

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Let There Be Lights: Jenny Holzer in Hong Kong

By Lara Day, September 12, 2013



Photo by Jessica Hromas

American artist Jenny Holzer has made a career of forging new paths. The first woman to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale, she became synonymous with her pithy, subversive aphorisms—“lack of charisma can be fatal,” “money creates taste”—in the late 1970s, long before the age of Twitter.

Now she is exploring new ground yet again: translating her works into Chinese.

In her first Hong Kong solo exhibition, which opens at Pearl Lam Galleries on Sept. 19, the 63-year-old artist is presenting phrases from her seminal text series “Truisms” (1977-79), “Living” (1980-82) and “Survival” (1983-85) in both Chinese and their original English.



Photo by Jessica Hromas
A detail from Jenny Holzer's 'Light Stream'

Though words are her raw material, her installations are determinedly physical, and she attributes her compositions to the influence of minimalist artists such as the late Donald Judd. In the show, writing interacts with the objects it appears on, whether carved on white-marble benches or glittering on rods and arcs through a sequence of colorful light-emitting diodes, or LEDs. One piece, "Light Stream," from which the exhibition takes its name, consists of more than 25 LED components and a babel of disparate texts, all clamoring for the viewer's attention.

Ms. Holzer's writings have been translated in the past, most famously in her "Xenon" light projections, which have appeared in places from Berlin to Buenos Aires. A serene, contemplative counterpoint to the LED works, the projections have yet to be shown in the China region, though the artist says she hopes that will change next year.

Taking a break from installing the show, Ms. Holzer spoke to the Journal about the similarities between LED programming and calligraphy, the magnetism of Mao and her feline alter ego on Twitter. Edited excerpts follow.

This is your first solo show in Greater China. What made you decide to come here?

I'm delighted to be invited. It's better not to invite yourself to a party. I established that early in life.

What was it like translating your work into Chinese?

What's nice about doing this and being here is when I started to write the "Truisms" in the '70s, of course I read Confucius. So it has been neat to remember that and to invoke it when we started to do the translations.

Mao was another one of your early influences.

Especially [in] the "Inflammatory Essays." I went to the library at Brown University when I was in college and I read people, including Mao—prominently Mao—who were sure that if their ideas and ideals were implemented, that things would be good, would be right. I wanted that sort of certainty.

In a previous interview, you mentioned a photograph by Cindy Sherman where she dresses like a young Mao Zedong. What was it about Mao that interested you?

Warhol saw it: a combination of the iconic look and the content, not to mention the power.

There's a history here of calligraphy and presenting text as art, more so than in the West.

I have always been taken by and compelled by content, but once I have the content, my next challenge is to embed it in something. I guess the equivalent to calligraphy for me would be the programming. How should it move, how should it occupy time, how should it play in space? How can there be moments when the progression is very wild, how can there be softer times, resting periods? How can the programming be a very good fit for the subject matter, and other times how can dissonance serve a purpose?



Photo by Jessica Hromas
'Light Fall' by the artist

You're playing with that dissonance in "Light Stream," the namesake of this show.

It's been a long time since I've tried anything akin to this. For the Venice Biennale in 1990, there was one room that was the "too much" room that had many languages and, at least for 1990, hyperactive programming. Here it's going to be wilder still.

You've used different media for your writings over the years, from condom wrappers to light projections. How did you discover LEDs?

I began with street posters just pasted up where I could place them [in New York], then not too long after that I had a chance to put content from the street posters, from the "Truisms," on the board at 1 Times Square. That was my first venture into electronic sign programming and that stuck with me. It was the "a-ha" moment.

I noticed you have a Twitter account, @JennyHolzer, that tweets some of your works, but you haven't been updating it.

It wasn't mine!

It wasn't yours? So it's a fake one?

There's also [@JennyHolzerMom](#) and [@JennyHolzerCat](#). Somebody used my text as me for the Twitter account, and finally gave it to me.

Have you been tempted to experiment more online?

We made a little piece in the '90s called "Please Change Beliefs." I threw my "Truisms" [on a website] and invited people to rewrite them, and then there was a mechanism that let them be collected and be alphabetized. That was entertaining.

The piece was before its time. And now everyone's crowdsourcing through the Internet. Is that something you're still engaging with?

I've turned to painting now. That's my current favorite hobby.

That's so retro.

As I slide into the grave. How appropriate. [Laughs]

Do you have plans to do more work with Twitter? It's like Twitter was set up for Jenny Holzer's "Truisms."

That's why so many people are doing it. [@JennyHolzerCat](#) has some good stuff!

I hope to do a project that will involve going prospecting, mining in any number of the poetry contests that take place around the world, and get these poems programmed up on electronic signs and have them ready for any number of handheld devices, because that's where everybody lives.

Could you talk more about the project?

Even though I'm a "weekend painter" now, what I'm focusing on is some way to pool these fabulous poems, a lot of them from kids, and have the masters among them as well, and distribute these and have them appear on any number of giant signs, on anything from a

sports stadium to a town square. I'm hopeful we will have a partner for augmented reality, which would let people come to certain buildings where we did do projections and have them play around—you'd hold up your phone and people could project this collected poetry and throw it onto buildings or what have you.

You used to write yourself, and now you use the words of others. Why is that?

Writing was always a struggle for me. I could do it, but it was hard. I'm not a natural-born writer. The visual work has always come more easily to me. So at a point in midlife when I was asked to do a number of memorials, I started to realize that it made much more sense to use the writing or the utterances of the people being memorialized than my trying to write about their lives. That was the beginning of the shift.

Are you planning any more trips to Hong Kong?

Hopefully next year. I'm cautiously optimistic that we can do projections. There's such a wealth of poetry to draw on, and I'd like to go back to my very early writing to the poetry of young writers from around the world. I think that kind of global range could be fabulous, and it just plain would be pretty to see this writing go by, shaping itself to the form of the hillside, or reflected on a river, or molding the content to the facade of a venerable building.

"Light Stream" will be on display in Hong Kong at Pearl Lam Galleries from Sept. 19 to Nov. 2.

<http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2013/09/12/let-there-be-lights-jenny-holzer-in-hong-kong/>