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Jenny Holzer: 'Ready For You When You Are'
Reading Between the Lines
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by Jody Zellen



It comes as no surprise that Jenny Holzer is engaging with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to generate the texts in her dynamic LED artworks. She is best known for language-based pieces, ranging from her *Truisms* (1977-1979) to more recent large-scale paintings, etched marble benches, projected displays and LEDs. Holzer's text-based works draw from political and historical sources, as well as the news media. In recent works, she re-presents de-classified documents as found, transforming these pages into formally elegant and amazingly powerful artworks. For her exhibition, *Ready For You When You Are* she has installed three large-scale robotic LEDs, two of which display AI-generated texts that contrast those on her more subtle oil on linen paintings—covered in gold and platinum leaf—based on reproductions of redacted government documents.

WTF (2022) is a twelve-foot long LED sign that cascades across the vast gallery space swinging in irregular arcs as it moves back and forth along a rail from one side to the other. The animated text that fills the four sides of the thin rectangular sign are culled from tweets Donald Trump shared during his presidency, as well as posts by the “leader” of QAnon. Below this bombastic work are stamped lead and copper plates shaped like Greco-Roman curse tablets—thin sheets of metal incised with texts that call for harm or disruption to their victims. These works are displayed haphazardly on the floor under the path of the menacing LED column. They are also inscribed with fragments from Donald Trump's tweets. While there is much to read, it is not always possible to scrutinize every text, as the installation is more about the accumulation of inanities, lies and dis-information put forth by the then president than any of his individual statements.

In many ways, the exhibition is an extensive research project where Holzer and her team amassed an archive of de-classified government documents and memos on subjects ranging from counterterrorism to the Patriot Act and The US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence. Heavily redacted, Holzer's reproductions present these pages as glowing and reflective rectangles akin to Mark Rothko compositions, yet rather than being washes of paint, Holzer juxtaposes different types and tones of metal leafing, which give the works a constructivist aura. They are formally exquisite, as well as powerfully suggestive compositions that are also filled with occasional words, phrases and sentences that read like concrete poetry.

In two tall rectangular columns, *BAD* and *GOOD* (2023), Holzer used AI to generate the pulsating phrases that illuminate the LED surfaces. For *GOOD*, she instructed ‘the bot’ to generate text about “human and nonhuman, as well as physical and immaterial experiences” that relate to thought and emotions. Selections of the AI's output were sequenced into an animated display that traverses the vertical column as it spins on its axis. Conversely,

in *BAD* the AI drew from extremist content and, according to Holzer, created texts filled with writing about “*secret cabals, corrupt and illegitimate leaders, invasions and coups, deep state plots to eliminate free will, insurrection, information warfare, overbearing federal regulation, fraudulent elections, the deception of climate science, the socialist threat, political correctness, disinformation from the mainstream media, and a coming doomsday or civil war.*” A motorized system spins the column in quirky bursts that are paralleled by pulsing explosions of color that reinforce the sentiments expressed in the AI generated phrases.

Holzer’s work is intentionally political, but also formal. It is beautifully crafted and designed. She excels as a visual artist, creative thinker and problem solver who loads content into her artworks without being overly didactic or pedantic. It is hard to take one’s eyes off pieces like *Sensitive Information* (2023), a smaller-scaled painting where she contrasts shimmering sections of moon and red gold leaf, one covering the background and the other reproducing the lines of redacted text to create a beautiful geometric abstraction with an occasional readable word.

Holzer is interested in what can be read between the lines literally (as in her redacted paintings) and metaphorically when official documents are transformed into works of art. Throughout her fifty-year career, Holzer has continued to mine new territories to create rich and powerful pieces that resonate on multiple levels.

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