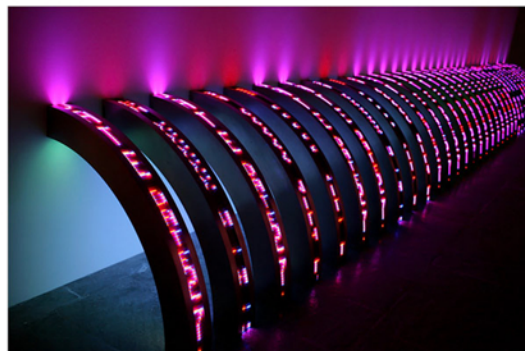
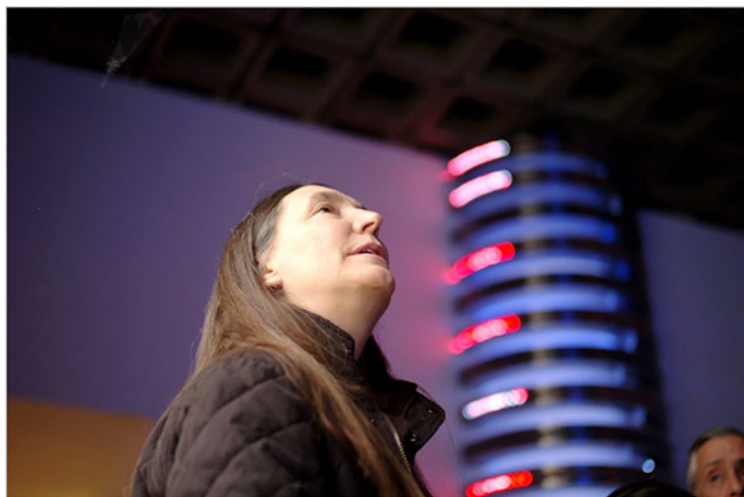


Sounding the Alarm, in Words and Light



All images courtesy of The Whitney Museum and the New York Times

By Roberta Smith

Basically, Jenny Holzer has spent the last three decades pelting us with unsettling and increasingly relevant portents of things to come.

In tones alternately poetic or oracular, inflamed or numb, Big-Brotherly or tender, Ms. Holzer's terse snippets of prose have warned of evolving threats to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. She has tracked the inner thoughts of bereft lovers or shellshocked survivors and articulated the baser instincts unleashed by social chaos.

To do this, she has turned various user-friendly, pop-culture modes of public address into early warning systems, including posters, T-shirts, billboards, broadsheets, plaques, giant projections and incised marble benches. Electronic LED signs are her best-known, most spectacular method; they also reflect the military-commercial-entertainment complex that, bit by bit, her art exposes.

Ms. Holzer has infused Conceptual Art's playful language with real-life seriousness and has put words in Minimalism's sleek mouth. And few contemporary artists have as much right as she to say this: I told you so.

Two of her most familiar phrases - written at least 25 years ago - could bracket the political turmoil and material excess of the United States during the last decade. "Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise" is from her 1977-79 "Truisms" series. "Protect Me From What I Want" is from her 1983-85 "Survival" series. Equally pertinent in the era of Abu Ghraib and Gitmo, and also from "Survival," is the chillingly convoluted "Die fast and quiet when they interrogate you or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore."

This grim directive pulses every so often along the extended LED signs of "For Chicago," the large and dazzling new work that leads off the spare, 15-year survey of Ms. Holzer's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show's title, "Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect," sums up the frantic, maternal impulse behind the work.

"For Chicago" reminds us that Ms. Holzer extensively recycles her writings; it uses all of them, from "Truisms" to "oh" (2001). But the piece also exemplifies her continual quest for maximum visual impact.

Using recently developed, thinner-than-ever LED signs, "For Chicago" is the first Holzer piece made specifically to lie flat on the floor. Its 11 48-foot-long LED signs, placed parallel about two feet apart, nearly reduce language to pure light. Stand at the end of the piece, and the words seem to flow from your shoes. The whole configuration suggests a lighted runway or weirdly geometric rows of crocuses in a field. As the punctuation-averse artist herself might put it, the piece means to stop you in your tracks and does.

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Born in 1950 in Gallipolis, Ohio, Ms. Holzer belongs to the feminist branch of a post-Post-Minimalist generation of artists that emerged around 1980, looking for new ways to make narrative or commentary an implicit part of visual objects. Her nearest contemporaries include Cindy Sherman, Sarah Charlesworth and Louise Lawler. But Barbara Kruger is most like-minded in sensibility and in the ambition to fuse reading and seeing, taking language beyond words so that it becomes immersive and experiential.

The Whitney show emphasizes this ambition, featuring only eight LED pieces surrounded by lots of empty space, encouraging us to appreciate their increased visual complexity. (Such spaciousness is becoming something of a Whitney house style; it is equally effective on the two floors of works from the collection below the Holzer show.) Some pieces climb the wall in curved, repeating bands of LED that jut out like Donald Judd's stacks. Others are straight but sandwiched between walls like Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes.

The pieces can be read from different angles, especially since most of them use double-sided LED signs. More intricate programming allows new tricks: the words jump change shape and are interrupted by patterns or solid color, or slip past in double layers. Even when Ms. Holzer is recycling earlier writing, as she does in "Monument" and in "Green Purple Cross" and "Blue Cross" (which are shown combined, spanning a corner), enjoyment and meaning collide more violently; comprehension is slowed, and the words take on new weight.

But above all, the exhibition demonstrates that as the times have caught up with Ms. Holzer, she has turned from poetic soothsaying to simply reporting the facts. Her newest LED pieces, as well as the silkscreen paintings she started making in 2005, have a single source: declassified and redacted government documents concerning Iraq and the Middle East.

Ms. Holzer's Warholian silkscreen paintings are mostly stark blow-ups of these documents. They can be heart-rending confessions or letters from prisoners of all kinds and their families (parents pleading that the Army discharge rather than court-martial their sons); autopsy and interrogation reports; or exchanges concerning torture, as well as prisoners' handprints and maps of Baghdad. All are to some extent redacted, blacked out with a censor's marker, which gives them unexpected interest as found drawings. These works could be accused of exploiting personal tragedy, but they also make starkly clear the shattering of human lives that has always been Ms. Holzer's primary subject.

The texts in the paintings come at us from many points of view, with all degrees of emotion or officialness; they reiterate in real life the multiple voices of Ms. Holzer's writings. The changing viewpoints in turn are mimicked in the way we re-encounter the same language in different forms. The words in "Purple" mostly echo the paintings, but seem even scarier spelled out on curved LED signs that arc from floor to wall, like some kind of highly efficient machine.

The flashing words in "Thorax" repeatedly focus on a single incident - the death of a civilian driver in Baghdad - again from different points of view. As is usually the case here, the truth is elusive, but the facts of pain and death are solid.

The most complex piece both visually and linguistically is "Red Yellow Looming," in which 13 LED signs form a kind of stairway between parallel walls (another Flavin composition). Words, codes and numbers, mostly from State Department dispatches, move across the signs; all pertain in some way to the current war in Iraq, but some date back to the Reagan administration.

This may be the most beautiful yet most sinister piece Ms. Holzer has made; reading even a little of it is like watching something start to go down the drain while being strangled in red tape.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Foundation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland, this show was overseen by Elizabeth A.T. Smith, curator at the Chicago museum, and Sam Keller, the Beyeler's director. It confirms that Ms. Holzer has always been bent on seducing us into seeing the darker side of things. There is a strictness and narrowness to her art that may be easier to respect than to love. But in many ways she has met - at least for the moment - the basic requirements of artistic importance. Her work is singular, consistent and relevant. It has developed and has also been influential. It regularly succeeds in taking us deep into the machinations of human frailty and power.

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