

Jenny Holzer, Postmodern Artist

It is hard to label an artist as absolutely postmodern since there are so many elements that attribute to being one. We chose to narrow down what we think are the a few of the most important characteristics that a postmodern artist carries with them: The theme of construction and reconstruction of language, art, and society through deconstruction, and also how an artist decides to fill a space with his or her work.

Through many periods of art, we as a society along with artists have created opinions that formulate our view of the world. Sadly, categorizing artistic “Periods” themselves is also one. To discuss deconstruction, we also need to categorize or else this discussion will never end. To begin, we want to point out that one of the biggest differences between postmodern artists like Jenny Holzer and most modern artists is the impulse of immediate deconstruction. The ideals that were formerly present in many modernist art worked towards a universal language about God, religion, and people which everyone could understand. Postmodern art rejects that. That and all the preconceived notions and views of the masses that have been steered towards a general stream of consciousness. (Holzer’s work does this). They take the thought of one individual and display it in the world. Her method is clever in that the presentation disguises her truisms as any other eclectic advertising sign. However, once the audience takes a closer look, they face confrontation because the text is not catered towards comforting people, but rather making people realize certain aspects of their lives that they had forgotten. “Your oldest fears are the worst ones”. Right away, anyone who sees this will form opinions and ideas. One might think that, “well it could be that you never resolved the fear” while another can say “well of course! I am afraid of my fears. And my old fears have haunted me for the longest time, so of course they are the worst!” What then happens is a disruption within the daily cycle of mindlessness that stops people in the middle of their daily routines and makes them think, reconsider, and realize. The point is that whether or not you agree with her works, they are true not in the sense that everyone agrees with them, but that they make you think.

Through analyzing how an artist occupies and manipulates space, we can see their style, philosophy, and general approach to creating and understanding art. Jenny Holzer approaches her public textual installations through the layering of multidimensional mediums. On the surface, her public installations show the layering of timing, colours, and information of the text itself. Holzer works with programmers to implement the colours of text, the sequence of text, and the timing of the presentation, and, how it pauses and starts again. She is also aware, though in a semi- unconscious way, of how her works will affect and be affected by the environment the installation is held in. For instance, her installation in the Berlin Nationalgalerie was putting LED displays on the ceiling of the building. The display itself seems one dimensional physically, although not metaphorically, when considering how it can be seen only if someone looks up at the ceiling. However, Holzer recognized that the entire building, except for the roof, was made of clear glass windows. The lights, as a result, were seen outside as well as inside and the reflections off and through the windows allowed the installation to complement the building while also standing as its own. After the physical aspect, is the emotional and introspective elements which include the layering of the audience through participation, and of course the text itself, other people’s text. Post modernist art is multifaceted when compared to modernist art because it engages the audience more. In the time of now, installations and other postmodern art are not simply limited to being presented in a room and hanged on a wall. Specifically in Holzer’s case, many of her works are massive projections for the masses that can affect more people in less time than most modernist art. Also, her works also carry very

personal characteristics in that the text themselves are not hers, but written by others. In an interview in Art 21, she said that she wants her work to be “for people who don’t do art”. These simple truisms show no subjectivity on a particular side of an argument part because she simply displays them as they are. She does not say under the texts, that they are “wrong or right”. As a result, these physical, visual, emotional, and other sensual attributes come together and form a multidimensional piece that fills one and also many spaces at the same time.

Though not present or clear in all postmodern artist’s works, Jenny Holzer’s work literally and metaphorically “speak” about language because so much of her pieces are about language and what the audience associate with text. Seeing a body of words or letters makes us think about other text, images, and emotions.