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OCTOBER 2019

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**LIMITED EDITION COVER BY JENNY HOLZER**

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Jenny Holzer

Guest Editor

# JENNY HOLZER

The artist Jenny Holzer has used epigrams, *Truisms* as she tags them, to mesmerising and energising effect. Whether fly-posted, lit up in LED, digitally animated or projected on landmark buildings at epic scale, her wry – and now overtly political – observations, and meme-inducing calls to action, appropriated absurdities and wrenching poetry, have made Holzer a genuine cultural force. We visit Holzer at her Brooklyn studio, where she is mixing paint and politics, turning Trump-era redacted reports – from the Mueller investigation to released records of Jeffrey Epstein’s sex trafficking and trading – into giant abstractions. For an artist who once wanted to paint like Rothko, they are a kind of reconnection, her own searing take on American sublime.

Jenny Holzer

# LIFE LINES

Declassified state documents inform Jenny Holzer's latest work, a series of watercolours, previewed on the following pages

Photography Ari Marcopoulos Interview Marina Cashdan

Jenny Holzer's New York studio is in Dumbo, Brooklyn, a neighbourhood that has outgrown its gritty industrial past; warehouses and empty lots have been replaced by fancy high-rises, renovated lofts and coffee shops. The area is rife with advertising agencies, galleries, tech start-ups and tourists. But back in the late 1970s and 1980s, 'the city was wilder', recalls Holzer. It was the heyday of artistic collaboration and experimentation – an electric, DIY environment in which she found success by confronting and shining light (literally) on injustice and cruelty in the world around her.

Holzer is known for her light projections and LED panel works, where texts are launched across majestic landscapes like a Mexican valley and a seaside cliff face in Rio de Janeiro, or sent climbing the walls of iconic buildings, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Reichstag in Berlin and Winston Churchill's ancestral home, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. Her words scream from marquees and billboards in major urban centres such as Times Square, or are quietly carved into benches and other stoneworks, in dozens more locations. The texts are crafted or chosen carefully and paired with a typeface, hue and/or location that imbue them with layers of complexity beyond the words alone. But before she employed language, Holzer started as a painter. She received her undergraduate degree from Ohio University (after stints at Duke and the University of Chicago), and then pursued her graduate degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she focused on painting.

'I thought it would be good to be Rothko,' she says. 'But I was rescued from my painting struggles by the ISP.' She was accepted into the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program (ISP) in New York, conceived and directed by the artist Ron Clark. It was Clark's infamous critical reading list that led her to abandon the paintbrush.

One of Holzer's most influential series, *Truisms*, comprising more than 250 pithy, sometimes cryptic, often confrontational or humorous one-liners, summarises ideas from works of literature and philosophy on Clark's list. Phrases such as 'ROMANTIC LOVE WAS INVENTED TO MANIPULATE WOMEN', 'WISHING THINGS AWAY IS NOT EFFECTIVE' and 'ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE' were printed in crisp



OUR LIMITED-EDITION COVER BY JENNY HOLZER FEATURES A DETAIL FROM *EPSTEIN 85*, 2019, ONE OF A NEW SERIES OF WATERCOLOURS. LIMITED-EDITION COVERS ARE AVAILABLE TO SUBSCRIBERS. SEE WALLPAPER.COM

OPPOSITE, HOLZER PHOTOGRAPHED IN HER BROOKLYN STUDIO IN AUGUST 2019. IN THE BACKGROUND IS AN IN-PROGRESS PAINTING USING RED GOLD AND PALLADIUM LEAF

black-and-white type, alphabetised and stacked on top of one another. Holzer blasted her *Truisms* around lower Manhattan, pasting the posters over advertisements – slyly replacing the style she was co-opting. 'I secretly wanted to be an artist but I wasn't sure I was an artist,' she recalls. 'I was lucky early on to run into a number of like-minded people who were self-defined as artists or agitators. And we worked to put content, be it language or visual, in front of passers-by in non-art spaces in the hope it could be useful to them.' This group – which included artists Kiki Smith, Tom Otterness, Christy Rupp, Jane Dickson and Walter Robinson – formed Collaborative Projects Inc, also known as Colab. They would stage their own exhibitions and self-fund stores, magazines and large-scale works or happenings.

The group was irreverent towards the art world, adopting a democratic artists-first philosophy, and Holzer's aesthetically pleasing and intellectually curious *Truisms* were influenced by this ethos: 'I was impressed by the content of the reading list, [but] I was exhausted and devastated by the process of reading all the material, so I thought as a service to myself and perhaps to others I could reduce many of the ideas to one sentence. [And] perhaps it was an attempt at tolerance to have all of these conflicting beliefs in one place, ordered only by the alphabet: every thought got a full sentence, and perhaps, by extension, every person who believed that thought would have equal airtime.'

Holzer has always been a collaborator, working with other artists, writers, poets, political scientists and historians. In the early 1980s, she collaborated with one of New York's first female graffiti artists, Lady Pink, weaving charged statements like 'TRUST VISIONS THAT DON'T FEATURE BUCKETS OF BLOOD' and 'MEN DON'T PROTECT YOU ANYMORE' into Lady Pink's brightly coloured paintings. In the early 2000s, Holzer began her long-time collaboration with American poet Henri Cole, which saw one of Cole's erotic sonnets caressing a government building in Venice – emphasising the beautiful and haunting paradoxes that Holzer conjures up for a sometimes-unknowing public. Cole later wrote about this work for *The New Yorker*: 'She projected, with her xenon light, the text of my love poem "Blur", a sonnet sequence, onto the Palazzo Corner della Ca' Granda »



## ‘When I’m by myself, I’m with myself. What could be more ghastly?’

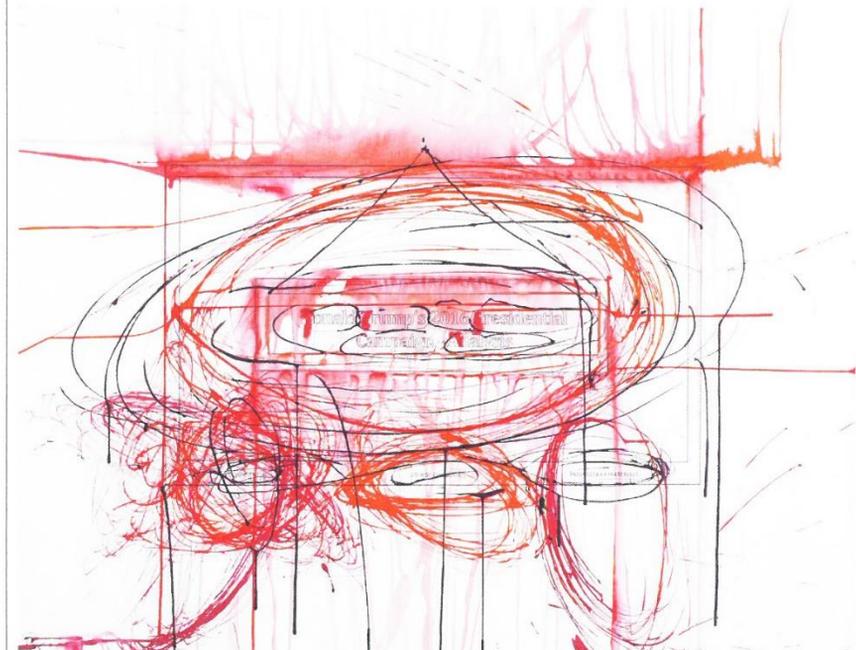
(currently housing the police headquarters). This was a building Venetians feared during the Second World War, so it was scary, and meaningful, and brave of her to scroll my erotic poem across its face.’

At several points during our conversation, Holzer comments on the intimidation of working alone, whether without a prompt (as much of her work has been commissioned) or physically. ‘[Working with others] lets me do so much more than I could manage on my own,’ she explains. ‘When I’m by myself, I’m with myself, and what could be more ghastly?’ (the line could well be plucked from one of her works). Holzer stopped writing her own texts in the early 2000s; she chose instead to be a curator and editor of others’ words and writings, finding phrases that, when paired with her aesthetic constructions, demand attention.

Holzer’s work is aesthetically pleasing, but also implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, political. ‘If you do the kind of work that might possibly effect change, why not?’ she says. Her more overt political actions started in 1984 on the eve of the US presidential election, with *Sign on a Truck*, whose LED light panels displayed her phrases like ‘SAVOR KINDNESS BECAUSE CRUELTY IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE LATER’, as well as messages from her collaborators: ‘WE ARE UNITED IN THE TOLERANCE OF OUR DIFFERENCES’, or simply, ‘VOTE’. Alongside the truck, she had emcees scan the crowd and ask questions like, ‘What candidate do you want?’, ‘What do you hope will happen?’, ‘What do you fear most?’, ‘What absolutely can’t transpire?’ and ‘What must be true for now and for the next generation?’ She employed a similar tactic – using LED

panels on box trucks – in response to the 2018 Parkland, Florida shooting, stationing trucks with phrases like ‘AMERICAN STUDENTS SHOT’, ‘DUCK AND COVER’ and ‘THE PRESIDENT BACKS AWAY’ in front of landmarks, government centres and public plazas in major American cities. In advance of the 2018 midterm elections in the US, she teamed up with activists from March for Our Lives to let loose buses in Los Angeles emblazoned with phrases such as ‘VOTE FOR YOUR LIFE’, ‘PRACTICE NONVIOLENCE’ and ‘YOU MUST ACT THE CLIMATE HAS CHANGED’. And, most recently, a convoy of five trucks with messages from poets, activists, educators, artists and people living with HIV and AIDS was assembled in New York for World AIDS Day, starting at AIDS Memorial Park and winding through the city before parking in Times Square.

Holzer has gotten ahead of political events to provoke action or change, but she has also used political events as fodder. In 2003, she found herself trying to make sense of the US invasion of Iraq. Taking advantage of the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, which allows the public to view declassified documents, she began working with researchers at the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Security Archive to find material. ‘When the US invaded Iraq, I was aghast. I thought it wrong. I thought it immoral. I thought it stupid. So I went looking for content to see if I was wrong, which sent me to various archives to find formerly secret or sensitive documents. And once I began reading thousands of pages, I offered them to others so that they might have a clue too.’ The heavily redacted texts brought her closer to that early ambition of becoming a painter; to her, the documents evoked supremacist compositions, so in 2005 she began printing and painting them on canvases in what would become known as her redaction paintings.





THIS PICTURE, RAGS ON THE STUDIO FLOOR, PART OF HOLZER'S PROCESS WHEN CREATING WATERCOLOURS  
OPPOSITE, DONALD TRUMP'S, 2019 (DETAIL)

It's no coincidence that Holzer's work has been embraced in the internet age, or that her works have been employed by others to shed light on abuses, most recently in the #MeToo movement. With her permission, the *Truism* 'ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE' became the centrepiece statement for the We Are Not Surprised campaign group, an art-world offshoot of #MeToo. In an open letter dated 29 October 2017, thousands of writers, curators and artists shed light on sexual misconduct and sexism in the art world; Holzer's words were incorporated into the letter and became a rallying cry for the group. And shortly after, the musician Lorde appended the entirety of a text from Holzer's late 1970s series *Inflammatory Essays* to her red Valentino gown at the 2018 Grammy Awards. 'I was enormously flattered, and relieved to be of some help,' says Holzer of her work appearing prominently in the context of the movement. Asked if she felt that the gap between male and female artists has narrowed as a result of the movement, Holzer replied: 'It's ridiculous that people still question whether women can be good artists. But I don't see any female artist stopping as a result of the inequity.' Holzer's own art collection features work predominantly by female artists.

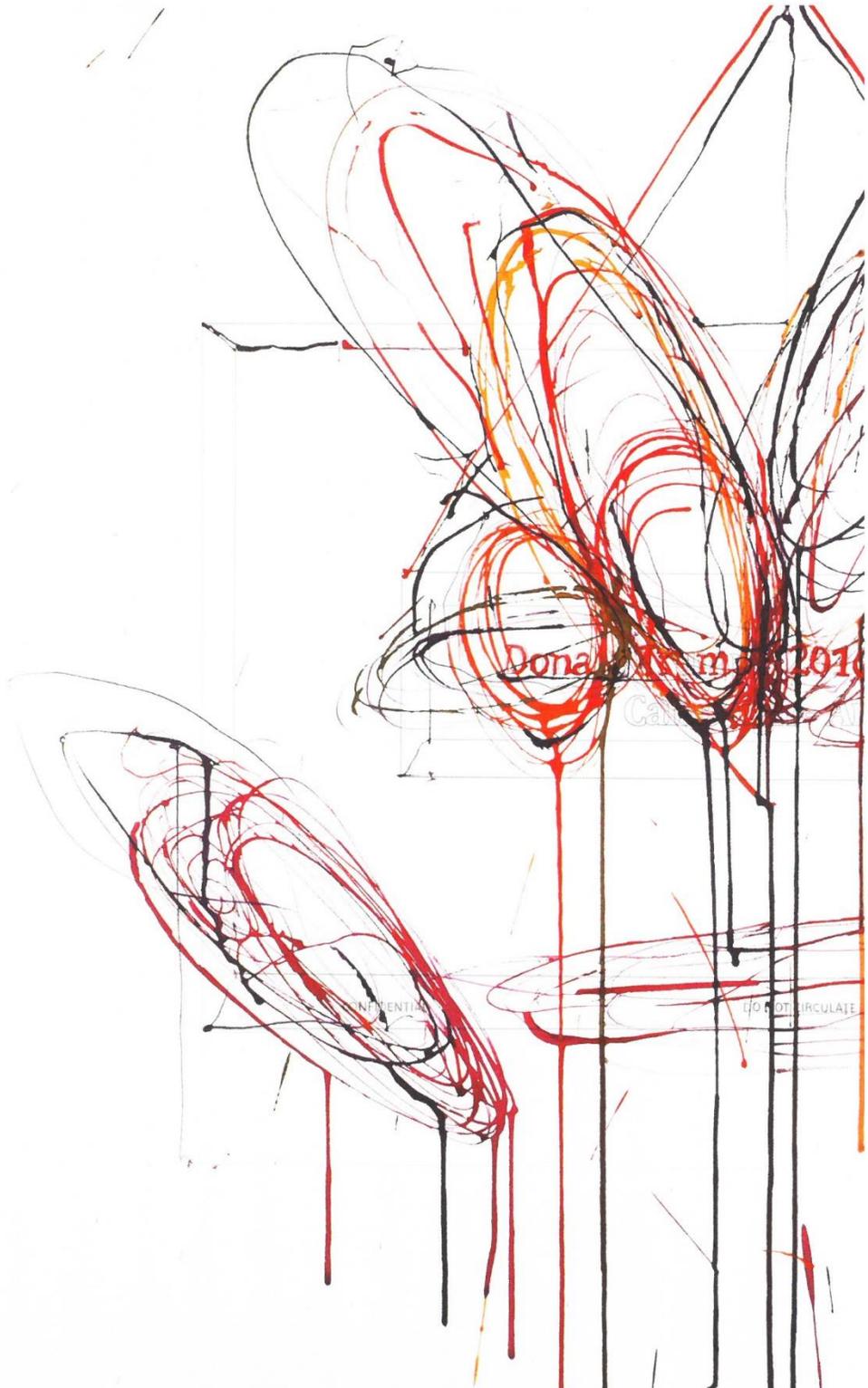
Back inside her studio, staff are diligently working at their computers, researching, requesting permissions and sorting out technical conundrums; tasks that are not always evident from works that glide off a surface so smoothly. The studio is researching and developing

AR technology for future works – on one end of the spectrum – and testing silver and gold leaf and paints for a new series of redaction paintings Holzer has been making from the flurry of documents that have been released during the Trump administration. In a windowless room separated from the main studio space, Holzer shows me the series of watercolours that grace this issue of *Wallpaper*. 'The secret-document research gave me, for the first time, the ability to make largely abstract works,' she explains.

The series uses heavily redacted pages from the Mueller Report, FBI investigations of the Trump Organization, a search and seizure warrant for electronic devices belonging to Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen, PowerPoint presentations from an Israeli private intelligence agency investigated by Robert Mueller, and recently released records on the Jeffrey Epstein sex ring case. Holzer's gestural marks overlay curious phrases supplied by the documents – such as 'Harm to Ongoing Matter', a definition of 'internet troll', and the kicker 'It's just the document' (followed by a fully redacted page) – which almost feel like they were made for a Holzer work.

The series also takes the artist full circle to a medium that she once abandoned. 'I'd noticed that I was getting old and, logically, would die, so I thought, "Well, I never did crack that painting problem, so I might as well try,"' she quips. The smell of paint still wafts in the room. ★

[jennyholzer.com](http://jennyholzer.com)





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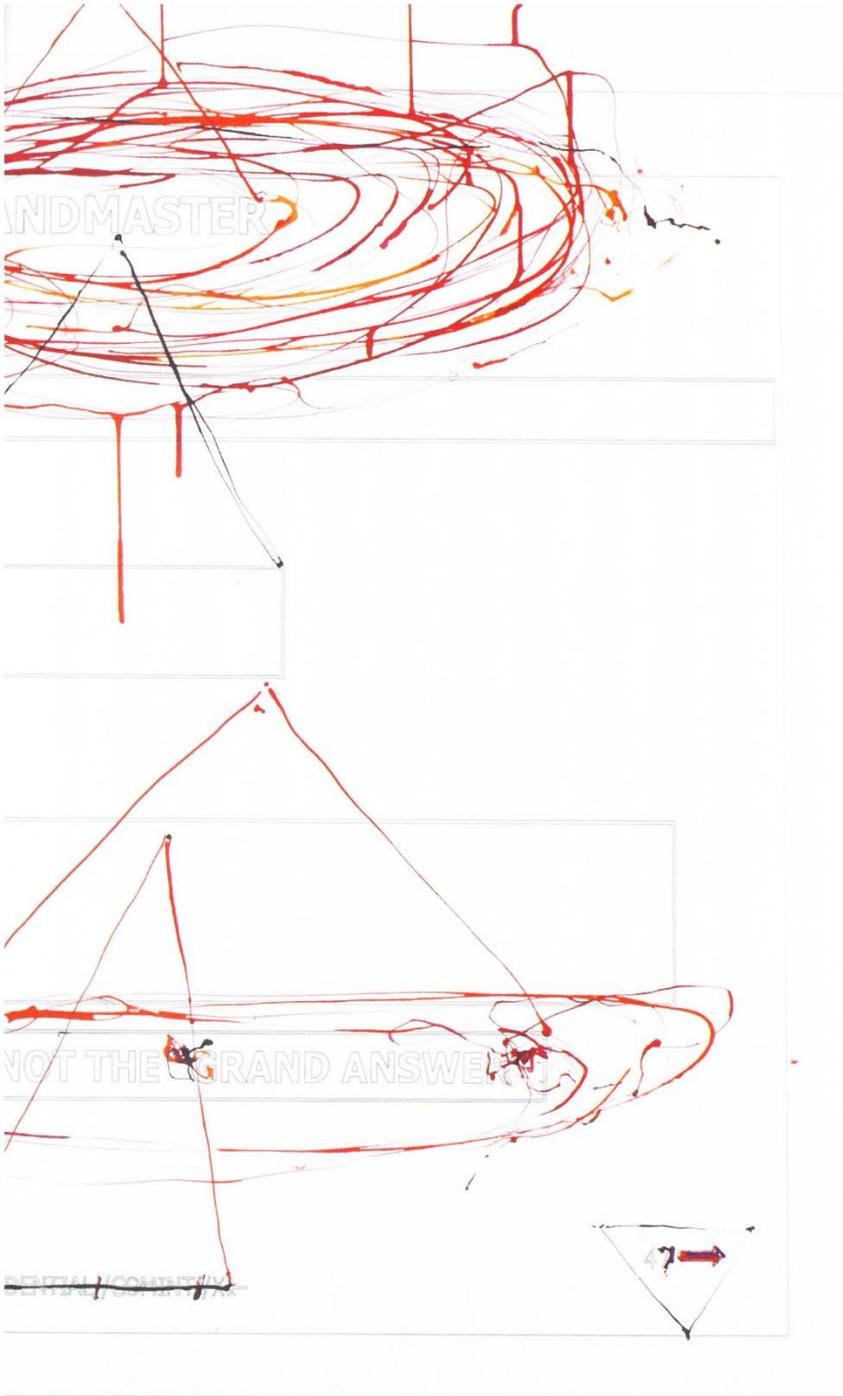
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**King, Rhonda**  
Rhonda King Realty  
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**Richardson, Bill**  
Office Direct  
Soc agent w/Gov  
(Tony)

**Santa Fe Institute**  
Santa Fe, NM

**Singleton, Dr. & Mrs.**  
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**Massage - New Mexico**  
Diana (p)  
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Yoga  
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Sabina (German)

**RM**

**Aboff Shelley**  
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**Cowley Dick**  
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**Domb, Sam**  
New York, NY

