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Abstract

This essay investigates the fascination and how artist of jenny Holzer and Banksy in using the dystopian narrative by examining a selected few of their projects that highlight individual dystopian ideas with context towards its origins and fictional uses. With different formatting styles of text-based language and the hidden facts to guerilla art and the satire humour use to get a message across. As the two-artist work on authoritarianism to the resistance and reawakening of public conscience of Jenny Holzer's work of the psychological unease of nuclear anxiety and authority cover up of redactions. To Banksy's satirical outlook of using urban environment to convey a protest to the unlawful acts of authority. With responses to the artist work from News outlets and articles on the attraction the public. Underlining the argument that the fascination of dystopian is not something of fiction but of real-world problems that people must face. To the closing thought of the connection that dystopian art can be the tension between despair and hope that by knowing what is hidden of truth that the end can be changed before ruin emerges and to prevent the depictions of a true dystopic future.

Why the fascination with dystopia narratives and 2 artists who use it?

Introduction

We will be looking at 2 artist practitioners' perspectives that being Jenny Holzer and Banksy commentary work and how the responses to the current climate of politics and social commentary of the dystopia narratives. To see the differences and similarities to the themes leading to an understanding of the fascination of dystopian narratives within the real world. We will be exploring both Holzer work that engages with the dystopian, using power of words to critique and give conflict to the observer of the social injustices and to reflect on society. Also, with Banksy's work that also engages with dystopia with subverted art that has as a satirical take on politics, capitalism and propaganda of modern life.

Before continuing we must understand that dystopia can be simply understood as the failure of utopia as it can function as a cautionary tale of the future of society that has been amplified by existing social and/or political ideological conditions. The coining of this term was by John Stuart Mill in 1868 in a speech to which Mill criticized the British government's land policies in Ireland being dystopian which opposed the idea of true utopia being “good place” and for the term dystopia meaning “bad place”. As it was used to express the frightening and oppressive society of the British rule over Ireland.

The connections with dystopia with the rise in popularity over the current years within media and culture as noticeable examples of Blade Runner, Mad Max and The Hunger Games. With today's themes around dystopian ideas often reflecting the current Political idiocracies and propaganda or with the fear of advancement of digital technology, pervasive surveillance, and climate change.

To understanding it more further using Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism of which the brings the idea of capitalism not just one part of the economic system among others, but being the only one imaginable without any alternatives that Fisher captures with the look into ecological damage and apocalyptic collapse through culture, media and everyday societal interactions. The result of the critique is the functions of capitalism that gains dominance over every aspect of the world. This can be seen as an idea that it won't be the end of capitalism but the end of the world as it's much easier to Invision and can be a mental block to see alternative futures that can challenge the societal pathways to lead to a liveable future.

The human desire to look at dystopian outcomes is interesting in the way that people approach these visions of the worst ending, that through the current climate of society and the government ideals or the ethics they present can be more captivating in an extreme scenario. Enduring of the popularity of dystopian narratives, it is best to see that not only the implications with current events with different aesthetic style of future or the complete ruin of civilisation collapse but the ideas but to the psychological direction with the reflection of survival and adaptations with the ethical decision making from a crisis, that even dystopian art can give a perspective seen from the historical shift of mid-century's nuclear anxiety to the now the digital fears of artificial intelligence and the extreme governmental power dynamic and the increased fears of economic collapse in current history. Seeing into the visual fascinations of unusual positions of dystopian narratives of outcomes and the processes to the relationships of the future.

Case Study 1 – Jenny Holzer

Figure 1. Jenny Holzer "Truisms" 1977-1979 Spectacolor electronic sign, Times Square, New York, 1982. © 2007 Jenny Holzer, member Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Holzer's Works as a conceptual artist based in New York can be interpreted as dystopian, with the focus of Her work on the use of government deception and the social themes of violence, war and the abuse of power. Holzer's is most known for text-based series that use this format using LED signs, giant billboards and even engraving stone with the text being things that challenge the social norms and the power structure of the political times. Starting with Truisms (1978-1987) Holzer's first major text series where she anonymously posted short statements on posters around New York to confront the public with shocking and discomforting viewpoints on everyday life. With around 300 short texts that expressed many different perspectives that gave the public to challenge assumptions with complex ideas into

single sentences that were plastered on T-shirts and billboards of the sentences she put forth on what was said during that time. Maybe it was to be true to somebody who was seeing her work to present a belief to relate by what is said or to disagree with. (Schwarts, 2019) This could the work on authoritarian language be showing the lost voice of the individual by gathering the public as Holzer removes her own voice to present contradictory statement that the public can view as modern anxiety by being bombarded by these “truth bombs” and the “fake news” on the information of warfare with statements like "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE" or "FEAR IS THE MOST ELEGANT WEAPON" that instils these fears of the truth. As these are to mimic the voice of state corruption of hidden truths given to the viewer as a subject of the dystopian regime of authority as her other work with similar themes of Truism that being Holzer's Survival series from the 80’s on short phrases that create a sense to doublethink. Holzer said in an interview with Steven Henry Madoff “I wanted to avoid polarization. Then a young artist pointed out that contemplation is fine when there's no crisis, but when there is a crisis, you may have to come down on one side or another.” (Madoff, 2003) This can be a way that the public will choose on expectancy of one side being the authority of the government's words or the public showcase of “truths” that Holzer had collected and presented in an overstimulating manner in her show case on LED signs that had a repeat in a loop a show case a wide variety of statement on the subject of the human life and the social norms that people have come to believe and the language of corruption.

Figure 2. *Survival (1983–85), Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society* ,Marshall,J. ,1985

Truism can be the discussion of ideology belief then Survival is about the subject of enduring a crisis then an end to devastation. This was at the height of the cold war during a time of fear of nuclear tension that was felt across the world, as Holzer's work at this time shifted to a more cautionary and urgent means, then to what was being used for Truism. (Singularart, 2024)

While John Stuart Mills defined the dystopian when discussing political polices, Holzer’s Survival series brings in the individual of the 80s experience of what is bad and that the crisis had already become a reality that is lived in. From Hozier’s work with phrases shown in fig 2 “PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT” that highlight the feeling of the public that expresses the notion of freedom from the fears by revealing the truth. This could be seen as the unspoken cruelty of a corrupt system that reflects control of information and the unspoken fears of the individuals. The format that Holzer presented on the medium of a giant LED sign can seem like a similar method of authoritative message to the public, with the feeling on the Survival Series and using the text medium as a language to be more instructional than general in Hozier's earlier work. Holzer has also said in an interview with

Diane Walderman “I wanted to see if I could make anything that would be of use to have some kind of meaning for a very general audience, somebody on their way to lunch who didn't care anything about art” (Waldman, 1989 pp.19). This can be seen to give comfort during a time of a dystopian crisis by providing an individual resolve that anyone in the area can have by interacting with Holzer's work. For not just the survival series being used in Time Square as it was Holzer's Home and her created grounds but as the area was a landmark in the history of art for the public as a way to convey of the consumerism and as seen as a capitalistic dystopia nightmare of over stimulating information by displaying in a Spectacolor board to which it was the most notifiable sign in New York city.

This has the effect of Surveillance Capitalism, which was theorised by Shoshana Zuboff to be that capitalism feeds off the human experiences of fears and desires to create a prediction of behaviour. For instance in Holzer's work where the text that reads “PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT” as seen in fig 2 can be seen as a cry for help by the subject of the audience that sees it by the force of internal fears of truth by an external force by providing a dystopian narrative of realized dread that forbids the pleasers of desires using our own psychology against us. (Zuboff, 2019 – pp 42-45)

From the Survival series of Holzer having the expected feel of urgency with other text reading “WHEN YOU EXPECT IT TO HAPPEN, IT HAPPENS” for this to be addressed to the public at a time of the Cold War. The exploration of political violence of the very nature is highlighted in her work by insinuating the survival aspect of human nature could override the ethical ideas of right and wrong at a dangerous time of the uprising of not only nuclear anxiety but the urban violence that was going on. Holzer's work during this time of the 70s to the 80s could be the reflection mirroring the woes but giving a light like a guide to those fears to the public, as to not be feeling alone as an individual but to collectively realize the problems of that era.

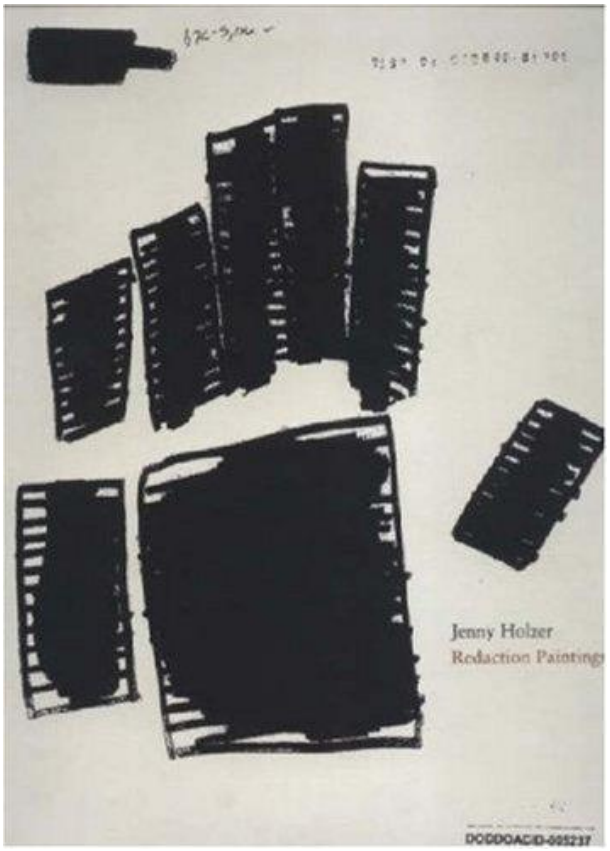

Figure 3. Jenny Holzer: Redaction Paintings, Chelm & Read, 2006

Moving to the modern times with Holzen's work based in the 2000s era with the more Bureaucratic dystopian narrative of secrecy and hidden information. With one of her projects titled ***The Redaction Paintings*** as seen in fig 3 as an ongoing series that started in 2005 which are large scale oil on linen re-creations of redacted government documents threw Holzer's deep research into declassified U.S government document (Vault Magazine, 2023). The reproductions of these redactions of censorship gives the dystopian idea of these paintings of hidden truths of information. This was started because of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, and the US invasion of Iraq to what Holzer moved back into painting as a medium to confront the governments use of redacting information as it can be seen as a dystopian of sanitizing the language used for information as Holzer still uses the engagement of language on her work for the series to highlight dangers of sanitizing violence and the exposing of disconnection between governmental powers and the truth of

the war on terror. By Holzen using censorship it ensures that the secrets became more of the object of contemplations and what people could assume is hidden from them as the series is of a record that the government attempted to erase by putting a spotlight to the dystopic nature they are creating, as the attempt to hide information only draws more attention and for Holzer to elevate to an audience can push forth the attraction towards the violence and the authoritative powers that are trying to erasing its own actions. This can also be seen in 2025 with the redaction of partial release of the Epstein files with news coverage telling, “The White House earlier declared that the Trump administration is the "most transparent in history". However, only a fraction of the documents has been released and of the thousands which have - dozens have been blacked out and redacted.” (BBC, 2025)
As the attraction of hidden information on the crimes and ethics that a governmental body uses its power to cover up but brings an attraction to the dystopian narrative. Holzer's Redaction painting stays true to its goal of highlighting the censorship of language to control the shock and awe or to reduce collateral damage within the hierarchy of authority.

Figure 4. THE PEOPLE light projection featuring Fannie Lou Hamer., Department of States Office of Art, 2023

Holzen's career can be seen as a warning of the dystopia that is being lived in, she Identified the “Surveillance dystopia” of the 1980s before the internet existed as she visualised with language and the attraction it brought with public attentions and that her past work is still

relevant today.(Yavuz, 2024) her work showcases that the dystopia is not just a scenario set in the distant future but the underlining truth of the present as Holzer doesn't provide the utopia outcome but presenting the dystopian reality with all of her projects and the use of text can reach further to the public, by the use of digital screens or through the carving in stone the take that the dystopian is in the now and not the future problem to resolve.

Case Study 2 – Banksy

Figure 5. *A mermaid and castle by Banksy at Dismaland*, Yui Mok/PA, 2015

Banksy, who is a guerrilla artist known for their ironic and satire illustrations in urban environments, displays the different dystopian parts of life that are currently being played. Their work reflects the state of political social commentary of environmental degradation, authoritarian surveillance and the late stages of extreme capitalism of consumerism. A collaboration with other artists in for a big project called Dismaland (2015) a bemusement park that commentates on the “dark tourism” as an experience of the dystopic narratives of decay that materialise the intensity of negative feelings towards the public that engages with the attraction. (Pimentel Biscaia, M. S. and Marques, L., 2022, pp. 306–325). Dismaland is of the opposed idea of Disneyland as an inversion to what Disney's amusement park is doing and that being the sanitized consumerisms, that it's giving a mind set to their audience a promise of nothing is wrong and drawing into a false utopia of colourful and spectacular attractions. Dismaland being the hidden reality and having the uncomfortable truths with the grim reminders as not just a protest but a reflected mirror of reality with the use of its attractions, most noticeable is having scenes of despair with its imagery on environmental

damage of an oil spill as an unwinnable game relating to amusement game “Hook-a-duck" amongst other attractions on relations within the bemusement park with the themes of grim dystopian truth of the present century (Channel 4, 2015). The use of crisis and the dystopian outlook as a core idea to attract the public to play with different dystopic scenarios shows that morality of different ethical situations was off limits to the real-world counterparts. The fascination Dismaland could be seen as the anti-theme park, from knowing of Mark Fisher’s capitalist realism that Dismaland didn't stop the flow of consumerism but redirected it to a form of reflection of the world. Dismaland alone often did not change the minds of the public as the intractability of the art may succeed while the facts fail by creating such an experience of the” rock bottom” or a “collective purging” of the anxiety and acknowledging the dystopian horrors of the real world. (Oxenham, 2015) The attraction to the dystopic bemusement park that Banksy with the help of other collaboration artists who work going into Dismaland offers is the subvert capitalistic way that Disneyland and others like it as utopic facade. For the audience who took part and interacted within Dismaland as the attraction can stem from the knowledge of Banksy as an artist with the dark humour and the challenge of a system that deals with the hidden powers and corruption.

Banksy is most known for their guerilla art, another one of their projects titled “ONE NATION UNDER CCTV” shown in fig 5, is the humorous showing of dystopian narrative amongst other illustrations Banksy has done throughout their career. By placing his work near the sources of the criticisms that being an actual cctv cameras it is to give the irony of vandalism and that Banksy's work shows the underlining use of being watched by the authority and the invisible or hidden tools of control made visible with it being laughable with the visual pun that an illegal act can still persist even under government surveillance.

Figure 6. *one nation under cctv*, oogiboig*,* 2008

As findings that the UK being the most watched by CCTV cameras across the globe with reports from the BBC with headlines of “More CCTV cameras installed in Grimsby town centre” and “More schools getting CCTV for parking enforcement” (BBC News, 2025) this is the direct response of what Banksy was illustrating back in 2007 in the mural, with it having the gaze of societal monitoring that it was showcasing towards. The use of street art that Banky’s best known for to commentate on government actions and social culture in the UK, Banksy is giving a response to the state of morals and questions the control from authority and power. The use of graffiti in Banksy's work being the act of vandalism in the eyes of the law and that using the urban environment as a gallery to highlight a protest on a dystopian topic of abuse of authority or the societal matters that are happening within the UK. Banksy turns the environment in urban life to dystopian visions of problems that can be seen as invisible or hidden from the public eyes, as they draw the attention for the public to find resolutions of the individual to discuss the topics and themes that Banksy presents.

Figure 7. *Season's Greetings appeared on a steelworker's garage in Taibach*, BBC News, 2018

A trope in most dystopian media and art is the corruption and use of innocence. Banksy uses this imagery that exploits the imagery of the young to heighten an emotional response that affects towards a dystopian critique that often blends the cute and innocent with the horrific context that can be hidden only revealed from a distinct perspective. This can be seen in other works that Banksy has made of Napalm (2004) seen in fig 7.

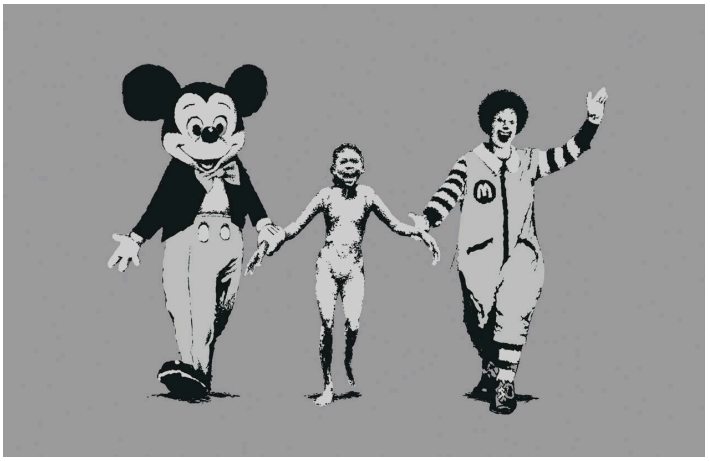

Figure 8. *Banksy: The unauthorized retrospective*, Steve Lazarides, 2014

By appropriating a known Vietnam war photograph and transforming it into a clash of a horrific moment in history with the cheerful Mascots. This can be seen as critiques of “bubblegum” coating of Western imperialism, for how it attracts its viewers of the mismatching element, to confront the “smokescreen” of consumerism that hides the violence around the globe and through history. (Pleszkiewicz, n.d)

Banksy use of children in some of their work in depictions of the innocent being victims of political dystopia and hiding the meanings with no context but the relevance of the time and to put forth the guidance towards a symbolism with depictions by having deeper meaning and to the audience to put a spotlight on getting the public to think of the morality of situations that Banksy brings forth. (Blue Horizon Prints, 2023)

The medium that Banksy uses to display a message most seen as a guerrilla tactic that the artist uses to push a dystopian resistance that can be seen even noticeably in the story “V for Vendetta” with similar attributes of anonymity and the overall message of anti-authoritarianism. Both being symbolic in the critiques of political messages as the character V uses theatrics of explosions and destructive imagery in a fictional story telling by using performative protest to a fascist government. (Kodencheri, A. and Gandhapodi Kothandaraman, C., 2022) Banksy uses street art in urban environments to bring imageries of corrupt authority, capitalism, war and surveillance. The use of art as a tool against oppressive systems and not just for entertainment for the public spaces to bring political awareness and for people to gather as a resistance towards these problems. On the similarities to the very nature of Banksy's work it can have a relation to George Orwell’s dystopia, of fears and ideological manipulation with omnipotent surveillance and control of the individual. A key feature to Orwellian dystopia is the normalisation of the dystopian narratives of surveillance of what Banksy “ONE NATION UNDER CCTV” mural was critiquing on the constant observation, and “Season’s Greetings” of hidden acts and to doublethink on the perspective awareness on problems in society.

Figure 9. *Banksy mural of judge beating a protester scrubbed off London court,* euro news, 2025

One of Banky's guerrilla illustrations shown in fig 8 was an artistic protest to the British legal system at the Royal Courts of Justice in London; this was done in September of 2025. The depicted imagery of a judge beating down a protester as the meaning of it could be referred to the pro-Palestine demonstration. Ahmed (2025) a reporter for The Guardian in their findings with interviews about its removal commented ""I think it's disgusting that they would just cover it up," added Matteo, who witnessed arrests at a pro-Palestine protest in London on Saturday. "They are clearly afraid of the response this will get."". (Ahmed, 2025) The strangeness of this nature as it was removed within 48 hours of its discovery and as also in fig 8 that it was not permanently removed as a ghost of what was there still remains to be seen and put more of a spotlight on the depiction as a resilient reminder of what was being critiqued. For this can relate to the dystopian narrative of hiding truth as the idea of Orwellian dystopia of political authoritarian control of what is allowed to be displayed.

It is not the first time Banksy art has one of their works destroyed as in 2002 "Girl with Balloon" was shredded in 2018 at an auction, this was done as a "creative urge" as a reference to a quote from Picasso. (The independent, 2018) The difference between both of

his works is the intent behind each one as “Girl with Balloon” was intended to be destroyed as to against capitalism in the art world, and the art done at the Royal Court was wiped out by authorities to which it brought more light on the unfair treatment and the cover-up of problems in society.

With Banksy being anonymous and the fascination that comes with it like a dystopian story of a vigilantly fighting a system of oppression and even with the theory of who is behind the mask. For their use in street art is a performance as “adventures” in an illegal aspect to use the urban environment and not get caught is a way to engage with an audience (Blanché, 2016, pp 53-54). The use of irony and satire humour can be seen as dark and morbid but for Banksy it's a tool to get attention and bring the public to the moral topics that should be discussed. As a practitioner in bringing political topics to the use of urban environments, their work can be “relics” that can't be totally wiped for the new and next generation to use as a philosophical standpoint on what to do next.

Conclusion

From the two artist cases on the fascination with dystopian narratives and how each one exposing or bringing the spotlight to the different mechanical points of dystopia narrative, that being about capitalism and the corporate control on consumerism to the authoritarian powers of hiding truth to the public and the totalitarianism of being surveillance. The different use of mediums from Holzer's Text based showcase of the problems that are happening throughout her career to Banksy guerrilla art and Dismaland bemusement park. That both presents to the public a harsh reality check on the problems that the world is facing in the real world with a serious contemplation of each subject ranging from politics to the environment and the economy.

The attraction that the dystopian has is that it could be the offerings of a moral rehearsal and that it can be seen as a mirror that highlights truth where it is hidden. It can also be the validation of fears that the dystopian with it being used as depictions of future events in media is that it’s not some far off idea of destruction and ruin of the collapse of a utopic world. But as a call to rebel and bring hope by seeing an outcome that we can change the beginning before an unchangeable outcome may come to fruition.

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