

Fighting words

The ‘War on Terror’ in Jenny Holzer’s declassified documents

By Greg Cook

Imagine that suicide bombers have just blasted three American shopping malls. A fourth attack is thwarted: the suspects are caught and taken to the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay. American intelligence believes a larger attack is imminent. How aggressively do you interrogate those being held at Guantánamo Bay about where the next attack may take place?

“I’m glad they’re at Guantánamo,” former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney said when asked this question during the May 15 debate of Republican presidential candidates. “I don’t want them on our soil. I want them on Guantánamo, where they don’t get the access to lawyers they get when they’re on our soil. . . . Some people have said we ought to close Guantánamo. My view is, we ought to double Guantánamo. . . . And there’s no question but that in a setting like that, where you have a ticking bomb, that . . . enhanced interrogation techniques have to be used — not torture, but enhanced interrogation techniques, yes.”

“Archive,” which is up through Wednesday at Barbara Krakow Gallery, exposes the dark underbelly of this “War on Terror” bluster and euphemism. Jenny Holzer is best known for her LED broadsides of the ’80s: “Protect me from what I want”; “Your oldest fears are the worst ones.” Here the New York artist screenprints enlarged copies of declassified US government documents that recount the errors and crimes of our fight against al-Qaeda and our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The familiar story is re-energized when you get it from the horse’s mouth.

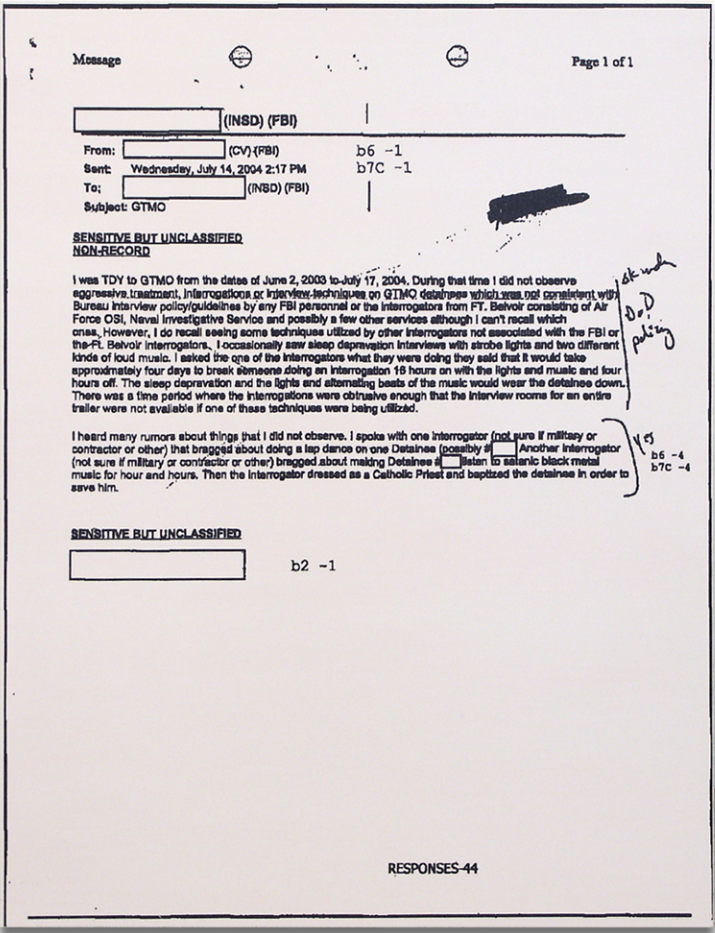
Holzer reproduces White House counterterrorism chief Richard Clarke’s warning to Condoleezza Rice in January 2001 — as she became national security adviser for the Bush administration — of the threat posed by al-Qaeda. Next up is CIA director George Tenet’s memo of September 16, 2001: “Subject: We’re at War,” which Holzer prints in warning red. Defeating al-Qaeda and other terrorists, Tenet writes, “will require our absolute and total dedica-

tion as a leadership team. . . . There can be no bureaucratic impediments to success. All the rules have changed. . . . We must be passionate and driven — but not breathless. We must stay cool. We must keep our heads.”

This is the Sunday after September 11, so throwing some rules out the window is understandable, but at the very time Tenet was writing this metmo, according to Bob Woodward’s Bush at War, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was talking up an Iraq attack to President Bush and the gang

at Camp David. It brings to mind two early Holzer slogans: “Abuse of power comes as no surprise” and “The beginning of the war will be secret.”

Holzer’s work has long explored the language of authority, power, and control. “I tend to go to the dark subjects,” she said during a talk at Rhode Island School of Design last October. “I think the good stuff will take care of itself. The dark things need attention.” Often her voices are anonymous and her tack is indirect; here she names names and uses her art to keep



I HEARD MANY RUMORS (PINK): The familiar story is re-energized by these enlarged dispatches from the horse’s mouth.

BARBARA

KRAKOW GALLERY

Fighting words

The 'War on Terror' in Jenny Holzer's declassified documents

By Greg Cook

our exhausted attention focused on the facts. Her primary source is documents obtained by George Washington University's National Security Archive through the Freedom of Information Act. The result brings to mind Brazilian human-rights activists' efforts to expose government torture in their country in the '60s and '70s by publishing a 1985 book of the government's own trial records.

Holzer presents an Army translator's report in which Special Forces troops are alleged to have shocked a prisoner with electricity in Afghanistan in 2002. A military medical examiner's report concludes that a dead Pakistani man was most likely kicked to death in American custody in Afghanistan later that year. An Iraqi high-school student and his uncle report that he was beaten by the American troops who arrested him in May 2004, only to be released two days later. FBI agents report that Guantánamo prisoners were kept from sleeping with strobe lights and loud music and "baptized" by an interrogator posing as a Catholic priest. When an agent sees a prisoner on a cell floor crying, his nose apparently bleeding, American interrogators claim that he "had become upset with them and threw himself to the floor." An agent reports: "I had heard previously that one of the female military personnel would wet her hands and touch the inmates as part of their psych-ops to make the inmates feel 'unclean' and upset them." It all reads as if the lunatics had taken over the asylum.

This is the kind of shameful behavior Romney is supporting when he promotes "not torture, but enhanced interrogation techniques." The kind Bush promoted when, last September, he praised the results of the CIA's "alternative set of [interrogation] procedures."

Holzer's texts are so powerful that they can distract you from how these paint-

ings work as paintings. She earned her master's degree from RISD in 1977, then moved to New York, where by the early '80s she'd hit on her signature all-text posters and LED signs. Since then it's often seemed that she was fishing for new vessels for her words — official-looking metal plaques, granite benches, coffins, stone walls. But it's only in recent years, with nighttime projections of texts onto buildings, that she's found a medium for her words that has the charge of her posters and LEDs. And her work has taken on a new formal beauty — especially in projections on waterfront buildings, like the ones she created in Providence last October, so that words scroll across façades and reflect in the water below.

Holzer first presented these government texts as projections onto George Washington University and New York University buildings. As screenprinted paintings, they're small enough to fit over your couch, but the medium reinforces the message. They recall Warhol's '60s screenprints of fatal car wrecks, electric chairs, and police siccing dogs on civil-rights protesters. Holzer reproduces all the schmutz of the photocopies for the grit of authenticity. Mug shots of prisoners become black silhouettes, words are redacted by government censors, four pages are completely blacked out. (It brings to a 2005 Onion headline: "CIA Realizes It's Been Using Black Highlighters All These Years.") By reproducing them untouched, she finds a visual metaphor for the government's efforts to hide its bad behavior.

Reading these documents is a depressing reminder of how the Bush administration's inept and corrupt and careless actions have everybody focused on prisoner abuse, attacks on civil liberties, and a misbegotten war in Iraq instead of real terrorist threats and the Afghan war. It's a question not just of ethics but of effectiveness. During

that May 15 Republican-presidential-candidate debate, the interrogation question was also put to Senator John McCain. "When I was in Vietnam," he answered, "one of the things that sustained us, as we underwent torture ourselves, was the knowledge that if we had our positions reversed and we were the captors, we would not impose that kind of treatment on them. It's not about the terrorists, it's about us. It's about what kind of country we are. And a fact: the more physical pain you inflict on someone, the more they're going to tell you what they think you want to know."

'Jennny Holzer: Archive' | Barbara Krakow Gallery, 10 Newbury St, Boston | Through June 6

Copyright © 2007 The Phoenix Media/Communications Group

BARBARA

KRAKOW GALLERY