



Pro
Utopia

verbs

distopia

Proverbs X Iconography



Waiting for The Who to come on. Woodstock 1969
in Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly
Delights (1503–1515).

In the Renaissance period, artists like Pieter Bruegel the Elder used iconography and peremology (the study of proverbs) to convey societal critique in their works. Bruegel's painting 'Netherlandish Proverbs' (on the right) is a prime example. The painting is filled with over 100 proverbs and idiomatic expressions, each depicted visually through characters and actions. This use of iconography and peremology allowed Bruegel to offer a humor-

ous yet critical reflection on the social, moral, and cultural aspects of 16th-century Netherlands, inviting viewers to decipher the hidden meanings within the painting and engage with societal issues in a clever and thought-provoking way.



Proverbs of Women

For my studio based practice I decided to use Bruegel's painting as inspiration to repaint it with German proverbs about women.

By replacing the existing depictions of Netherlandish proverbs with German proverbs about women, I wanted to offer a new perspective on societal dynamics and gender roles and explore how proverbs have evolved and how they can still reflect and comment on contemporary issues.

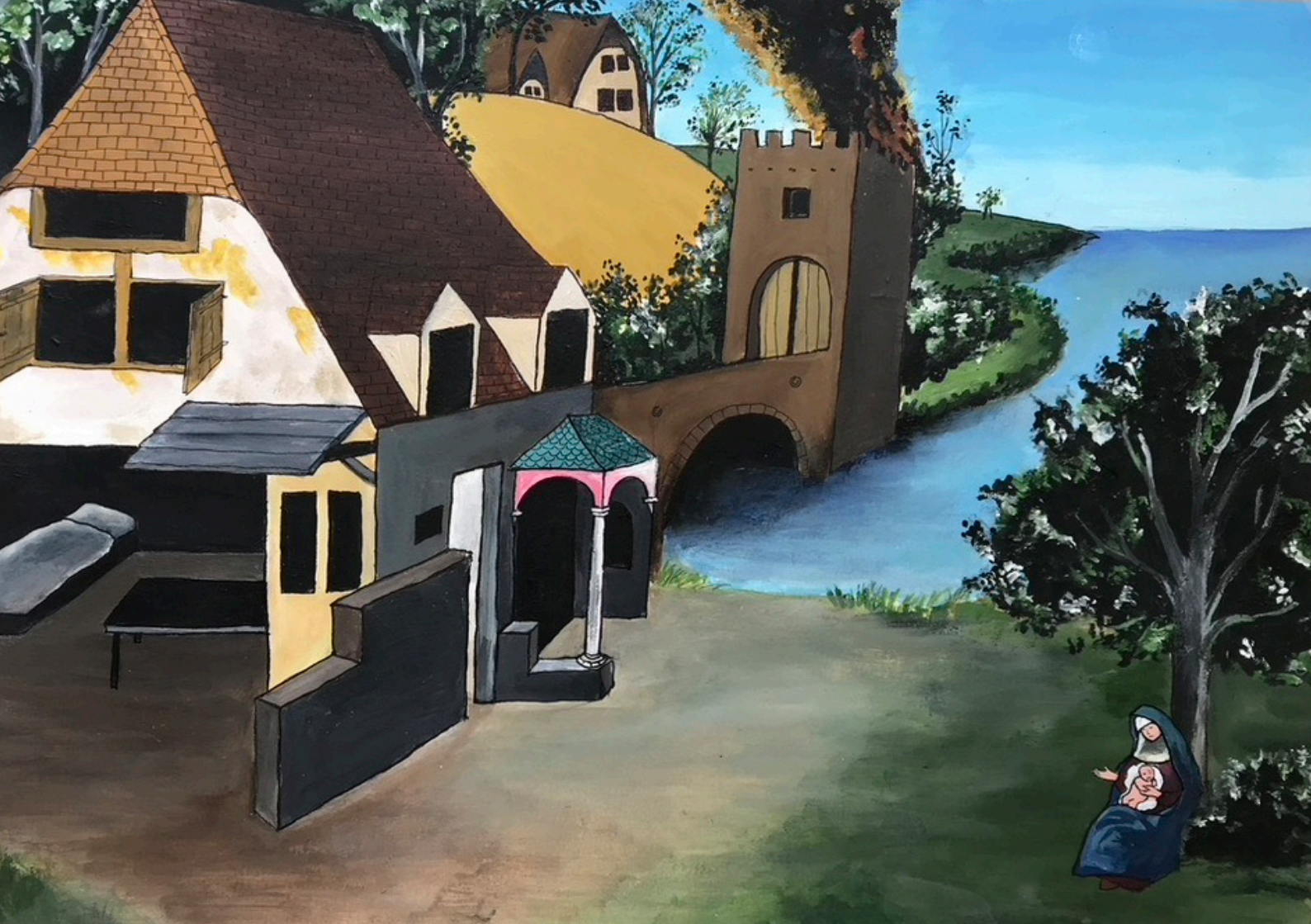
Just as Bruegel used his work to comment on the society of his time, my reinterpretation should be seen as a reflection on modern attitudes and stereotypes about women.

I hoped that this experiment has the potential to provoke thought and discussion about gender, societal expectations, and the relevance of traditional sayings in today's world.



One important insight I gained while collecting proverbs about 'ideal women' is that they are usually portrayed in the role of mother.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 'The Adoration of the Kings' (1564)



World Upside Down

As mentioned earlier, painters like Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder used their paintings to critique society during the Renaissance. They depicted dystopian and utopian elements, proverbs, and symbolic iconography. Their dystopian scenes, filled with chaos and moral decay, aimed to unsettle viewers and highlight human folly.

These artists included utopian elements ironically, underscoring the potential

for a better world. By incorporating proverbs and carefully chosen symbols, they added layers of meaning to their works, prompting viewers to reflect on their behavior, values, and the complexities of the world around them.

Pieter Bruegel's painting 'Netherlandish Proverbs' can be divided into two distinct halves, one suggesting dystopian scenarios on the left side and the other presenting utopian elements

on the right side. On the left side of the painting, Bruegel depicts a chaotic and disorderly world, filled with human folly and absurdity. Conversely, on the right side of the painting, Bruegel presents a more ordered and harmonious world, suggesting utopian elements.

Like Bruegel, I decided to divide the painting into dystopian and utopian proverbs about women. Thereby, I hoped to understand more about the ideal/folly women.



Close up of 'Netherlandish Proverbs' by Pieter Bruegel (1559)



utopia

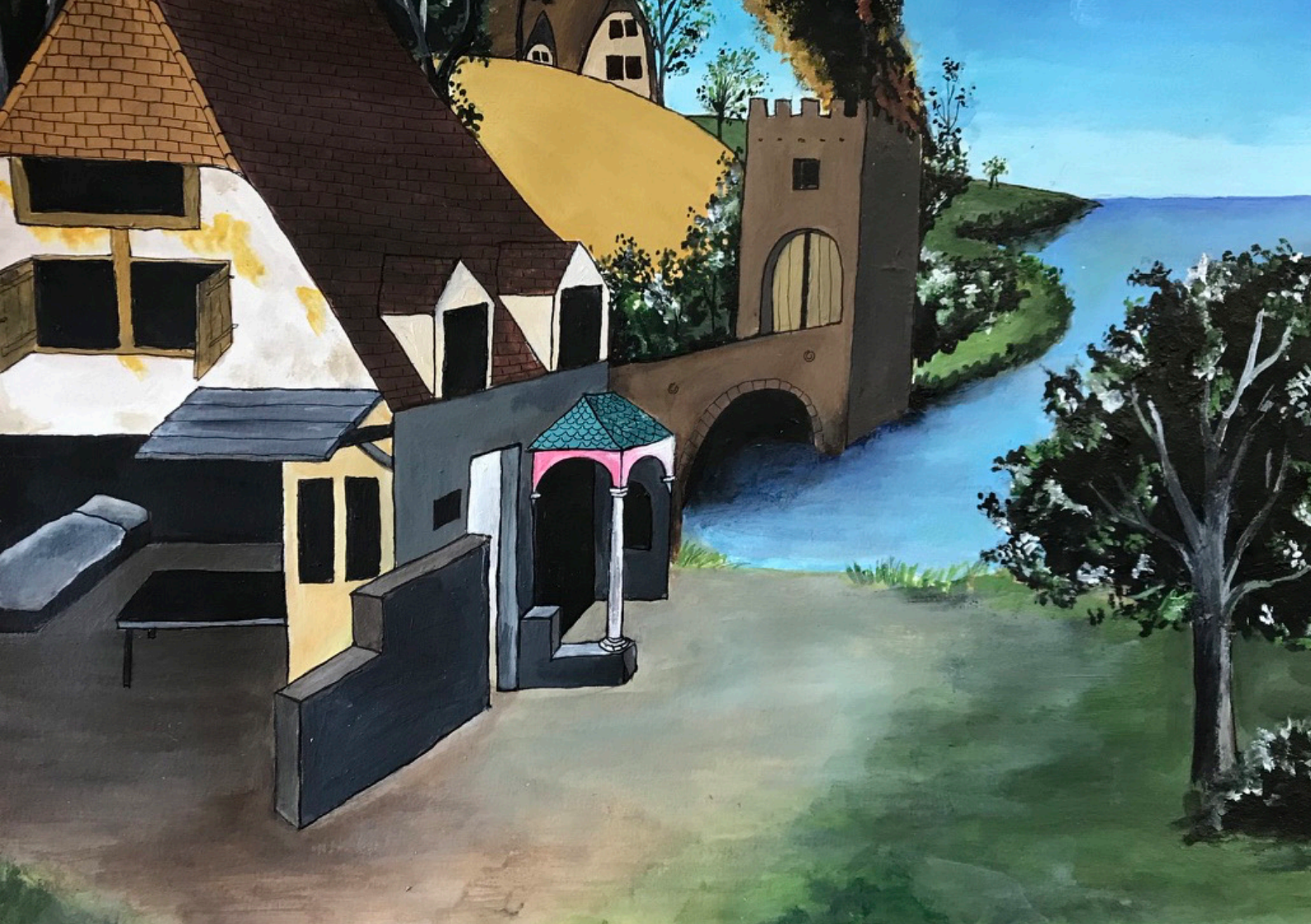
dystopia

„Netherlandish Proverbs“ by Pieter Breugel (1559)



Sketch inspired by „Netherlandish Proverbs“







Process

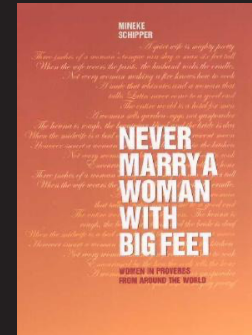
For the painting, I have analysed and categorised the information from the book ‚Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet‘ by Mineke Schipper and collected forty-eight proverbs about women in the German language.

These proverbs, representing a rich cultural and linguistic tapestry, offer insights into societal perceptions and stereotypes related to women.

Thereafter I have gone further by incorporating a few of these proverbs into a repainted landscape reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel's village scene.

This painting was intended to serve as a canvas for my creative reinterpretation, where I have curated the placement of the proverbs within the scene, strategically situating them in either utopian or dystopian scenarios.

To enhance the thematic contrast between utopia and dystopia, I have utilised black background to represent the dystopian scenarios in this publication. In contrast, the white background, symbolizing purity and harmony, is employed to depict the utopian scenarios.



‚Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet‘ by Mineke Schipper (2006)

Sketch inspired by ‚Netherlandish Proverbs‘



‚Netherlandish Proverbs‘ by Pieter Breugel (1559)





Findings

During the course of this exercise, I made numerous realisations, and concurrently, new questions emerged. Notably, I observed that throughout my research, Chat GPT and other search engines frequently struggled to grasp the contextual nuances and satirical aspects of proverbs. The method of juxtaposition, which is often effective and intuitive for humans, presented significant challenges in translation for machines, especially when the

origin and context were not explicitly defined. The most formidable task was contextualizing the distinction between serious issues veiled in irony. The following questions arose during the project:

What motivated my choice of painting, a non-contemporary medium, as means to convey my studio practice?

Is painting the most suitable medium for effectively translating proverbs into iconographic representations?

Do the selected proverbs primarily address antiquated societal concerns rather than contemporary ones?

Should my investigative focus be exclusively directed towards gender-related biases?





Feedback

During the class critique session, a few of the questions I posed myself were repeated: I received feedback indicating that my research focus was not sufficiently clear, primarily due to the lack of a strong connection between painting and proverbs. Furthermore, it was pointed out that painting is not a contemporary or suitable medium for graphic communication design. Additionally, it became evident that the chosen proverbs lacked relevance to con-

temporary society. One student suggested the idea of combining old and modern media, potentially utilising photography or collage techniques. Notably, the portrayal of women in proverbs was singled out as a captivating subject.

moving forward I decided to incorporate this feedback into my practice. Thereby, I found myself contemplating how to effectively apply proverbs to today's societal issues using mo-

dern techniques. Regarding adjustments for the final submission, I made the decision to incorporate text and modern media elements, consolidating everything into a publication. This approach allowed me to discover greater freedom for experimentation, applying elements from both the Renaissance and modern eras, all while implementing the juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia.

Proverbs and their Significance Today

Proverbs have been an integral part of human communication and culture for centuries. While their origins are rooted in traditional societies, proverbs continue to hold significance in today's culture. The significance of proverbs in modern culture:

Concise Wisdom: In an age where information is abundant but time is scarce, proverbs offer nuggets of timeless wisdom in a compact form. They distill complex

ideas into easily digestible phrases, making them relatable and memorable.

Cultural Heritage: Proverbs connect contemporary society to its cultural heritage and history. Many proverbs have deep roots in various cultures, and understanding them fosters a sense of continuity and tradition.

Universal Themes: Proverbs often deal with universal themes which allows them to transcend cultural

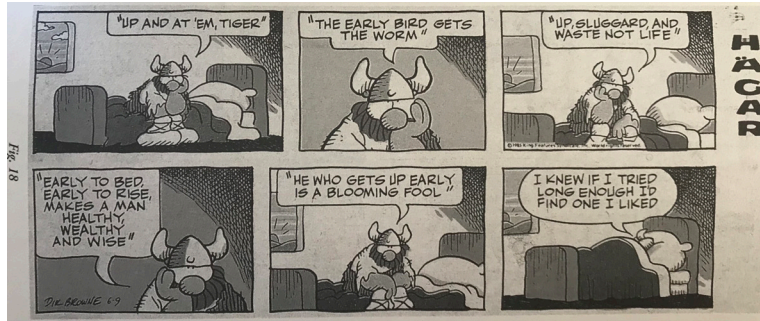
and linguistic boundaries.

Communication Tool: Proverbs facilitate effective communication by conveying ideas or warnings with brevity.

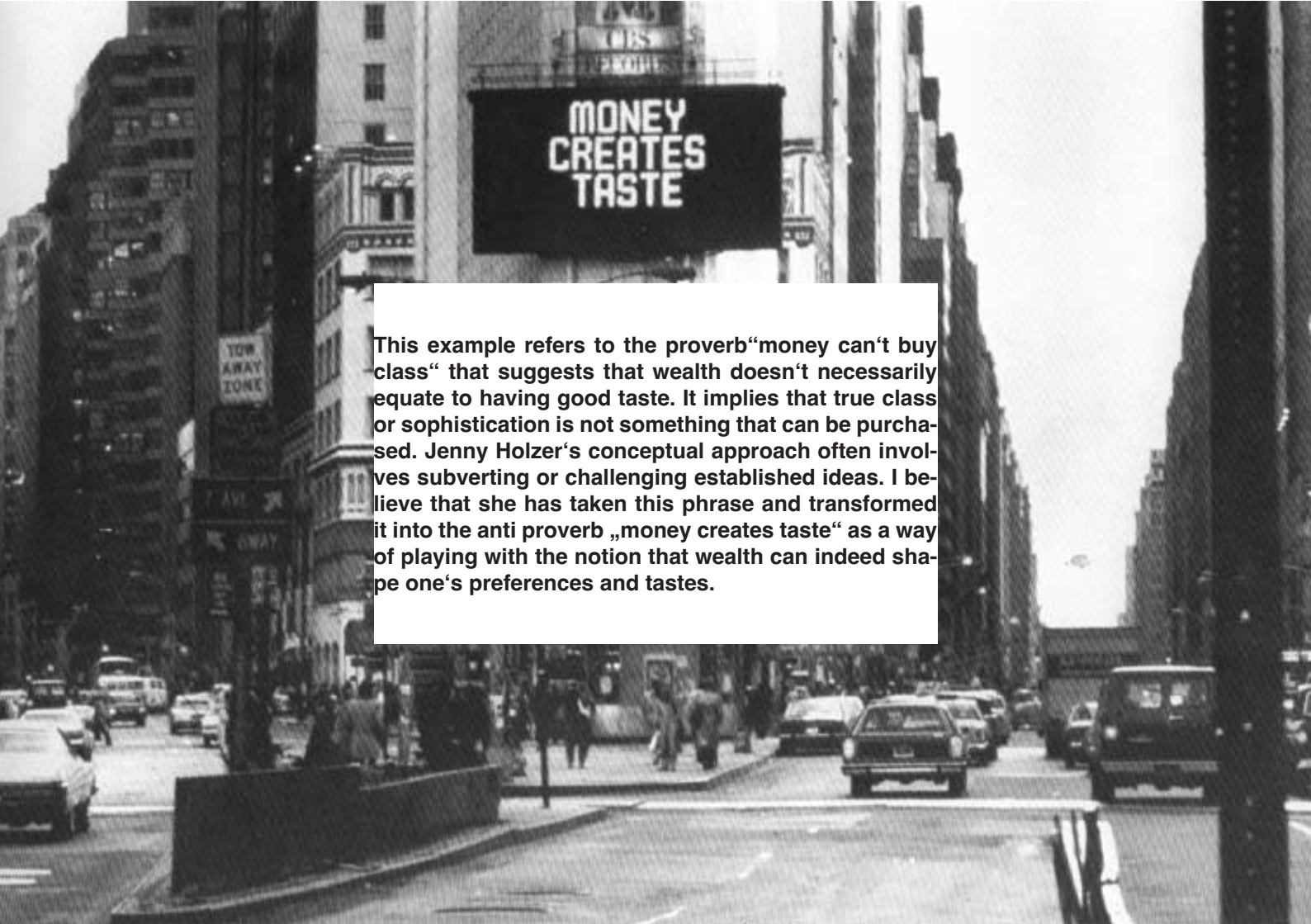
Reflection and Guidance: Proverbs encourage introspection and provide guidance in navigating modern life. They offer solutions to common dilemmas and challenges.

William Belcher's poster „As the Saying goes“, 1973

from the *Burlington Free Press* (9 June 1985), comic section



from *Washington Post* (23 March 1987), comic section



This example refers to the proverb “money can’t buy class” that suggests that wealth doesn’t necessarily equate to having good taste. It implies that true class or sophistication is not something that can be purchased. Jenny Holzer’s conceptual approach often involves subverting or challenging established ideas. I believe that she has taken this phrase and transformed it into the anti proverb „money creates taste“ as a way of playing with the notion that wealth can indeed shape one’s preferences and tastes.

Jenny Holzer

Proverbs can be portrayed iconographically through various media. Often times artists use proverbs as inspiration, creating visual representations that capture the essence of the proverb's meaning. These artworks serve as a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern aesthetics.

Jenny Holzer (previous page) is one of these artists: her public installation was seen at Times Square in New York 1982. Jenny Holzer is a conceptual artist known for her use of language and text to create artworks that challenge conventional wisdom and provoke contemplation about various societal issues



from *Survival* (1983–85), 1985
© 1985 Jenny Holzer

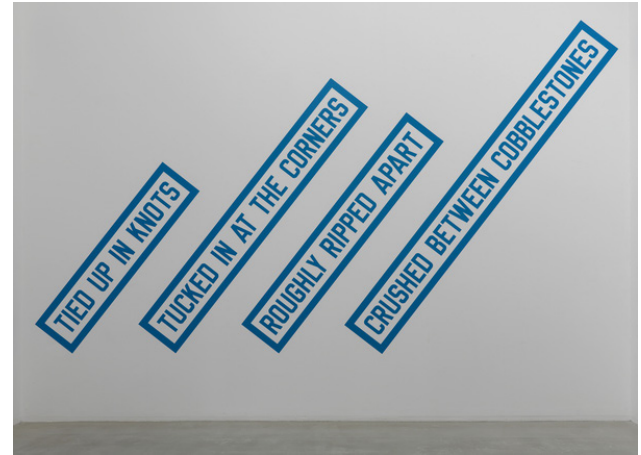
**WE ARE SHIPS AT
SEA**

NOT

DUCKS ON A POND

Lawrence Weiner

Another contemporary artist, who incorporates proverbs in his practice is called Lawrence Weiner. Lawrence Weiner (next page) is a conceptual artist known for his use of language in his art. He often works with proverbs and other linguistic elements to convey ideas. Weiner's art typically involves the presentation of text-based works, such as phrases or proverbs, on various media, like posters, walls, or sculptures. He explores the power of language and how it can convey meaning and provoke thought, blurring the line between visual art and language.



Lawrence Weiner TIED UP IN KNOTS 1988

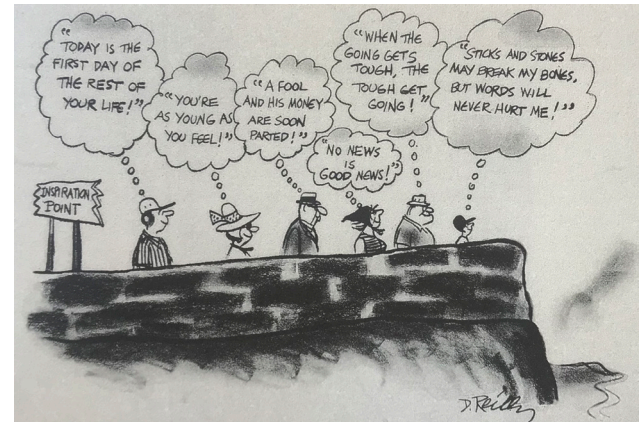
Comics and Memes as Proverbs

Comics and memes are a popular contemporary form of communication that can also use proverbs. They often incorporate proverbs within their narratives, using them to convey moral lessons or humor. For example, a comic character may use a well-known proverb to address a situation or make a point.

Meanwhile memes are often captioned images or short videos that convey humor, sarcasm, or social

commentary. Proverbs are sometimes repurposed in memes, either in their original form or with humorous adaptations to comment on current events or trends.

Both comics and memes rely on visual storytelling, making them effective platforms for conveying proverbs' meanings in a visually appealing and easily shareable format.



from *The New Yorker* (3 July 1978), p. 32



Proverbs and antiproverbs

Memes, like proverbs, often humorous and pithy expressions shared across the internet, provide a unique platform for exploring the juxtaposition between dystopia and utopia. This juxtaposition can be a powerful means of commentary and reflection on the state of the world, our aspirations, and the dual nature of our experiences:

Critique and Hope: Some memes might combine elements of both dystopia and

utopia to show a world in need of improvement but with the potential for positive change. This duality can inspire people to take action and work towards a better future.

Satirical Utopias: Memes may create satirical utopias that, upon closer inspection, reveal hidden dystopian elements. These memes challenge the idea of a perfect world by pointing out potential pitfalls.

Exploration of Fear and Desire: The juxtaposition in memes reflects the experience of both fearing and desiring different aspects of the future. Memes can tap into these emotions, creating a space for discussion and self-reflection.

This juxtaposition is a testament to the multifaceted nature of human perspectives and the role of humor, satire, and art in navigating the challenges and opportunities of our time.

Don't put all eggs in one basket.



Don't put all emissions in one athomsphere.



After the rain, comes sun.

