

And the world was made hash

Truisms writ large
by Jenny Holzer
engage with the big
ideas of our time

MARY SORENSEN

Jenny Holzer started using words as art, she realised what she was up against. “I very quickly became aware of how difficult it is to be precise enough, comprehensive enough, feeling enough, convincing enough, the litany goes on,” she says. “But nevertheless, I use words, and so be it.”

These words, sometimes projected on to buildings, other times lit out with lights inside galleries, have not stopped in the past decades. Her early work, Holzer projected phrases that sounded simple, colloquial and sloganistic, such as “Abuse of Power Comes with Surprise”. In the 1970s she made these works *Truisms* and added them up in the 80s with the *Vital Series*, such as “From What I Want”.

She was aiming to be very explicit and “to make the content legible”, using the beauty of language to attract the viewer like a magnet. You get an idea of her style, insistent, social agenda-driven, she says, on the phone from her Losick Falls studio in New York state, that flirting with technology in the form of ideas that consume you is “a good habit”.

Usually, even as her work becomes well known across the world, she does large-scale projections appearing in and on the exterior of galleries and outdoor spaces, staged in big cities — using combinations of words that are difficult for her.

It is not easy to write things, she says. “I wrote a number of years then stopped writing for a time ago. It has been a relatively late in life, to find something which has let me treat so many more subjects and have a cope.”

Fragments of poetry Holzer play as part of a survey opening at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne next week are by the laureate Wislawa Szymborska. *Children of Our Age*, *I have, In Praise of Feeling* and *Find Out Yourself*: these words led out in light-emitting sculptures.

She has no idea what the poet thinks of her words belated in this way, but she is going towards a project in the next year, “one of the things on the horizon”, so she takes the poet’s words to colour, and big.

Her expression is quite simple, years away from simplification, says of Szymborska’s “She treats more subjects most people do, and that’s the object her work.”

There will also be two series of work in the Melbourne show, one in what Holzer says has been a 10-year obsession with official sanctioned violence.

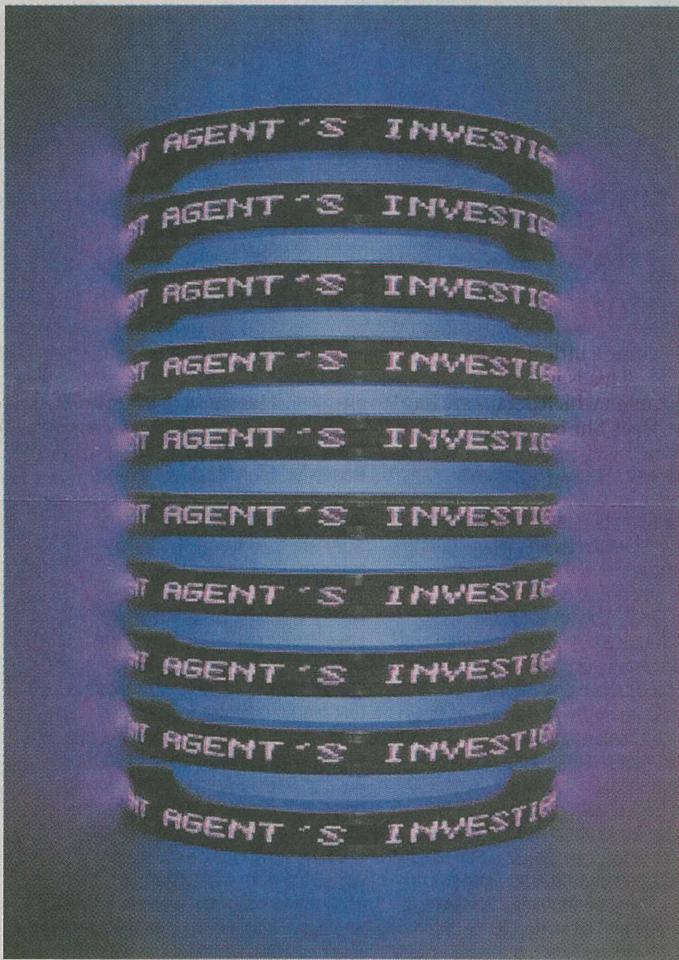
Installations and in LED signs reproduced words from documents relating to the wars in Afghanistan. Juliana Engberg, who has curated the show for ACCA, says the printed paintings, which are US government documents with censored blacked-out sections, are the artist’s attempt to show how “subjects, and tragedies are closed behind administrative doors”.

By displaying them in the focused space of a gallery, it is possible for the works, people who view them, to get to the truth to power”.

By Holzer’s words ask us to question our thoughts and actions in the world,” Engberg says. “This is a humanist and philosophical project encourages us to self-enlightenment through questioning our prejudices, false



People look at *Xenon for Paris* by Jenny Holzer, projected on to the Louvre museum’s facade and pyramid on April 9 this year



Torso (2007) by Holzer carries words from declassified war files

beliefs, fall-back positions and habits to reach a new level of tolerance, understanding and self-awareness.”

Holzer turns 60 next year and she calls herself an “almost old lady”. She started out as a street artist at a time when art, having absorbed the influences of minimalism, was powering into the arena of political activism. Most of her large-scale works are word projections, she says, such as the one she did on the Tiber river in Rome, where visitors — a mass of people coming together for communion, commemoration and spectacle — would not be aware who the artist is.

“For better or worse,” she says, “most of my work is ephemeral. When I stop making it, it will be, in

large part, gone.” She remembers how a combination of “the night air, the mood of the crowd, the history of a place, the time in the world” has given her installations their irrevocable power. “I wish I could consolidate things and make lasting masterpieces, but it ain’t happening. The ephemeral is part of the point, and the regret, and it’s part of the reality.”

Because she is a woman, and particularly concerned about the treatment of women in masculinist societies, her work has been called feminist. She gently rejects the description, preferring to call her art human practice, but adds that she is “not apologising about being female, even enjoying it occasionally, imagine!”

“It’s good to be able to practise,



Holzer at the 1998 Adelaide Festival with her installation *Lustmord*, made from human bones

and it is still harder to be female, which is shocking to me,” she says. “I had imagined when I was young that much of this would be resolved forever. I was so wrong.”

Holzer calls herself, in a word, reserved. She is not difficult to interview, but admits to feeling anxious about trying to represent herself clearly. (Paradoxically, this anxiety seems to infect my questions, which become increasingly complex and incomprehensible as the interview goes on; Holzer remains calm and coherent throughout.) While her interests are often obsessions, she says with a laugh that she would prefer them to be called “obsession-lite, or how about preoccupation?”

For the work on show at ACCA, she spent more than five years reading thousands of pages of declassified material, “desperately sad” official accounts and letters home to family about sons and daughters maimed and killed, put into detention, charged with war crimes. “Obviously, it’s harder on the people who were in the theatre of war themselves, but it’s still not easy hearing about the suffering, the killing, round and round,” she says.

The electronic sculpture *Torso*, which is shaped like a torso, carries a stream of words taken from

the declassified files. Engberg says this suggests “the way the body endures, even as language supports and mangles it”. The screenprints are hand painted to imply that even the seemingly impersonal action of a bureaucracy “has individual bodies behind it”.

Holzer, such a careful woman when it comes to explaining her own actions and feelings, is intent on making art that makes clear what is going on behind the screens erected by powerful institutions such as governments and the military.

The idea of using text in projections and LED displays came to Holzer in the decade when advertising was gaining momentum, but she says her impetus was originally the News of the World displays on buildings in New York’s Times Square.

“I was interested in the use of signs in Russia and China to announce great things,” she says, “and the use of language in the early 20th century, when things were going to be great: the tragic optimism that said everything was going to be good.”

Her truisms, and the use of poetry and documents, are offered not as not propaganda, but for contemplation, she says.

“I can offer hundreds of differ-

ent positions, in the hope that people can sift through and find something for themselves.”

She watches the way people look at the pretty lights, the soft, transparent outdoor projections and the more hyperactive LED ones inside gallery spaces, interested to see how they react.

“Time is an element in the programming,” she says, monitoring the period that one group of words remains visible before being replaced by the next aphoristic group. “It has to be varied so it doesn’t put people to sleep, but it can’t be so aggressive it puts people off. There’s no ideal formula because people are so different, but I try to have it rise and fall long enough for people to see the content.”

“What’s interesting about the projects is the silence. People don’t usually talk. I don’t have anything against sound, but the lack of sound is interesting. It becomes a contemplation, a slowing, a sensing, a considering; that’s all good stuff.”

“It’s what you do afterwards that matters.”

Jenny Holzer is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, December 17 to February 28.

‘When I stop making my work, it will be, in large part, gone’

JENNY HOLZER

And the word was made flash

Aphorisms writ large enable Jenny Holzer to engage with the big issues of our time

ROSEMARY SORESENSEN

WHEN Jenny Holzer started using text as art, she realised what she was up against. "I very quickly became aware of how difficult it is to be precise enough, comprehensive enough, feeling enough, correct enough, the litany goes on," Holzer says. "But nevertheless, I chose words, and so be it."

Those words, sometimes projected on to buildings, other times spelled out with lights inside galleries, have not stopped in the past three decades.

In her early work, Holzer projected phrases that sounded simple, colloquial and sloganistic, such as "Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise". In the 1970s she called these works *Truisms* and followed them up in the 80s with her *Survival Series*, such as "Protect Me From What I Want".

She was aiming to be very explicit, and "to make the content accessible", using the beauty of light to attract the viewer like a moth to a flame. You get an idea of her tense, insistent, social agenda when she says, on the phone from her Hoosick Falls studio in New York state, that flirting with danger in the form of ideas that may consume you is "a good human habit".

Gradually, even as her work became well known across the world — with large-scale projections appearing in and on the exterior walls of galleries and outdoor events staged in big cities — using her own combinations of words became difficult for her.

"It's not easy to write things, that's why I quit," she says. "I wrote for a number of years then stopped, some time ago. It has been a joy, relatively late in life, to find poetry, which has let me treat so many more subjects and have a bigger scope."

The fragments of poetry Holzer will display as part of a survey show opening at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne next week are by Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska. *Children of Our Age, Could Have, In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself*: these words are spelled out in light-emitting diode sculptures.

Holzer has no idea what the Polish poet thinks of her words being displayed in this way, but she is working towards a project in Poland next year, "one of the bright things on the horizon", so she can take the poet's words to her, in colour, and big.

"Her expression is quite simple but light years away from simplistic," Holzer says of Szymborska's poetry. "She treats more subjects than most people do, and that's why I project her work."

There will also be two series of works in the Melbourne show based on what Holzer says has been a five-year obsession with officially sanctioned violence.

In paintings and in LED signs she has reproduced words from documents relating to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Juliana Engberg, who has curated the Holzer show for ACCA, says the screenprinted paintings, which show US government documents complete with censored blacked-out portions, are the artist's attempts to show how "subjects, events and tragedies are closed be-



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