

# THE Nation.

## From the Dirty Silences

Must art confront ugly realities with an ugliness of its own?

**Barry Schwabsky**

November 11, 2014 | This article appeared in the December 1-8, 2014 edition of *The Nation*.



The FBI Files, 28 (2002), by Arnold Mesches

Maybe it was just coincidence that Jenny Holzer's recent exhibition, "Dust Paintings," at Cheim & Read in New York City, opened on September 11. That date fell on a Thursday this year, and Thursday nights are always big ones for Chelsea openings. I remember seeing Stephen Shore's photographs from Israel, the West Bank and Ukraine at 303

Gallery; Matthew Ritchie's new paintings—wrapped up in a heady, encompassing installation with sculpture, video and a wall drawing—at Andrea Rosen Gallery; and the reconstruction of a 2002 installation by Jason Rhoades at David Zwirner, to name a few. None of them put me in mind of the events that had taken place just three miles south of the gallery district thirteen years ago. Holzer's new paintings did, dwelling as they do on the new world we suddenly found ourselves in as a result of what happened that day—or rather, as a result of the Bush administration's use of the attacks as justification for war, surveillance and “enhanced interrogation,” better known as torture.

Those who haven't seen Holzer's work lately may be surprised to learn that she has taken up painting. She first came to public attention in the late 1970s with her “Truisms”—apothegms plucked from the ether of common sense and printed on posters that, at first, were anonymously wheat-pasted on the walls of punk-era Manhattan. It's hard to remember now, but their apparent authorlessness was part of their effectiveness and allure; as a student who knew nothing of conceptual art, I remember how striking these compendia of statements could be. Somehow, the purportedly reassuring ones were even more intimidating than those that were overtly threatening. Here, “Solitude is enriching” started to sound like something you'd be told on being sentenced to solitary confinement, while “Remember you always have freedom of choice” seemed to imply that you could never plausibly claim to be innocent of wrongdoing—whatever it was, you knew it was wrong and still chose to do it. And how could there be any way out when “You are a victim of the rules you live by” and “Abuse of power comes as no surprise”?

Fame found Holzer soon enough and swept away her anonymity. As she began presenting texts on bronze plaques, LED boards, T-shirts and stone benches throughout the world, the work lost some of its sting, even though the writing became more elaborate and, often, more overtly emotional, even lyrical (one series was called “Laments”). Along with her own writing, she began to use poetry and other literary texts—but also, around ten years ago, declassified government documents. It's the latter that have become the focus of her efforts in painting. The shift took many by surprise, but it probably shouldn't have. Holzer told an interviewer that as a young artist, she had intended to be a painter but got spooked: “I was looking at Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. I couldn't measure up.” But writing, she eventually learned, was something that she could do without being paralyzed by self-consciousness; because she didn't consider herself to be a writer, she thought she could do something with texts that writers wouldn't, like paste them on a wall.

At Cheim & Read, Holzer revealed that she has figured out how to paint without having to inhabit the role of “painter.” This should not be surprising, because finding liberty in this paradox has been a recurrent artistic ploy at least since the 1950s—think of the workmanlike deadpan of the young Jasper Johns, which led his elder colleague, Willem de Kooning, to tell him: “I’m a house painter and you’re a sign painter.” House painter, sign painter—anything to avoid being what the French call an *artiste peintre*, an artist painter. Like Johns, Holzer seems to want to make paintings that are always discernible as paintings—a painterly touch is never dissembled in them—yet in which the subject is presented directly and objectively. For Johns, the subject was numbers or the alphabet, the American flag or a map of the United States; for Holzer, it’s heavily redacted documents about what has been done in America’s name in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

\* \* \*

The actions recorded in Holzer’s painted documents are not pleasant, and we should be relieved, in a way, that they are only described and not pictured, that we process them intellectually rather than viscerally, at least in the first instance. Many of these “Dust Paintings,” all from 2013 or 2014, pertain to the case of Jamal Naseer, who was among a group of eight men captured by US soldiers in Afghanistan in 2003. The men were beaten, kicked and drenched in cold water mixed with snow in the freezing weather. Naseer died. Later, his death was attributed to natural causes—but even when this claim was proved false, no one was held accountable.

Whose hand has written the surviving prisoners’ testimony, here blown up to human scale or larger? Although the English is often flawed—“they did oppression”; “the body of Nasser looked beaten”—it is still more fluent than one would expect of Afghan youths who had probably never been abroad. And that’s not the only mystery about the documents Holzer has painted. In many cases, a good part of the text has been blacked out—“redacted,” as the euphemism would have it. (It’s curious that a word that used to mean comparing the variants of a text in order to arrive at a complete and definitive version has now come to mean censoring it.) And the way Holzer has painted them—unlike the works in her 2006 exhibition “Archive,” at the same gallery, where similar documents were crisply silk-screened in a Warholian manner, with little sense of any overt aesthetic mediation other than the shift in scale—seems calculated, done not to hide the texts but to obscure them a bit.

Why? Presumably so that one will have to read them closely and absorb them slowly. In his poem "The Creations of Sound," Wallace Stevens criticized a fellow poet, X (you might say Stevens has redacted the name, although Harold Bloom suggests it is T.S. Eliot), whose poems "do not make the visible a little hard // To see." For Stevens, it seems, there was a certain squint that was necessary to the imagination's grasp of reality. And just as he sought to make the visible a little hard to see—only a little; he wasn't an obscurantist—Holzer is making the legible a little hard to read. Likewise, just as speech, in the same poem, "is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier," Holzer's painterliness seems calculated to take the dirty silence of the page and fill it with little smudges, blots, discolorations. Mostly smoky, muted grays and blues, Holzer's colors in these works seem to blunt sensation; they ask us not to react, but to accept with mournful receptivity. *Así sucedió*, as Francisco Goya put it in his series "Disasters of War." *This is how it happened.*

Interspersed with the text paintings were a few others rather different in character, though clearly derived from or meant to parallel certain of the document paintings in which large blocks of text, rather than single words or scattered ones, have been redacted. In some of the latter, almost nothing has been left to read—just, for instance, the helpful heading "Conclusion" along with, twice, the word "secret" crossed out and then "NOFORN," a rather foreign-looking word that means "not releasable to foreign nationals." Of course, in the post-9/11 reality, we are all presumptively foreign in the eyes of those who claim to protect us. But in this second, smaller group of paintings, those large, dark blocks are replaced by crisp rectangles of red, yellow or orange as well as gray-on-white backgrounds. There are still bits of typed text in these paintings—I mean painted simulations of typing, of course—but mostly very little: the word "secret," a page number. In one case, called *Presently in the United States*, two blocks of a kind of spectrum of hues ranging from red through white to blue reveal, at the top (along with a yellow horizontal line), the legend "A group presently in the United States plans to conduct a terrorist operation involving the use of high explosives." Maybe it was even true.

In these more colorful paintings, the text becomes secondary. We are not encouraged to devote a lot of attention to reading something that's nearly illegible. With their clean edges and tidy geometry, the paintings recall early-twentieth-century abstraction—the works of some forgotten proponent of De Stijl or Suprematism, perhaps. Formal concerns are paramount, and the link to Holzer's documentary sources seems residual—but as abstract paintings, they hardly stand comparison with Mondrian or Malevich (or Rothko or Newman,

for that matter). Forgetting her hesitancy to become entirely the painter, Holzer has forsaken the squint at the medium that makes her text paintings so powerful.

Given their subject matter, a suspicion of sorts hangs over the most powerful of these works. Aren't they offering an aestheticization of suffering, a way of turning a bad conscience into decor and making sackcloth and ashes oh-so-elegant? Can art, in the words of the critic Thomas Micchelli, be "too beautiful for its own good"? Micchelli accepts that some art can betray its subject matter through beauty, but he thinks Holzer avoids this trap. I believe the whole question is wrongly conceived, because it seems to concede that art might be able to confront ugly realities only through an equal and opposite ugliness of its own, or else it can only face the pretty side of life and must turn its face from the rest. But history gives us too many ineluctable counterexamples—the names, from Goya onward, are too obvious to need repeating. Anything we think, anything we perceive, can be matter for art—and that's all the more true for those things we urgently need to think about and to perceive.

\* \* \*

Holzer is not the first artist to work on redacted government documents. In 2002, at what was then the PS 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens (now MoMA PS1), Arnold Mesches presented work from a series of collages and a few paintings he'd begun two years earlier, after having received his FBI files under the Freedom of Information Act. This fall, many of those works were presented again at Life on Mars, one of the plucky little galleries that have lately sprung up in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, under the title "Next in Line: The FBI Series."

Mesches is an artist who should be better known. He seems to have been something of a late bloomer. I first became aware of him in the mid-1980s; he had recently moved to New York from Los Angeles and, although he was already in his 60s, was showing his caustically satirical political allegories alongside artists three decades younger in Manhattan's briefly flourishing East Village scene. Mesches' refusal to act his age must be congenital, for here he is again, at an amazingly vigorous 91, still exhibiting his work among the young hopefuls of Bushwick.

**Please support our journalism. Get a digital subscription for just \$9.50!**

The story behind Mesches' FBI series starts further back, in October 1945, when the bureau began keeping tabs on him. The date is significant: the war had ended a month before, and

the alliance with the Soviet Union had come to an end. A new red scare was in preparation, and Mesches was a member of the Communist Party. The spying continued until 1972, at which point the FBI might have decided that painting pictures was probably not going to topple the government. But until then, as Mesches discovered, anything was possible. “They’d tap your phone or snap your picture at a protest march...or a demonstration for peace, at an art opening, or coming out of your studio.” Or they used informants: “a model or two who posed for me privately or for my class, a student who joined us for beer and pizza after class, a close neighbor whose children played with ours, a fledgling artist who you helped get into an exhibition, a comrade in a meeting, an asshole buddy you trusted with your heart and being, a confidant whose life’s torments were deeply intertwined with your own, the trusted friend who sat next to you at a funeral...or a lover or two.”

As hurtful as all this must have been to discover, what’s most striking in the excerpts of the files worked into the collages is the sheer triviality of the information gathered. But there’s a missing center to this story: on August 6, 1956, Mesches’ studio was broken into. He was painting a series about the Rosenbergs. Stolen were art supplies and more than 200 works. Curiously, the documents Mesches was given under FOIA included none from the three months before and after the break-in—much like that convenient eighteen-minute gap in Nixon’s White House tapes. Maybe those papers still lie somewhere deeper in the shadows.

\* \* \*

The documents Mesches did receive were already—like those Holzer has been using—“abstracted” by the broad markers with which some anonymous artisan has blacked out large portions of text. For Mesches, those marks were reminiscent of the bold black paint strokes of Franz Kline—which is to say that, unbeknownst to their makers, they were already imbued with aesthetic potential. The best means for actualizing this potential, Mesches decided, was to use that quintessential modern technique, collage, to make the redactions collide with family snapshots; with artifacts of the time, like the cover of Norman Vincent Peale’s bestselling *The Power of Positive Thinking* or the once seemingly ubiquitous face of Richard M. Nixon; or with images from the news or from the collective dream life of the culture as embodied in the movies, a compendium of banality and folly. The images are sometimes simply cut and pasted, but more often they are painted, as if Mesches had wanted not just to use but to inhabit them.

While the clash of collage lends these works their immediacy, Mesches keeps his rediscovered history at a distance by transforming it into a kind of legend. He says that he

was inspired by the juxtapositions of writing and imagery in medieval illuminated manuscripts. With their delicate, lacy borders and splendid colors, Mesches' illuminations make something almost pretty out of this absurd history—but that's not the same as prettifying history. Besides, the artist's blunt, energetic painterly style, which is longer on vigor than on nuance, never prettifies anything. He refuses to be wounded by the wounds he suffered, or to finger those who betrayed him. Instead, he turns the tables: the people who thought they were collaborating with the FBI turn out to have been collaborating with Mesches on the future works he has concocted out of the records of their doings, just as the likes of Nixon and Peale are condemned to be no more than walk-ons in his own comical tragedy or tragical comedy.

I remember once asking Art Spiegelman about a rather shocking thing he'd written: that Maus had been made in collaboration with Hitler. "He's a rotten collaborator!" Spiegelman replied. Besides, he hadn't collaborated with Hitler, after all—he'd made Hitler collaborate with him. That's a subtle distinction, as important as it is hard to maintain. Both Holzer and Mesches, in their separate ways, have taken on some pretty unsavory collaborators and come out clean. Holzer is a minimalist by temperament, prizing reticence and refinement (and she is not without an affinity for the censor's faith in propriety and indirection); Mesches' expressionism is a voluble pictorial vernacular, sharing the violent energy of the gesture of expungement. That their aesthetic premises are so different makes it all the more telling that they've both felt the need to dwell on those passages that have been expunged from our history.