

DEVALS

JENNY HOLZER

It's the word I want

18 october – 28 november 2026



Living (detail), DEVALS, installation view, 18 october – 28 november 2026. Courtesy DEVALS & Jenny Holzer.

The word, so to speak, is a public concern of the first.

— Hugo le Ball¹

DEVALS is pleased to present “It’s the Word I Want”, the gallery’s first exhibition dedicated to the American artist Jenny Holzer. Bringing together works from private collections, the exhibition explores several key forms central to the artist’s practice.

Jenny Holzer’s work speaks. It speaks of words and language, of how ideas and discourses are articulated, of formulation, diction, expression, and all that follows. It speaks to you and to us, to our conventions and our conflicts. Rich in meaning yet seemingly neutral, even coolly informational in tone, her work is animated by the paradox of a form that captivates and seduces. Words take on a physical presence and exceed their own boundaries; propositions are tested through the very means by which the medium gives substance to the message.



Jenny Holzer, *The future is stupid* (Selection from the *SURVIVAL SERIES*), 1983-1985
Courtesy DEVALS & Jenny Holzer.

Holzer’s practice emerged at a time when the enduring legacy of Pop Art’s imagery and slogans intersected with a crisis in painting and with new approaches to space, structure, and the very nature of the work of art. Initially trained as a painter, Holzer moved away from the vocabulary of abstract imagery towards what she describes as “pure writing.” In 1977, she began her first series, *Truisms*, comprising concise statements and incisive aphorisms such as “MONEY CREATES TASTE,” “ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE,” and “MOSTLY YOU SHOULD MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.” These statements marked the starting point of an inquiry that continues to this day.

¹ The quotation is taken from the original typescript and reproduced in *Hugo Ball 1886-1986* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1986), p. 155.

Against the backdrop of an increasingly globalised and homogenised world caught in a state of perpetual acceleration, Holzer turns to an array of media to circulate her texts, from the most vernacular to the most monumental: shop windows, billboards, bus shelters, short television spots, Jumbotrons and, later, the vast electronic screens of Times Square, as well as postcards, glasses, T-shirts, and other everyday objects.

Her texts infiltrate the spaces of everyday life, transforming public language into both subject and medium. In doing so, they confront viewers with the subtle mechanisms through which ideas, beliefs, and structures of power are disseminated.²

The exhibition's title, "It's the Word I Want", takes its cue from the words of Hugo Ball in the first Dada manifesto, presented at a literary soirée in July 1916: "I shall be reading poems that are meant to have done with conventional language, no less.... It's the word I want, where it begins, where it originates.... The word, the word outside your domain, your stuffiness (...), your laughable impotence, your stupendous smugness (...). The word, gentlemen! The word, so to speak, is a public concern of the first."³ The same vitality and intellectual impetus animate Jenny Holzer's use of language.

In the early 1980s, Holzer developed two series that extended the concerns of *Truisms* while allowing for greater expressive freedom: *Living* (1980–1982) and *Survival* (1983–1985), to which the two works presented in the exhibition belong. Both bring together brief statements and aphoristic reflections on everyday life, addressing ordinary physical experiences and sensations such as the voice, the mouth, the body, fear, and sexuality. These intimate concerns are interwoven with more explicitly ideological propositions relating to society, political structures, the condition of women, and the dynamics of power.

The plaque *THE FUTURE IS STUPID*, presented in the exhibition, draws on the visual conventions of official signage. The understated metal support, the spare presentation of the inscription, and the apparent neutrality of the format lend the statement an authority that contrasts with its provocative content. In Holzer's work, the use of familiar forms of public and institutional display unsettles the viewer's expectations: the format appears to announce legitimate information or an authoritative statement, only for the text to subvert the conventions it invokes.

² Adapted from *MoMA Highlights* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, first published 1999; revised 2004), p. 279.

³ The quotation is taken from the original typescript and reproduced in Hugo Ball 1886-1986 (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1986), p. 155.

What distinguishes Jenny Holzer's work from that of many of her contemporaries is the enduring force of her statements, whose meanings continue to unfold and provoke questions nearly fifty years after they first appeared. Holzer creates work that is both intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant through the most elementary of means. Her approach bears a close affinity with the procedural clarity and structural economy that characterise the artistic strategies of Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer, and Robert Smithson, all of whom she deeply admires. She locates the work's force in its very conceptual framework, allowing meaning to emerge as much from the logic of the system as from any expressive elaboration.



Jenny Holzer, Abuse of Power Spectacolor billboard, Times Square, 1982
© 2026 Jenny Holzer, Member Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. image © 2026 Lisa Kahane

Jenny Holzer's work turns language into a means of intervention in public space. Her texts have become part of the history of countless places around the world, while her installations continue to expand the possibilities of language in the shared realm, wherever viewers encounter them. The art historian Hal Foster describes this as the continuation of a "verbal anarchy in the street."⁴

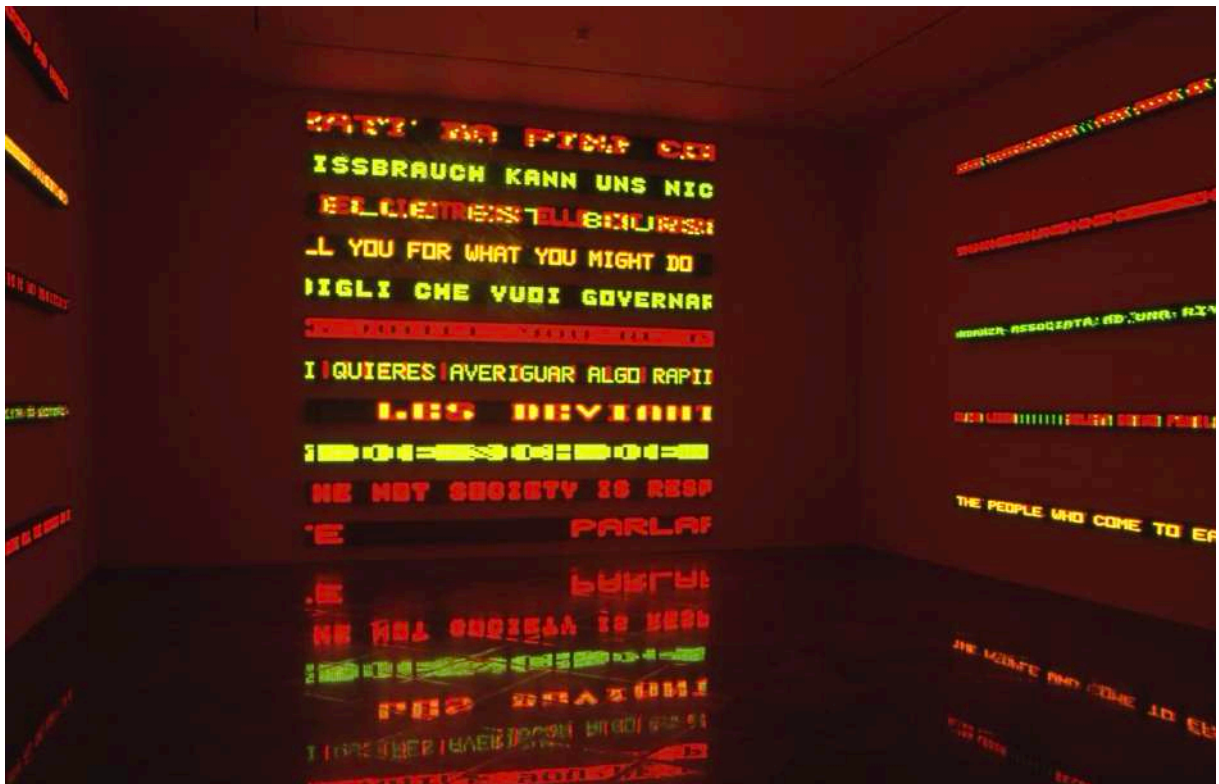
When LED signs first appeared in 1982, Holzer seized upon their potential to dissolve the physical and psychological boundaries between the viewer, the message, and the space through which it circulates. As Marie-Laure Bernadac puts it, these signs enabled Holzer to develop an "epidermal" approach to language.⁵

The electronic sign from the *Living* series presented in the exhibition exemplifies this approach: the text unfolds through light and movement, turning reading into a temporal experience, while the engraved plaque sets against it the stillness of inscription. Suspended between appearance and permanence, the two works reveal how, in Holzer's practice, the medium shapes the message and the word becomes an experience that moves from the intimate to the public manifesto.⁶

⁴ Hal Foster, "Subversive Signs," *Art in America* 70, no. 10 (Novembre 1982), 91

⁵ Jenny Holzer, Marie-Laure Bernadac, Henry-Claude Cousseau, Bertrand Bordier, Anne O'Connor, and Gila Walker, *Jenny Holzer: OH*, ed. CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain (Paris and Bordeaux: Réunion des Musées Nationaux and CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, 2001).

⁶ Here, "manifesto" refers to the public dimension of Holzer's work. See Karl Janssen, "The Duisburger Akzente," introduction of *Die Macht des Wortes = I Can't Tell You: Xenon for Duisburg*, ed. by Jenny Holzer, Söke Dinkla, Friedrich W. Block, Eleonora Louis and Michael Müller (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 15.



Jenny Holzer: *The Venice Installation* (installation view), 1990. Image courtesy The Albright-Knox Art Gallery Digital Assets Collection and Archives, Buffalo, New York & Jenny Holzer.



The future is stupid (Selection from the SURVIVAL SERIES) & Living (detail), DEVALS, installation view, 18 october – 28 november 2026. Courtesy DEVALS & Jenny Holzer.

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