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The Power of the Pencil



Lucille Clerc, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2015, following Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris) ©LucilleClerc - All rights reserved

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I was sitting at my desk looking at two Jenny Holzer *Survival Series* pencils. On one, "Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise"

is written in red, which made me think about the political situation right now and the meaning of messages. But how much can we accomplish with a pencil?



Jenny Holzer, *Survival Series* pencils © 2006 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Holzer made her pencils to be put into circulation and used, to be put to work. The fact that I have kept the pencils untouched on my desk for more than ten years is ironic. Pencils are tools to disseminate messages, but once they become works of art we treat them with a different respect. Is it better to use the pencils as intended, in which case, the message will disappear? Or to keep them as objects so that Holzer's truisms might trigger more thoughts?

For me, the pencil represents a comfortable and private way of putting down ideas. Writing with a pencil is a physical act. What you write can't be shared as easily as an email. Pencils are used for diary writing, to-do lists, doodles and at other personal moments. There is a ritual pleasure that dates back to childhood in erasing your words and changing your mind—which a pen doesn't allow. And even though computers give you the freedom to erase words, there is none of the romance or privacy of using a pencil.

One of the most powerful images of freedom of speech was the illustration that went viral shortly after the terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015. It is meaningful that such tragedy could inspire this optimistic image: one pencil is broken but then becomes two pencils, so in defeat becomes stronger.

Such a humble object is durable, timeless and accessible. It resists temperature changes, water and power outages. It can be an artistic tool, a vehicle for branding or, indeed, a work of art.

**Survival Series pencils were first exhibited 1991, sold as a limited edition*