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New 'Truisms' In Words And Light

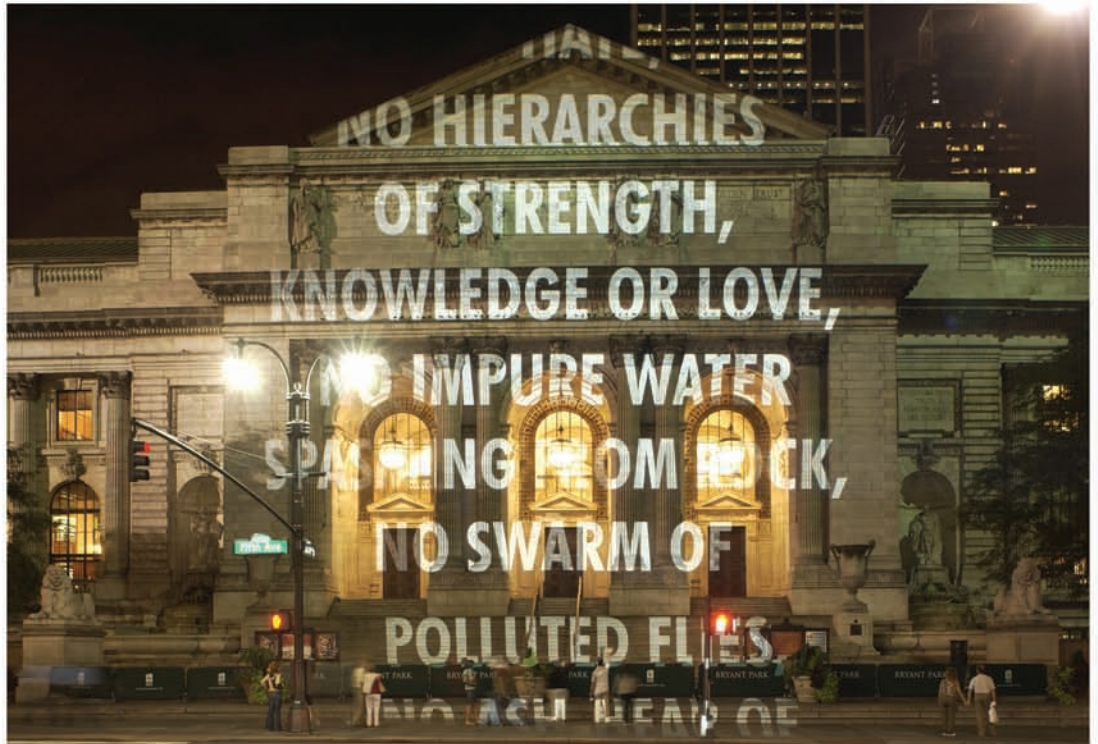
Jenny Holzer Projects
Her Response to 9/11

By AMEI WALLACH

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Jenny Holzer, like so many artists, got calls asking how she would memorialize the events. All she could think of at the time was to leave bare the two scarred pits where the World Trade Center had stood. "Because I didn't really have an answer, I kept thinking about the question," she said one recent afternoon on the steps of the New York Public Library. Her "much delayed answer," as she calls it, will illuminate three of the city's most heavily trafficked locations, beginning tomorrow night.

With the help of the public art organization Creative Time, Ms. Holzer, 55, will project United States government documents and the words of some 20 international poets for 11 nights on the facades of five buildings: 30 Rockefeller Center and two other buildings in that complex (tomorrow through Oct. 2); the Bobst Library at New York University in Greenwich Village (Oct. 3 through 5); and the public library (Oct. 6 through 9). "I think the documents I used are representative of what I came across," she said. "Ultimately, it's a personal representation, since I made it. But it's not a polemical selection."

The documents and poems, though, about subjects like the war in Iraq and home-



Charlesamuels.com

Jenny Holzer projected text onto the New York Public Library during a test run. The words come from a poem by Henri Cole.

land security, do reflect the political and social passions Ms. Holzer first announced in 1977 with "Truisms," a series of slogans she pasted on street corners and buildings.

The words to be projected against the Bobst Library will be copies of recent government documents released under the Freedom of Information Act. Many concern torture, a topic Ms. Holzer considers as central to her art as "death, dying, martyrdom, murder, slaughter, rape and more," as she put it.

The documents are e-mail messages or on letterhead from the Department of Defense (referred to as D.O.D. in the papers), the F.B.I. and other institutions whose names have been officially whited or blacked out, as has paragraph after paragraph of information.

One of the declassified documents contains three lines of information and two pages of redacted lines. One mentions investigators impersonating F.B.I. officers, so

that, it says, if the "story is made public in any way D.O.D. interrogators will not be held accountable." The reason, the document explains, is because any torture will appear to have been carried out by "'F.B.I.' interrogators."

As a result, it adds, the F.B.I. will be "left holding the bag before the public."

Some of these documents have been discussed in the press, including the July 10,

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Jenny Holzer at the public library, where she will project documents and poetry. Other sites are Rockefeller Center and the Bobst Library. Frances Roberts for The New York Times

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2001, "Phoenix Memo." In it, an F.B.I. agent clearly states: "The purpose of this memo is to advise the bureau and New York of the possibility of a coordinated effort by Osama bin Laden to send students to the United States to attend civil aviation universities and colleges." Blocked out are the names of the sender and many of those who received and approved the memo.

Seeing the bland, bureaucratic forms, some with graphic descriptions of torture, Ms. Holzer said, would encourage "people who are intrigued to go look for more." Through what she calls "the art school stuff" — placement, magnification, light — she said she wanted to make the documents visually immediate and disconcertingly poetic. In test runs, these projections have enveloped passersby in white words, uncanny and sufficiently transparent to let the sturdy reality of buildings, trees and roaming dogs show through.

"There's something about light that's right for these terrible subjects," Ms. Holzer said. "It's a way of having beauty let you come closer than you might otherwise." She noted that at the Bobst Library, the primary audience will be students. Her daughter, Lili, 17, hopes to go to N.Y.U. next year, Ms. Holzer said. Over the summer, she refused to let Lili be listed on a database of 16- to 18-year-olds that the Pentagon had begun assembling for recruitment purposes.

Ms. Holzer was born in Gallipolis, Ohio, and her austere, moralizing voice comes out of the American

Using 'art school stuff' to make documents visually immediate.

heartland. Her sound-bite slogans have often taken their tone from American billboards and airwaves.

She has referred to primary-source material for years. But the first time she projected such documents was in "Truth Before Power," a 2004 exhibition in Austria. The show took its name from a phrase in a classic 1968 text by Sherman Kent, a founder of the Central Intelligence Agency, who argued that accurate information must be used in policy-making. During her research Ms. Holzer discovered the National Security Archive, a library of declassified documents created two decades ago by journalists and scholars.

"We aren't advocates," Thomas Blanton, director of the archive, said. "We try to show the world the argument the government has with itself. By beaming photons through the text, Jenny Holzer makes it less omnipotent, less powerful. She breaks it apart with beams of light and yet broadcasts what was a secret. So how cool is that?"

Ms. Holzer wanted to show these American documents at home in time for last year's presidential election, but doubted it would be possible. "It seemed at one stage that anyone who said anything critical was unpatriotic, as opposed to criticism being constructive, loving and patriotic," she said. Creative Time offered to

help, and though there wasn't time to organize the primary documents, poems of warning, war and extremis were projected around New York last November.

Some of these same poems and more will be scrolled on 30 Rockefeller Plaza and on the steps and columns of the New York Public Library. Since "Truisms," Ms. Holzer has sought to unhinge settled beliefs through a chorus of quarreling sensibilities: "awful punishment awaits really bad people," "morals are for little people," "torture is barbaric." In this case, her selection of 50 years of poems ranges from the Polish Nobel Prize-winning Wislawa Szymborska's "Tortures" ("the body is and is and is and has nowhere to go") to Jack Gilbert's "Brief for the Defense" ("We must risk delight") and valentines to New York by Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, more poems about race are being added.

"We want to leave room to be flexible if something wrenching happens that makes the selection look clumsy or cruel," she said. And then, she added, "That would be oafish."