

CHEIM & READ

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

MAY '09

JENNY HOLZER

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

For over 30 years, Jenny Holzer's art has plumbed the relationship between didactic text and other visual conduits for language. In the late '70s, she wheat-pasted posters of Nietzsche-like *Truisms* across Lower Manhattan. The guerrilla-style work garnered a cult following and established her authoritative, forewarning voice. As time passed, she has proved to be the art world's soothsayer. The best known truism, for example, reads, "Abuse of power comes as no surprise."

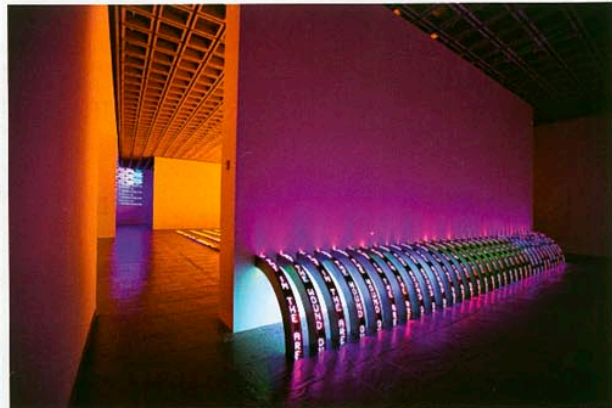
As she has demonstrated over the last two decades, Holzer is adept at co-opting technology to disseminate her ideas while warning against its (inexorable) march in such aphorisms as "automation is deadly" and "technology will make or break us." Yet technology has indelibly shaped Holzer's evolution as an artist. The LED signs, which she introduced in 1982, increased the agility of her art, and over the years she has been able to accelerate and slow the words' delivery with increasing precision, opening up a playful range of speed and pattern for writing that is often dark and angry. Of late, LED displays have been supplemented with xenon lamp projectors as her favored methods of text transmission.

The 15-year retrospective of Holzer's work now at the Whitney Museum of American Art is a forceful illustration of her ability to marry her text to the electronics associated with commercial signage without sacrificing her anti-establishment ambitions. The words are a combination of her own writings—from the *Truisms* (1977-79) to *Oh* (2001)—and declassified government documents pertaining to the war in Iraq. *Monument* (2008) and *Thorax* (2008) belly out from the wall in semicircular, ribbed columns, their seriality reminiscent of Donald Judd's stacks; *Red Yellow Looming* (2004), *Green Purple Cross* (2008) and *Blue Cross* (2008) each act as a series of digital I-beams connecting two walls, one LED display running atop another. Timed in complex counterpoint, the anxiety-inducing lyrics in *Green Purple Cross* and *Blue Cross* read, in part, "I breathe you, I smile you, I am crying hard, There was blood." Cast onto the walls behind them are vibrant multicolored haloes that Dan Flavin would have admired.

The largest piece in the exhibition, the 2008 *For Chicago* (where the exhibition debuted last October), takes up an entire room with 10 evenly



"Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect" remains on view at the Whitney through May 31. Its final stop is Fondation Beyeler, Basel [Nov. 1, 2009-Jan. 24, 2010].



Jenny Holzer: Above, *Purple*, 2008, 33 double-sided curved LEDs; left, *Red Yellow Looming*, 2004, 13 double-sided LEDs; at the Whitney.

spaced LED displays lying flat on the floor. Here, Holzer plays up the schism between her blunt, graphic writing and the liveliness of the work's yellow-orange light, which flares up and peters out as the flow of words changes direction and rhythm. We are pulled in two directions as the text, beamed at a breakneck speed, begins to supersede comprehension, engulfing the viewer in a disorienting fury of racing light.

The declassified government documents figure prominently in Holzer's recent work. They seem to scroll endlessly into and out of the wall in *Yellow Red Looming*, *Thorax* and *Purple* (all 2008). In these pieces, the artist astutely pairs furnacelike reds and hypnotic, deep-ocean blues with deeply disturbing content, skewing the harrowing reading experience toward a kind of trance.

The hardest political edge of the exhibition, however, is found not in the technology-based works but in Holzer's "Redaction Paintings," black-and-white silkscreens that magnify and expose the secretive behavior of the post-9/11 U.S. military intelligence bureaucracy. These stark works, reproducing documents in which the government blocked out names and any material deemed sensitive, deliver a powerful one-two punch that is free from ideological distraction [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '06].

In "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," published in 1967, Sol Lewitt wrote, "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art," a maxim with uncanny applicability to Holzer's work. Holzer's place as a torchbearer for conceptual art is not up for debate. Her work enchants as it provokes, lulling us with lights and action even as we are unsettled by the words they illuminate.

—Nick Obourn

547 WEST 25 STREET NEW YORK NY 10001 TEL 212 242 7727

FAX 212 242 7737 GALLERY@CHEIMREAD.COM