

## THE CULTURE PAGES

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### Lines in the Sand Is Jenny Holzer's art in danger of being washed away by the digital storm that surrounds her?

BY KAREN ROSENBERG

**I**N HER COOLLY elegant room at the Bryant Park Hotel, Jenny Holzer passes me a printout of Walt Whitman's "Mannahatta," a text she's planning to use in her upcoming installation at Rockefeller Center. "I see that the word of my city is that word up there," it reads. Like Whitman, the 55-year-old Conceptual artist—you know her for her flowing red LED displays, scrolling cryptic mottoes and aphorisms—envisions a city

overflowing with words. In Holzer's New York, pithy language is strewn across surfaces grand and pedestrian—almost anywhere, in fact, but rarely in galleries. For most of her career, Holzer has stuck with public projects, even though, in her friend the poet Henri Cole's description, she is "not even 1 percent a public person."

When we meet, it's the end of Fashion Week, and Holzer, in her faded black jeans, is an incongruous presence in the hotel, looking more like a punk roadie than an artist who was once commissioned to create work for Helmut Lang's Soho store. When she's not traveling for a project, she lives and works upstate in rural Hoosick

would just be there and go away."

Her latest New York project will be nearly as ephemeral: For a weekend starting on September 29, Holzer will be projecting poems (including the Whitman) on the façades of Rockefeller Center, and a few days later at the New York Public Library at 42nd Street. In between, she'll project declassified documents relating to 9/11 as well as Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo at NYU's Bobst Library. The latter selections illustrate "how one strikes a balance between transparency and the secrecy that's necessary for security," says Holzer. The three works are a continuation of a series called "For the City," which

lived in my loft briefly—that's my only brush with stardom." These days, she describes her style as "borderline, at best—slightly improved by my kid telling me to buy these shoes" (they're Chuck Taylors). "Her gang is going back to the punk stuff. It gives us something to talk about."

It wasn't until the late eighties, though, that Holzer's work moved beyond the art world. In 1989 and 1990, she hit the triefecta with prestigious shows at the Guggenheim, the Dia Center, and the Venice Biennale (for which she won the Golden Lion for Best National Pavillion, and where she was the first woman to represent the United States). With her Venice project, she reached an apex of "information overload," in her own words, flashing electronic texts in five languages. Her takeover of the Guggenheim's rotunda, where LED text in three colors spiraled up the parapets, was equally commanding. Holzer, like her contemporaries Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, became a minor celebrity; in 1990, Dennis Hopper even made a film, *Catchfire*, about a Holzer-like artist played by Jodie Foster. Not all the attention was positive; Robert Hughes disparaged her, in his *Time* review of the Biennale, as "the modern version . . . of those American maidens who, a century ago, passed their hours stitching improvised text on samplers."

"A fair criticism would be that I can't write," Holzer admits. "My rejoinder would be, it doesn't matter—I can write well enough to deliver the content, and I place it in the right form, the right medium, the right vehicles. And now I've found people who can write." She's referring to the poems she's chosen for the projections at Rockefeller Center and the Library: Some are personal ("Staying at Ed's Place," by May Swenson), some visual ("The Great Figure," by William Carlos Williams), but most are polemical (exemplified by Yehuda Amichai's "Wildpeace.") There's a strong elegaic undercurrent to her selections, partly because of 9/11 and partly because death and suffering have always been important themes for Holzer. "Memorials are the third sphere of my practice," she says, citing Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial as one of her favorite public artworks, period.

In fact, Holzer is surprised that people find her work "all dry, conceptual rather than expressionist," as she puts it. "The electronics can be extraordinarily aggressive, or they can make you very wistful and weepy," she notes. "The light washes over the building, and it's emotional and tactile as well as cerebral." It seems a surprising thing for her to say, but then she told us as much in one of her "Truisms" two decades ago: WORDS TEND TO BE INADEQUATE. ■

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Falls, but it's no boho enclave like Woodstock. "My neighbor, who's a Basque shepherd, has 500 pregnant ewes," she says.

These days, it's easy to take art like Holzer's for granted. Her mode of public address seems almost quaint, as Madison Avenue has become incredibly sophisticated about positioning its creations as non-advertising, or post-advertising. Besides, in post-9/11 New York, Holzerisms seem to pop up everywhere—consider the ominously vague subway-poster slogan IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING. Has her art become ambient, disappearing into the city's ever-louder visual white noise? "Sometimes people make my work," she says, laughing. "Somebody got one of those LED belt buckles and some software, and programmed some of my text in. That was good—I'd been meaning to do it and was too lazy." Holzer's own frequent recycling of pet phrases (PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT; ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE) has opened her to charges that she's tapped out, merely riffing, her interesting work behind her.

Though the technology she co-opted—she owns the LED sign the way Richard Serra owns Cor-Ten steel—has become something of a relic, other forms of streaming text have come forward: the cable-news ticker, the text message, the instant message. So it is surprising to hear Holzer call herself "a lame geezer who can barely send an instant message," one who relies on her 17-year-old daughter to keep up. She has, however, been considering the cell phone as a medium, envisioning a project based on text messaging: "When you'd go in certain areas, you'd get certain messages, unsolicited but so fast that they wouldn't be annoying," she explains. "They

kicked off last year at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, Bethesda Fountain, and other urban landmarks. Holzer hopes to take the project on the road.

A native of suburban Gallipolis, Ohio, Holzer moved to New York in 1975, joining the Whitney's Independent Study Program. After some early experiments with the group Collaborative Projects (Kiki Smith and Tom Otterness were there, too), Holzer went out on her own with what is now her best-known work, the "Truisms." Those pithy phrases were printed on flyers that Holzer tacked up all over town—a classic get-famous-quick move, effective back then, that's almost laughably naïve (and unlikely to work) for a young artist today.

The phrases themselves were by turns cynical (SELFISHNESS IS THE MOST BASIC MOTIVATION), moralistic (MOSTLY YOU SHOULD MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS), liberating (THERE'S NOTHING REDEEMING IN TOIL), and strident (ROMANTIC LOVE WAS INVENTED TO MANIPULATE WOMEN). If they have a particular voice, it's that of an earnest midwestern populist crossed with a world-weary grad student. "I had been looking for a way to say things very precisely, going back to the shame, in Ohio, of saying anything at all. I figured if I had the temerity to blurt something out, it should at least be short," Holzer recalls.

The "Truisms," and a 1982 Public Art Fund project on the electronic message board in Times Square, launched her career; before long, she was a New Wave icon, posing for the cover of the *Soho News*. "In the seventies, a lot of artists were musicians, and musicians were artists. The boundaries were fuzzy," Holzer remembers. "I tried to learn how to play guitar, but I was horrible! Kim Gordon