



Jenny Holzer has projected poetry on to the floors, ceilings, and walls, making the language something felt as well as read. She has also made declassified emails into paintings.

Secrets and lies exposed in black and white

ART
JENNY HOLZER

ACCA, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank.
Until February 28

Robert Nelson Reviewer

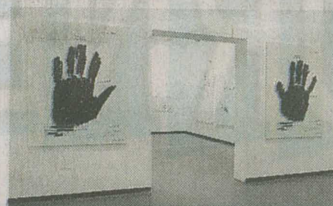
NEARLY everything that happens among us humans, unless organised by the gods, occurs through language. Before a bridge becomes a bridge, it is discussed in thousands of words, from the moment that someone says: "You know what? we should have a bridge here." Dumping asylum seekers in the desert or stopping at a red light: these are all responses organised by language, justified and enforced by words, and rehearsed right down to the second when you hit the brakes.

All our institutions, our universities, our banks, our government are little but language. They might have an august

building and computers strewn around, but they're only a shell for doing things with language.

Since modernism, artists have struggled with the discouraging idea that language is somehow more fundamental and more socially important. Language arrives in your head before anything else and compels everything that you might want to do. There is no sensory asylum from language. For a brief spell, artists pinned their hopes on the independence of formalism: the doctrine that visual shapes and colours and patterns on their own are all that counts, as in music. But this wishful autonomy has proved unsustainable.

The problem with formalism is that it turns its back on the world and all the other important things that happen within it. It ignores the other causes of bliss and strife and seems like the dead-end of expression. And so artists in the tradition of



Dada, surrealism, conceptual art and postmodernism have sought to come to terms with language, to wrestle with its immeasurable powers and make it talk to the sensory.

The American artist Jenny Holzer is in that tradition. Her work has occupied the whole of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art over summer, where its scrolling horrors have laid a pall over the festive season; and only now that we're all back at work — and are once again thinking in the language of power — can we bravely face up to its torrid contents.

Holzer concentrates on the treatment of suspected terror-

ists, because it reveals a point where language institutes disgusting behaviour that finally oversteps its own authority. In all ages, extracting information from unwilling captives has been an exceedingly unpleasant process; and sometimes the poor blighters from the other side have been apprehended on faulty intelligence. They don't know anything, but are punished with special vengeance for withholding information that they actually don't have.

Thinking about torture is not something that we often do, because it's a thing of creepy ghouls who relish the sadistic record; but Holzer's reasons for taking us there are all to do with the limits of language. Officers, unlike artists, are not authorised to act outside a set of orders, guidelines and protocols.

If they want to intimidate a prisoner during interrogation, their verbal or physical violence must first have been declared

legitimate. Holzer has reproduced declassified emails that specify and justify violence for the purposes of handling terrorists. Of course, language falls short of the blow itself, and sometimes the result is murder. Holzer reproduces candid autopsy reports that name the cause of death as homicide.

Holzer's subject matter is not just cruelty, but institutionalised cruelty, which is the extent to which a cruel act can be spoken for. With righteous words, we decide how much we will hurt other people.

The question is how much power art derives from language, the same authorising language that assents to a kick or a plastic bag. In proving that language is the unique vehicle of power, the visual in Holzer's hands is like a stupefied guard who passively looks on while the damage is done.

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