

MASS MoCA

Jenny Holzer

About the texts

TRUISMS (1977–79)

Truisms, comprising over 250 single-sentence declarations, were written to resemble existing aphorisms, maxims, and clichés. The series was influenced by the reading list provided by Ron Clark at the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, where Holzer studied in 1977. Each sentence distills difficult and contentious ideas into a seemingly straightforward statement of fact. Privileging no single viewpoint, *Truisms* examine beliefs, mores, and truths. Arranged in alphabetical order, they were first shown on anonymous street posters pasted throughout downtown Manhattan, and they have since appeared on T-shirts, hats, electronic signs, stone floors, and benches.

INFLAMMATORY ESSAYS (1979–82)

Influenced by Holzer’s readings of political, utopian, art, religious, crackpot, and other manifestos, the *Inflammatory Essays* are a collection of one-hundred-word texts that were originally printed on colored paper and posted around downtown Manhattan. As with any manifesto, the voice in each text urges and espouses a strong and particular viewpoint. By remaining anonymous as the author, Holzer allows the reader to assess ideologies separated from personality. These texts invite us to consider the urgent necessity of social change, the possibility for manipulation of the public, and the conditions that attend revolution.

LIVING (1980–82)

In the *Living* series, Holzer presents a set of quiet observations, directions, and warnings. Unlike the *Inflammatory Essays*, the *Living* texts are written in a matter-of-fact, diaristic or journalistic style suited to descriptions of everyday life. These are commentaries on how individuals negotiate landscapes, persons, rules, expectations, desires, fears, other bodies, one’s flesh, and oneself. *Living* was first presented on cast-bronze plaques, the sort that often appear on historical buildings, to lend the writing authority; it has also appeared on hand-painted signs, stone benches, and electronic displays.

SURVIVAL (1983–85)

Survival is a cautionary series whose sentences instruct and inform while questioning the ways individuals respond to their political, social, physical, psychological, and personal environments. The tone of *Survival* is more urgent than that of *Living*. *Survival* was the first of Holzer’s text series to be written especially for electronic signs; the sentences are short and pointed so as to be easily accessible to passersby. PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT is a key text from this series.