

# THE WRITING ON THE WALL

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## PROJECTIONS: JENNY HOLZER

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**WE ARE BOMBARDED IN OUR SOCIETY** by the platitudes of sloganeering: "Impress for Less," "Just Do It," "For Everything Else, There's MasterCard." Everything from airport announcements to street signs and news bulletins tell us what to do. For 30 years, Jenny Holzer, who lives in Hoosick Falls, has used the raw material of language and the tactics of public art to disrupt the assumptions that clutter the informational landscape. *Projections* is a brilliant physical and metaphysical examination of the totalizing effects of language. It's the kind of art we need more of just now, when popular rhetoric has reached a pitch of inanity.

I have been to see *Projections* three times, and each visit yielded different sensations, always powerfully disquieting. On my first trip, the museum was crowded with families enjoying ice cream during a MASS MoCA free day. In the huge darkened room of Building 5, the site of *Projections*, children frolicked while lines of poetry streamed from two enormous projectors elevated at opposite points in the room. Words slid and merged along walls, floor, and ceiling. *Projections* is one of the best uses of the Building 5 space I have seen; Holzer's transitory, shadowy messages foreground the industrial emptiness. The effect is uncanny and all-encompassing: Although you can read the poetry line by line, it's challenging, and the projectors can seem like searchlights emitting a disorienting, intermittent glare. Enhancing this effect is the poetry, by Pulitzer Prize-winning Polish writer Wislawa Szymborska: "The terrorist has already crossed the street," viewers read, from the chilling poem "The Terrorist, He's Watching" (The exhibition promises to run different poems every few months). Block letters move across visitors' bodies, literally embodying the power of language. On my second visit, a quiet weekday, viewers sat on gigantic

grayish-black beanbags specially designed for the exhibition. Once you sit on one of these preternaturally cushy bean bags, it's difficult to get up, furthering the sense of being at the mercy of ubiquitous, ghostly words.

On my third visit, it was exhilaratingly haunting to be the only viewer in Holzer's den of text. In Holzer's living language sculpture, lines of poetry scroll away, like the introductory text in the movie *Star*

*Wars*, with the same eerie, epic timelessness. Sometimes letters become pure shapes. The space can feel like a cave or like a prison yard, and the poems echo a drumbeat of fear: "The terrorist has already crossed the street./The distance keeps him out of danger/and what a view: just like the movies." Indeed. The effect of *Projections* induces a filmic kind of déjà vu because it's about the inevitability of narrative structures.

"Tortures," one of Szymborska's poems, speaks to this inevitability, telling us that throughout human history, "Nothing has changed . . . The body writhes, jerks and tries to pull away/its legs give out, it falls,

the knees fly up,/it turns blue, swells, salivates and bleeds." And in "The Terrorist, He's Watching," a horrifying scene loops back on itself: "The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty/Now it's just thirteen sixteen./There's still time for some to go in,/and some to come out."

*Projections*, Holzer's first interior projection in the United States, marks a new phase; previous installations displayed text she authored. Her fame as a text artist started when, in 1977, Holzer distilled a Whitney Independent Study reading list into what became *Truisms*: one-line generalizations about wealth, gender, and fear, among other subjects. Holzer printed statements in the imperative voice such as "Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise," and "A Strong Sense of Duty Imprisons You," in capital letters on posters around New York City. Since then, *Truisms* and other language works have appeared on T-shirts, human skin, and digital monitors in contexts ranging from Guggenheim and Venice Biennale installations to signs on garbage cans to a projection on the bank of the Arno River in Florence. Part of *Lustmord*, one of her most controversial works, was printed with blood in a German magazine in 1993 and read, "I Am Awake In the Place Where Women Die."

Artists have experimented with language as a means to destabilize expectations at least since cubists incorporated words into paintings. Similar to Holzer, contemporary Barbara Kruger uses collaged text art to create often political provocations (such as "Your Body Is a Battleground" on billboards in the 1990s). Holzer, however, is more interested in existential questions that cut right into the lexical heart, exploring boundaries between reality and language, bodily self and world. How to live with a body in a world that won't acknowledge pain? How do we speak to one another when every word has the potential to lock the door to understanding?

Don't miss her series of silkscreen paintings upstairs: They are declassified government documents—maps and e-mails—about the Iraq war copied in gray, flat tones. The documents are shocking, emphasizing the nonsensical imperatives of war: "seize," "exploit," and "execute" appear over and over. When actions in the political arena arise from such violent words, one has to question the very nature of language. There's no one better suited to the task than Holzer in this stunning exhibition. ■



What are words worth? *Projections* at MASS MoCA.