and the processes of producing and transmitting meaning. All communication, according to semiology, is built on sign systems that follow particular laws and structures. The most essential and dominant sign system is language (alphabet), but many additional sign systems are used globally, including traffic signals, road signs, editing and photography conventions in cinema and television, mathematical symbols, and fashion. Sign systems exist in all forms of media. All systems can be analysed using semiology as a verbal and non-verbal visual language, read within a specific context<sup>8</sup> (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005, pp.111-121).

### The medium is the message

DeBord's suggestion that images mediate social relationships between people raises the question of how images influence society's experiences of the world. The '*medium is the message*' is a phrase coined by the Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan in 1967<sup>9</sup> (McLuhan and Fiore, 1976, pp. 126-128). McLuhan argued that modern electronic communications (including radio, television, films, and computers) would have far-reaching sociological, aesthetic, and philosophical consequences, altering how we experience the world.

Of the many ideas that McLuhan sought to explain was the dominance of form over content. He stated that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it would transmit or convey, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived<sup>10</sup> (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 1-18). Simply put, the way we send and receive information is often more important than the information itself.

As an artist critiquing society, this understanding is essential, especially when analysing how news and information are presented and "sold" to us.



Figure 6

7 De Saussure, F., (2011). Course in General Linguistics. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

8 O'Shaughnessy, M. and Stadler, J., (2005). Semiology. Media and society: An introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 111-121.

9 McLuhan, M. and Fiore, Q., (1967). The medium is the message. New York, 123(1), pp. 126-128.

10 McLuhan, M., (1964). The medium is the message in Understanding media. New York: Signet, pp. 1-18.

Figure 6: Jenny Holzer, Times Square, 1982

## HISTORICAL REFERENCES

Using printmaking as a platform to critique the society in which we live is not new. The following artists illustrate how, historically, print culture has been used to convey a societal message.

### Goya

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) is regarded as the most important Spanish artist of the late 18th and early 19th centuries<sup>11</sup> (Voorhies, 2019). Goya used his images to expose the atrocities during Spain's war for independence from France in 1808 when Napoleon's army invaded Spain. The brutal incursion – which included mass executions of Spanish citizens who rose to resist the invasion – culminated in the installation of Napoleon's brother, Joseph Bonaparte, on the Spanish throne. During this time, Goya began creating plates for what would be known as *Desastres de la Guerra*. The series of 85 prints, produced between 1810 and 1820 while Goya was employed by the French, recounts the atrocities during Spain's war for independence.

It is important to note that *The Disasters of War* was not published until 1863, 35 years after Goya's death. It is believed that the delay was intentional so that the collection could be viewed uncensored and without fear of retribution from the incoming Spanish King Ferdinand VII's regime<sup>12</sup> (Park West Gallery, 2019). This body of work was not simply a single painting that could be hidden away but a collection of prints created from plates that could be reproduced indefinitely. Art historians agree that *The Disasters of War* acts as Goya's visual protest against the Spanish War for Independence and the subsequent Peninsular War<sup>13</sup> (Voorhies, 2019).

### Dadaism

The way in which art movements have questioned public and political speech has progressed historically. For instance, the Dadaists' tactics were frequently provocative, chaotic, and challenging to define<sup>14</sup> (Kristiansen, 1968, pp. 457-462). Dadaist practice is known for mocking politics and politicians, satirising the media, and insulting tradition using print mediums. Often delivered in the form of fake press releases, printed publications, advertising posters, and stickers, their messages were conveyed in a familiar medium necessary to reform mainstream society.

Dadaism aimed to rid society of apathy and alienation by exposing falsity in the political, social, and economic climate. These campaigns were often conducted outside gallery walls in public spaces, such as bars, restaurants, and streets. Taking their work outside the gallery space enabled them to reach an audience that may have been outside their avant-garde art world<sup>15</sup> (Hage, 2011, pp. 33–53).

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11 Voorhies, J. (2019). Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the Spanish Enlightenment. [online] Metmuseum.org. Available at: [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd\\_goya.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm).

12 Park West Gallery. (2019). A Closer Look at Francisco Goya's 'Disasters of War'. [online] Available at: <https://www.parkwestgallery.com/francisco-goya-disasters-of-war/>.

13 Voorhies, J. (2019). Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the Spanish Enlightenment. [online] Metmuseum.org. Available at: [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd\\_goya.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm).

14 Kristiansen, D.M., (1968). What is Dada? Educational Theatre Journal, pp. 457-462.

15 Hage, E., (2011). The Magazine as Strategy: Tristan Tzara's Dada and the Seminal Role of Dada Art Journals in the Dada Movement. Journal of Modern Periodical Studies, 2(1), pp. 33-53.

The above examples demonstrate the power and strength of print mediums and print practices. The printed text implies authority and lends itself to unlimited reproduction, allowing the artist to reach a broad audience indefinitely.

While techniques have been effective historically, changes within technology and society demand that the production of work that challenges the Spectacle must imitate the language and aesthetics utilised by the Modern-Day Spectacle, and that artists approach their critiques and practices with the same sophistication that the *Modern-Day Spectacle* employs.

## MODERN-DAY SPECTACLE

In his book *Social Capital Online*, Dr Kane X. Faucher, a media studies teacher at Western University, Ontario, describes how neoliberal capitalism is constantly creating more effective techniques for perfecting social separation by making technology innovation its exclusive instrument. More than just neutral devices, the mobile phones, tablets, and computers themselves are part of a massive commodification network that encourages their adoption and use as a prerequisite for various social interactions<sup>16</sup> (Faucher, 2018, p. 109). In contemporary society, it is nearly impossible to network, conduct business, or communicate without using these technological tools, that have become part of our day-to-day existence. In line with Faucher's supposition, the isolation that results from engaging heavily with these devices could be viewed as a primary mechanism of the *Modern-Day Spectacle*. COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns have necessitated the use of these devices and have further reinforced the alienation caused by them.

### Spectacle 2.0

Contributors to Briziarelli and Armano's book *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism* provide us with vital clues for defining *Spectacle 2.0*, a spectacle driven by a new aesthetics with a renewed emphasis on (new) media and marked by interaction<sup>17</sup> (Briziarelli and Armano, 2017, pp.15-47). When considering McLuhan, artists combating *Spectacle 2.0* are almost corralled towards a digital product, platform, algorithm, or device. Suppose a contemporary societal aesthetic is dictated by the new media and technology available to us. In that case, an artist must utilise these tools and materials to convey their message with the same weight and strength.

### New Aesthetics – A New Visual Language

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the very discouraged American author, media theorist, and cultural critic Neil Postman suggests that to inform the public of the ways of the *Spectacle*, one must engage and utilise the very same mechanisms to have the message heard<sup>18</sup> (Postman, 1985, pp. 13-18).

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<sup>16</sup> Faucher, K.X., (2018). The network spectacle. *Social Capital Online: Alienation and Accumulation*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Briziarelli, M. and Armano, E. (2017). Introduction: From the Notion of Spectacle to Spectacle 2.0: The Dialectic of Capitalist Mediations. *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*, pp. 15-47.

<sup>18</sup> Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves To Death*. Etc.: A Review of General Semantics, 42(1), pp. 13-18.

The COVID-19 pandemic has its own chapter in *Spectacle 2.0*. Because we are driven towards a new emphasis on technology and its instruments, the world has become segmented. When we are forced to remain indoors, this exaggerates the already seductive charms of these devices. Consequently, or merely due to progress, a new aesthetic and visual language has appeared, one still based in print culture, but delivered in pixels on digital devices.

A new visual language has emerged from advances in technology and with it, the new mediums, and formats it enables. The contemporary artists used as exemplars in this essay employ vital elements of this new and emerging technology. An understanding of semiotics, particularly McLuhan's "medium is the message", and making their work accessible to a public audience through guerrilla street art projects. Through technological and digital processes, they respond or swiftly deliver projects presented in a visual language that contemporary society understands and accepts.

## CONTEMPORARY REFERENCES

### Banksy

Love him or hate him, the street artist turned art world prankster Banksy is undoubtedly one of the most successful artists to manipulate the spectacle to his agenda. The Bristol-based artist's roots are in graffiti, but his practice has shifted to spray-painted stencils due to the speed of their application, photographic detail, and the opportunity for repetition.

His ability to manipulate the media through orchestrated stunts has helped him achieve sales equal to respected or "legitimate" art world practitioners. It has also allowed him to use his practice as a platform to speak out about social issues and injustices. While sometimes addressing international issues, such as the plight of Palestinians by painting on the West Bank in Gaza, or installing mock Guantanamo Bay detainees inside Disneyland, one of Banksy's regular topics of critique is capitalism, particularly within the art scene. Image 5. Banksy on West Bank, Palestine

It could be criticised and called hypocritical that Banksy's immersion in the spectacle merely allowed him to become one of the art world's mega-rich through maintaining intentional anonymity and his cult of celebrity, thus catering to the world's wealthy and elite. However, through his understanding of how the spectacle operates, his work has also reached a mainstream audience, and so too has his commentary.

*Love is in the Bin* is an ironic example of Banksy's critique of capitalist society. When at auction at Sotheby's London, a shredder hidden in the frame of the painting activated as the hammer fell, slicing the piece to damage but not destroy it. This stunt, aimed at humiliating the viewer or buyer, was enacted in public with the goal of going viral. The prank was successful and perhaps criticised the culture of high-end art

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collection, but ironically it caused the piece to sell for USD 25.3 million, nearly 17 times its initial sale price, three years later<sup>19</sup> (Sutton, 2021).

It may be his self-serving ability to manipulate the Spectacle that garners Banksy the criticism of his motivations, but there is no doubt that he understands and utilises the mechanisms of the *Spectacle* like few others.

### Jenny Holzer

Holzer's vision of language as art emerged in New York in the late 1970s. Her inspiration was an extensive university reading list incorporating Western and Eastern literature and philosophy. Holzer believed these writings could be condensed into easy-to-understand words, and it could be concluded that this process came about to include an audience from outside New York's elite art scene. She wrote these descriptions anonymously in black italic type on white paper and wheat-pasted them to building facades, signage, and telephone booths in lower Manhattan. The work, designed to look like familiar advertisements, traffic signs, and newscasts, set out to critique the admonitory language of government and corporations and the seductive language of advertising<sup>20</sup> (Saunders, 2011, pp. 3-11).

By the early 80s, the medium of current computer systems had become an integral part of Holzer's work and continued throughout her career. In 1982, nine of Holzer's 'Truisms' flashed at forty-second intervals on the gigantic Spectacolor electronic signboard in Times Square. The usage of the light-emitting diode (LED) machine allowed Holzer to reach a huge audience in a language and medium that had become increasingly prevalent. Holzer distinguished herself as a successor of the conceptualist and pop art traditions by merging knowledge of semantics with modern advertising technologies<sup>21</sup> (Arthistoryarchive.com, 2019).

Holzer's work has evolved from early street projects to incorporate the new visual language and aesthetics of the *Spectacle 2.0*. Wheat-pasted posters have become large-scale projections on buildings or ambiguous poetry presented on digital scoreboards in enormous sporting stadiums. The materials may have changed, but Holzer's work, based on print culture, still maintains a gorilla aspect, rejecting the art gallery's white walls and engaging with an audience in public and often site-specific locations.

### CONCLUSION

This paper aims to raise awareness about the importance of art as a platform for alternative voices. To have a voice means to communicate and express opinions and ideas, not to lend weight to a binary to accomplish a goal, assert authority, or dominate to ensure economic, financial, or political gain, but to ensure that art continues to have a role in shaping society. With the pandemic's limitations on close contact, it would be easy to think that many contemporary artists feel

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<sup>19</sup> Sutton, B. (2021). Banksy's 'Love is in the Bin,' Explained. [online] Artsy. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-banksys-love-bin-explained>.

<sup>20</sup> Saunders, G., (2011). Street Art: Prints and Precedents. *Art in Print*, 1(3), pp. 3-11.

<sup>21</sup> Arthistoryarchive.com. (2019). Jenny Holzer – Biography & Art – The Art History Archive. [online] Available at: <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/contemporary/Jenny-Holzer.html>.

blocked or prevented from continuing to challenge the *Spectacle 2.0*. However, the emphasis on manipulating technological and digital mediums enables a compatible and imitative platform for creative printmakers that mimics and challenges the *Spectacle* using a visual language that contemporary society understands and accepts.

To do this in today's society demands that, as visual art practitioners, we contribute to alternative voices in a way that is likely to be heard, and at the very least, to encourage dialogue. The practice of printmaking as a form of visual art lends itself and has proven to be effective historically. The 21st century demands that art avoids the dogmatism of social activism, the rigidity of propaganda, and the coerciveness of advertising and continues to embrace the ambiguity in art that raises questions to continue the conversations.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1: Image 1. Society of the Spectacle  
Figure 2: Francisco José de Goya – The Disasters of War, 1863

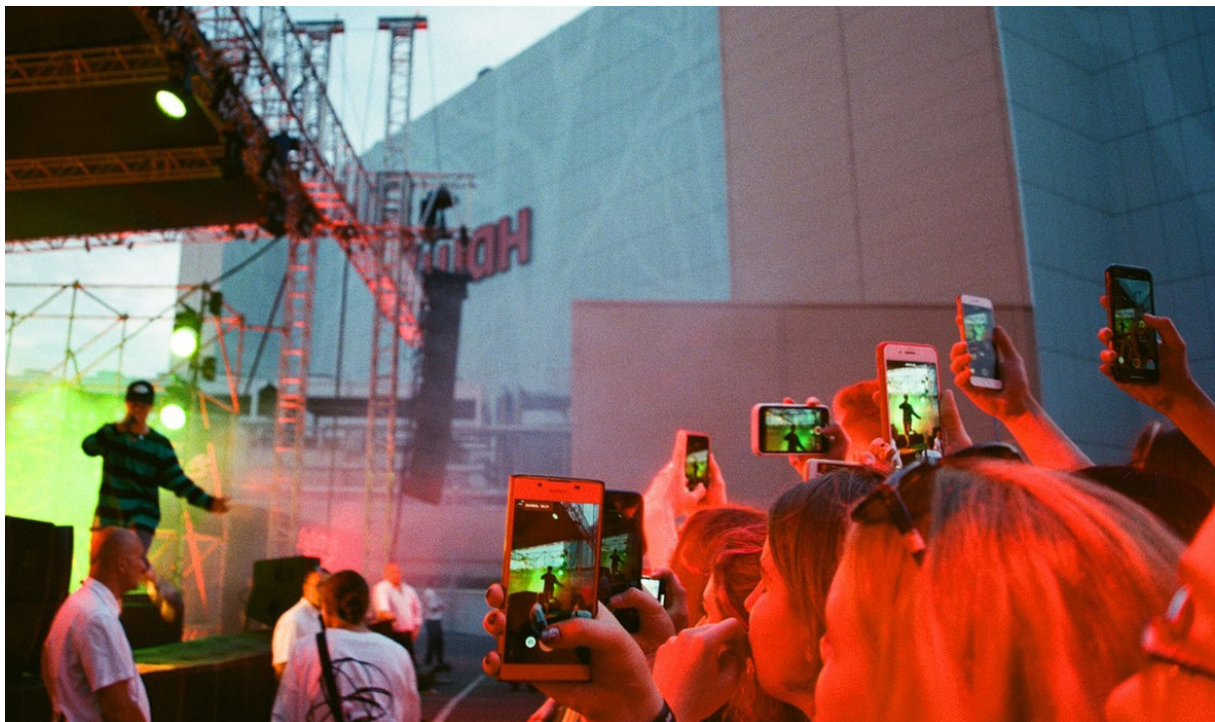


Figure 3: Dada 4-5, Zurich, 1919  
Figure 4: Spectacle 2.0



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Figure 5: Banksy on West Bank, Palestine  
Figure 6: Jenny Holzer, Times Square, 1982