

## YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW

By Leora Lutz

Rhonda Holberton's exhibition *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW* politicizes identity and desire. The title takes its cue from a list of the five most influential marketing words in the English language.<sup>1</sup> The scene presented in the gallery is reminiscent of a retail store, and as with advertising, there is something of a dream being offered here: an augmented reality that is newer and more necessary than the present. In this case, militant police states and one's personal identity and privacy collide with basic instincts to survive—and to be loved.



In general, Holberton's investigative art practice remediates technology and human interaction, situating historical events, procedures or techniques as groundwork to create narratives that shift perception. To compare, some artists and projects that come to mind are Trevor Paglan's *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, which documents clandestine military operations and Michelle Jaffe's *Neural: Soul Junks*, which takes a poetic audio stance on corporate political influence. Additionally, Holberton acknowledges

Sanaz Mazinani's work as a counterpart to her own work, where the body acts a means of activism and Mai Thu Perret's psychological ensemble installations.

Holberton's work falls into the category of conceptual work that implements actual findings as a means for discovering plausible hidden agendas, activating speculation and intervening on known truths. Her sculpture, film and installations have centered on conceptual networks within environmental concerns, particularly military encroachment in everyday lives, the mystery of the cosmos and the space between materiality and the cerebral.

Throughout her varied approaches one element is constant: location. How one locates themselves in the scenarios that Holberton creates is the crux of her diligent outcome. *YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW* is no exception with its selection of considerations that questions the very nature of politics and the body as a subject of consumption.

The retail setting of Holberton's 2 x 2 Solos exhibition at Pro Arts prompts the viewer to metaphorically buy into what it is being "sold." The commodification of art is nothing new, as the philosopher Herbert Marcuse pointed out in his essay, "Art as Form of Reality" (1969). But rather, "From the position of today's rebellion and refusal,"—which still rings true today—"art itself appears as part and force of the tradition which perpetuates that which is, and prevents the realization of that which can and ought to be." In essence, art is a camouflage of reality. As Marcuse continues: "in this universe, the work of art, as well as of anti-art, becomes exchange value, commodity: and it is precisely the Commodity Form, as the form of reality, which is the target of today's rebellion."<sup>2</sup> By presenting the double entendre of object commodification available for purchase within the context of a fictitious society, Holberton invites the viewer to exchange the here and now with the notion of a not so distant future.

For this particular exhibition, Holberton draws from military combat ideology and objects, such as operational manuals and camouflage. She offers up these solutions as survival alternatives in the utopic/dystopic scenario she has constructed. The multi-media assortment of works including sculpture, film and audio, contain elements of the figure, alluding to people navigating the politically charged social landscape. In preparation for such dark habitation, helpful audio files guide the listener to think about how to approach an issue, be it love or other covert operations. Garments are presented to blend into the hostile metropolitan surroundings while custom fragrance is offered to ensure one's existence. Moody silhouettes of tree shadows cast on the sidewalk are projected through the window, shifting viewers' perception of the locale. A large dream catcher fashioned in the manner of a parachute remains a hopeful symbol for the delicacy of aspirations. Together these works weave a complex and

overlapping conceptual quandary of the relationship humans have with the environment and with one another.



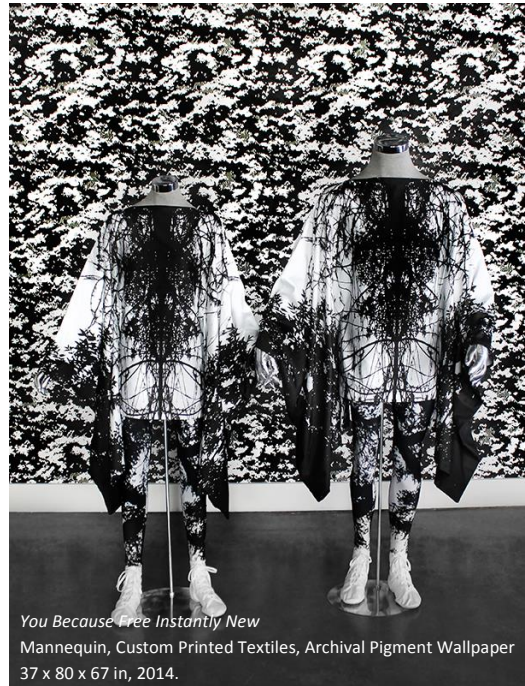
By coupling military components with human conflicts of self-worth and desire, Holberton integrates real and actual things and spins them toward science fiction story-telling. To use the adage: *Reality is stranger than fiction*. Holberton has situated the viewer within a story where they themselves are the protagonists who find themselves struggling with belonging in a place where the choice to conform or become radically invisible seems inevitable. The science fiction theme is pronounced in the audio work *Now We Have Division*, installed above a cushioned bench. The concept is similar to the hypnodædia in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which involved the conversion of text into soothing voices that subliminally influenced the listener. Using similar technology available in text to speech applications, Holberton transliterated hundreds of phrases from self-help books and military operation manuals into a convincing woman's voice. The phrases are carefully chosen yet delivered at random to coincide with what the viewer sees in the gallery while sitting on a bench listening:

*Power-struggle, like any addiction, intensifies over time. A single interaction between two people might now affect an entire department. Balance security and synchronization. Insufficient security may compromise a mission. Excessive security will almost always cause the mission to fail because of inadequate coordination. There are three categories of products associated with PSYOP and/or propaganda: white, gray, and black.*<sup>3</sup>

Against one wall of the exhibition is the signature piece of the show, *You Because Free Instantly New (An Army of Lovers)*. The subtitle, *Army of Lovers* references a speculative resistance movement. In this scene, as Holberton notes, "civilians are agents of capital and soldiers of resistance."<sup>4</sup> Two mannequins, one male and one female, are set in front of a wall covered in black and grey-tone Digital Camouflage wallpaper. Digital Camouflage is designed so that the people wearing it will blend into the silvery angles

and asphalt laden metropolitan landscape. The mannequins wear identical, unisex garments similar to the purposeful homogeneity and efficiency necessary for soldiers to wear. The garments' fabric pattern is generated from photographs that Holberton took at Point Reyes. The contrast between the natural patterns against the digital wallpaper implies the poetic juxtaposition of humans' imposition and destruction of nature. Traditionally used for hunting or for combat, the purpose of camouflage takes a socio-sexual turn when perceived in conjunction with other works.

*All of the Actors Have Withdrawn* is a grey scale video of three bodies engaged in a variety of street combat poses,



locked in a shattering embrace. Layered across each other, the poses could be any movement—combat, dance or copulation. The bodies are collapsing and disintegrating like crumbling marble, suggesting the falling of

tradition and normativity. The provocative and sexually charged scenario romanticizes both sex and combat-violence—both are overtly physical acts that require bodies to touch each other.

In contrast, the sculpture titled *toward\_a\_more\_pure\_profile* suggests an idealized human exchange, albeit tinged with loss. The structure is comprised of two three-dimensional scanned, CDC routed foam models of Holberton's vertically bisected torso that have been adhered together. Here, the coupling melded into one body signals the idealized notion of romance—each one sacrificing their individual identity to be conjoined as a single pair.

Conversely, *FOIL* is the name of a professionally packaged "perfume" that Holberton created using an alcohol distillation process that gleans individualized scents comprised of a person's DNA. Modeled after military scent detection technology, *FOIL* replicates a product that is meant to safe-guard one's identity. Political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri posit, "The question is really how the body of the multitude [the public] can configure itself as a telos."<sup>5</sup> Telos, as in teleology, is the study of an object's intention or purpose. Just as with any strategic operation, foiling one's opponent through appropriation gives "power adequate to the destruction of the enemy and the



construction of a new society.”<sup>6</sup> On the coinciding title sheet for the exhibition, Holberton replaced text information for *FOIL* with a QR code.



Visitors can scan the code, which leads to the title of the actual piece: *AN ARMY OF LOVERS*, which is taken from a book co-authored by David Buuck and Juliana Spahr of the same title. The characters of their story attempt to reconcile capitalism through corporeal experimentations and performative activities.<sup>7</sup> Attune to the strangeness of their book, the society that Holberton proposes has converted identity into a product, reiterating the notion that one could be instant, though never free, and never new.

*YOU BECAUSE FREE INSTANTLY NEW* draws attention to the conflicts of personhood, place and ardor. The history surrounding the venue of Pro Arts happens to be completely aligned with Holberton's continued investigation with government activity as a means to address the unpredictable and immobilizing aspects of everyday life. Pro Arts is located in Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, directly opposite City Hall, in Oakland, California; the same plaza where citizens gathered for the Occupy Movement. The Occupy website states: "The purpose of our gathering is to plan actions, mobilize real resistance, and defend ourselves from the economic and physical war that is being waged against our communities."<sup>8</sup> Somewhere in this science fiction that Holberton has presented lies the proposition that reality is nearer than comfort zones may allow, and acceptance of all that is possible is inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Ciotti, "The Five Most Persuasive Words in the English Language," *Huffington Post* (December 12, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Art as Form of Reality" in *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 1969), 148.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliographic list for the appropriated text includes:

*Taking the War Out of Our Words* by Sharon Strand Ellison;

Army Doctrines published by the Federation of American Scientists, including "ATTP 3-34.39 (FM 20-3)/MCRP 3-17.6A: Camouflage, Concealment, and Decoys" and "FM 3-05.301(FM 33-1-1)/MCRP 3-40.6A: Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures;"

*Buddha's Brain: The New Neuroscience and the Path of Awakening Inquiring Mind* by Rick Hanson, PhD; and *Hope and Healing: Peaceful Parenting in an Uncertain World* by Naomi Drew & Arthur Caliendo.

<sup>4</sup> Notes from the artist.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 404.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> David Buuck and Juliana Spahr, *An Army of Lovers* (San Francisco: City Lights Books), 2013.

<sup>8</sup> *Occupy Oakland*, [occupyoakland.org/about/](http://occupyoakland.org/about/)

All images courtesy of the artist, <http://www.rhondaholberton.com/>

This essay was originally published by Pro Arts for the 2 x 2 Solo Shows 2014 exhibition catalog. The text has not been altered from the original publication, except for a minor edit in paragraph twelve for clarification. In addition, images were added to inline text.