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TEXT GENERATION: HOLZER IN HONG KONG BY CHLOE MANDRYK

Hong Kong streets have a deafening chatter, of the visual kind. Every night, the ICC Tower projects an LED light show in Central and down in the urban canopy hundreds of neon signs chart the alleys. “Visual culture is a fuzzily defined thing. But one can say for sure that neon signs are a very important part” said curator Aric Chen recently after an infamous Sai Ying Pun eatery sign was deemed illegal and subsequently claimed as an objet d’art in M+ Museum for Visual Culture’s permanent collection.

American artist Jenny Holzer’s “Light Stream,” at Pearl Lam Galleries in Hong Kong, uses the power of light and text to entrance an audience. From the printing press to LED light, Holzer is a pioneer of using technology to spark a dialogue about subjectivity. Pithy statements blip across screens or lie embossed in various surfaces leading the viewer to question those media through which the unjust, beautiful, inane, private, violent, or extreme aspects of society are portrayed.

Holzer’s Hong Kong debut features new text-based works, including her first in Chinese. Phrases drawn from the artist’s repertoire have been translated by five experts. When describing the process of selection, Holzer said that she sought those phrases that would be “engaging and not gratuitously offensive.” Now reiterated in a language unintelligible to her, this project has renewed Holzer’s focus on the forms of text, an event she has found both “frustrating and liberating”.

Entering the gallery, four opaque, white marble bench sculptures (2013) read “Freedom is a Luxury Not a Necessity,” “Don’t Place Too Much Trust in Experts,” “Solitude is Enriching” and “Money Creates Taste,” all drawn from Holzer’s “Truisms” series (1977–79), engraved in Chinese text. Welcoming visitors to sit upon these aphorisms seems a pointed remark and the artist reputedly embraces such interaction (she sat perched upon “Money Creates Taste” during the press event). Running in a neat succession, like train cars, the benches lead from the entry of the gallery, towards the haze of whizzing text. The material contrast of these analog benches to the hyperactive light works suggests endurance. “They’re there for a good long time,” the artist said.

“Torso” (2007) and “Ribs” (2010) are on display in the gallery’s main space. These LED arches were inspired by whalebones and the curves of 17th century New England headstones. The artist professes an obsession with mortality since childhood. “Ever since I was a child I was fascinated by skeletons, whale bones, elephant bones, they seemed incredibly poignant,” she said. While previous iterations of “Torso” have usually been wall mounted, here the work is on the floor closely beside “Ribs.” Holzer serves up hundreds of one liners all borrowed from her previous works—“Technology will make us or break us,” “Your actions are pointless if no one notices,” “Lack of charisma can be fatal,” “We must make sacrifices to maintain our quality of life”—in an endless cycle. This stream has the effect of creating an “electronic wilderness” and, refracting in the gallery’s glass entry hall, conjures a sense of infinitude.

Of Holzer’s new works, there’s “Pearl’s Truisms & Survival” in which Chinese text scrolls through five-wall-mounted panels and “Inclined” (2013), a four-sided LED

sculpture titled that bridges from floor to wall like an escalator, running in a seven-hour loop. Both of these works use new animation technology to abstract images which beat and dissipate behind the flow of Chinese characters. Thousands of RGB diodes create bolts of white light and glittering yellow and blue shapes, evoking what the artist calls “consciousness failing.”

Throughout the exhibition, LED planks are flush with the gallery’s interior, giving the illusion of text meandering through both solids and space. As the text tunes in and drops out we are made sensitive to “what is unattainable or inaccessible...such is life,” Holzer mused.

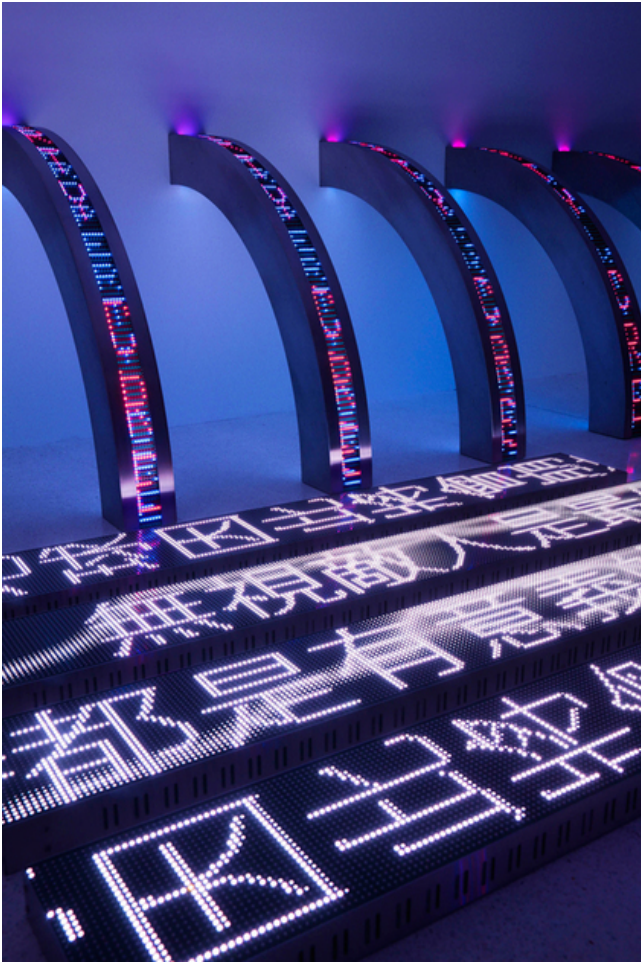
At the moment, Holzer’s dream project is to create public works that combine large-scale LED installations with text transmitted through hand-held devices. This crowdsourcing mentality harks back to some of Holzer’s original public interventions including her “Inflammatory Essays” (1979–1982), which were posted all over New York, and her outdoor projection series “Xenon” (1996–). This potential project invites the audience to participate in a more hands-on manner, “now they can change the content, send it on, react to it, improve it,” she says excitedly.

Holzer’s fearless approach to new media remains a critical tool. “That’s as far as I’ll go with representation as a possible utility,” she says before signing off.

Jenny Holzer: Light Stream is on view at **Pearl Lam Galleries** in Hong Kong, from September 19–November 2, 2013.



JENNY HOLZER, *Inclined*, 2013, LED sign with blue, green and red diodes, 243.8 × 15.2 × 15.2 cm. Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries.



JENNY HOLZER, *Light Stream*, 2013, 28 LED signs with blue, green, red and white diodes, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries.



JENNY HOLZER, *All Fall*, 2012, 28 LED signs with blue, green, red and white diodes, dimensions variable. Copyright the artist, Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries.