

Jenny Holzer Writing on the wall

By Michael Brodeur

"I'm sick of my stuff," says Jenny Holzer, laughing. "I think the last thing I wrote was in 2001! I've quit." Holzer hasn't quit making art—she's just weary of doing it all herself. "I've started prospecting."

If you've ever waited at a luggage carousel, only to see the phrase "MONEY CREATES TASTE" scroll past on its electronic sign; or if, on a visit to Candlestick Park, you saw the Jumbotron flash the phrase "RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY"; or if you've ever seen an LED board in a gallery, you've been exposed to the work of Jenny Holzer. Though she has always worked primarily in text, the form her work takes is staggeringly varied—ink and paper, T-shirts, enamel signs, electronic marquees, Xenon projections, lasers, bronze plaques, marble benches and sarcophagi. One installation at the Guggenheim featured several long LED boards scrolling their messages around the interior of the lobby, in a downward spiral.

While the method of presentation has always been a variable, Holzer's text has remained consistently direct, jilted and jarring when taken in fragments and abnormally powerful when experienced as a whole. "I used to love the words stuck into cubist collages and I loved the dadaists for their use of language," Holzer tells me in the back room of the Barbara Krakow Gallery. "I like manifestos, too. They all conspired to tilt me in this direction."

From the all-capped Times New Roman fury of her Inflammatory Essays of 1979-1982 ("BECAUSE THERE IS NO GOD SOMEONE MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MEN") to the slogan-y post-capitalist salvos of 1983-1985's Survival ("PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT"), to the view inside sexual violence she gave in 1993's Lustmord ("HAIR IS STUCK INSIDE ME")—Holzer's language is disturbingly frank, oddly revelatory and jarringly beautiful—even when it's not hers. Lately, she's been employing the work of a wide

range of poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler, Eugenio Montale, Wislawa Szymborska and Mahmoud Darwish.

"Part of the pleasure of not using my own work is that I can choose things that are utterly unlike me," Holzer says. "The only thing that might be somewhat similar is that I choose poems that are accessible and clear enough that they can be understood by people who walk by on the street."

If Holzer's achievement as a poet is her ability to actually communicate with even the most accidental of audiences through language, her most significant achievement as an artist (ironically enough) is her continued investigation of imagesilence—whether it be through the stillness of a marble bench, the indifferent scroll of an LED or—in the case of Archive—the outright suppression of information. Not to mention decency.

Sure enough, our walk through the exhibit is punctuated with several spans of silence—or speechlessness. The room is lined with large reproductions of documents acquired from the National Security Archive through the Freedom of Information Act. One piece, Camp Rules, is a copy of the handout given to detainees at Guantanamo ("Remain calm."; "You stay will be brief [sic]"); another, I Heard Many Rumors, details Gitmo interrogators forcing Muslim detainees to listen to "satanic black metal," as well as giving them lap-dances and dressing up as priests to "baptize" them. Stark, obscured silhouettes of exonerated soldiers stare facelessly from one wall, and opposite those (in another unexpectedly graphic move) are the panels of Formica Report—handwritten documents that have been entirely blacked out in thick, messy swaths. (You could mistake them for a quartet of Franz Klines.)

At first, it's odd to enter a Holzer show and not be bathed in amber light from busy rows of electronic signs, or lured to read from the cold, hard surface of the floor. Archive is utterly lo-fi, attuned to a simpler

JENNY HOLZER: ARCHIVE

THROUGH 6.6.07

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sensibility she ostensibly left behind when she finished wheatpasting her Truisms around New York City in the '70s. But in the absence of high technology (or the techniques of mass production), Holzer supplies careful craftsmanship and an eerie reminder that the documents—along with the atrocities they allude to—were very much done by hand.

The reproductions, actually, are hand-screened and painted, but the details of the distressed, over-Xeroxed type, the furtively scrawled Bic entries and the frequent interruptions of blacked-out content are all vital to the same discussion about silence and speech that Holzer's been holding for years. Here, too, can be found her fascination with transience (LEDs and projections) and permanence (marble and metal); how the ravages of war may seem lost in the past, but are actually hidden in the present and looming over the future.

Despite the grim revelations of Archive, Holzer's concern for beauty is still intact. The instantly familiar templates of the documents change character in their new forms. Each piece wants to be approached; and, much like the grim little lines that Holzer has generously dispensed over the years, they want to be read—and not forgotten.

"I want to find subjects that have some utility for most people, expressed beautifully," she says. "That's another good reason for leaving my stuff out!"

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