

DEVALS

Biography

I have always wanted to write ecstatic, fantastic things [...] as if I were mad, in some exalted state.

— Jenny Holzer

Jenny Holzer's art begins with a deceptively direct proposition: language is never merely a vehicle for meaning. It arrives already charged with authority, habit, persuasion and desire; its tone can make an assertion sound like common sense, a warning, a confession or a command. Since the late 1970s, Holzer has made these conditions visible by moving words through the systems that ordinarily govern public attention: posters, advertising displays, electronic signs, stone inscriptions, paintings and architectural projections. Her work examines how ideas acquire force, how statements become credible, and how the words encountered in public life enter the private theatre of thought.

Born in Gallipolis, Ohio, on July 29, 1950, Holzer first studied at Duke University from 1968 to 1970 and the University of Chicago from 1970 to 1971. She received a BFA in printmaking and painting from Ohio University in 1972, then an MFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1977. Her early training was in visual art, and painting remained an important point of reference even as she began to question the limits of image-making. During the mid-1970s she moved to New York and took part in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program.

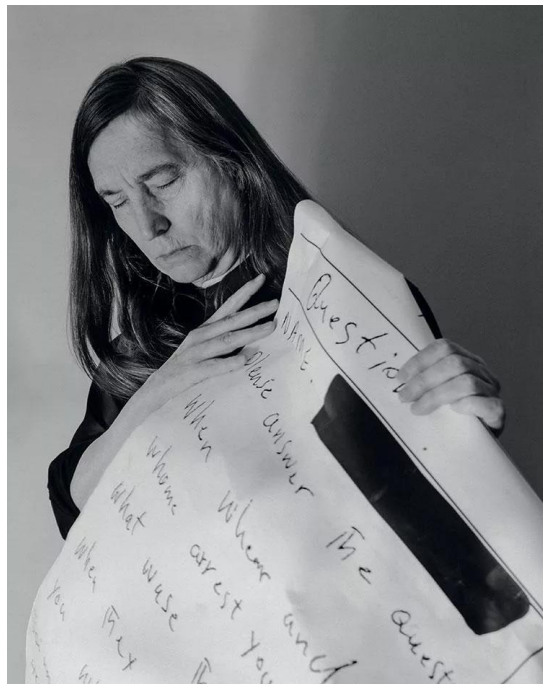


Fig. 1 Jenny Holzer in her Brooklyn studio, 2017. Photograph: Daniel Shea.

Holzer has described this turn as a move towards “pure writing.” In 1977 she began *Truisms* (1977–79), a sequence of terse statements arranged alphabetically and printed on inexpensive sheets of paper. She posted them anonymously on walls and buildings around lower Manhattan, allowing them to enter the city without the protective framing of a gallery or the identifying signature of an author. Their tone borrowed from the declarative authority of maxims, slogans and received wisdom; their content, however, was unstable. Statements could contradict one another, and the voice behind them remained difficult to locate. A phrase might sound conservative, radical, cynical, tender or cruel depending on the reader’s experience and the statements encountered beside it. The work’s authorship was deliberately unsettled: rather than asking the public to receive a personal confession, Holzer staged a collision among the beliefs already circulating in public life.

Detached from an identifiable speaker, each statement appeared at once authoritative and suspect. Viewers had to decide whether a proposition was sincere, ironic, coercive or absurd, and, in doing so, became aware of the assumptions they brought to reading. As Holzer later recalled, she wanted the work to be “stumbled across” in the course of ordinary life, when a passerby was not necessarily prepared for an encounter with art. The street was the social space in which the language of the work could be tested against the habits, distractions and disagreements of its audience.

Holzer’s decision to transfer language onto plaques and durable materials brought another register into play. *Living* appeared on rectangular aluminium and bronze plaques, whose sober geometry recalled civic markers, institutional signs and commemorative inscriptions. The artist described the shift as a move into an “official” format. The material’s promise of permanence and authority could sit uneasily beside a statement that was comic, disquieting, banal or psychologically exposed.

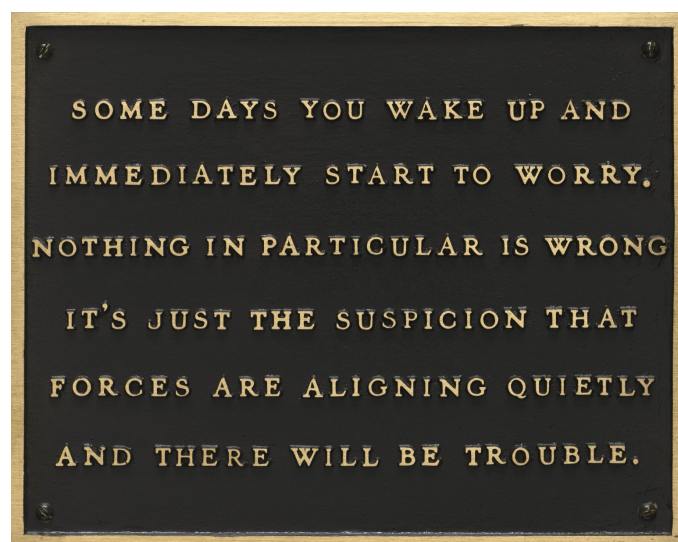


Fig. 2 Jenny Holzer, *Living: Some days you wake up and immediately...*, 1980–82. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art & Jenny Holzer.

In 1982, Holzer brought her texts to the Spectacolor electronic sign in Times Square as part of the public-art programme Messages to the Public. It was a decisive change of scale and medium. The work entered a field already dominated by commercial messages, moving images and the competition for urban attention. Her statements appeared within the same visual economy as advertising, yet resisted its promise of a simple, consumable message. The electronic display gave language light, motion and duration: a phrase emerged across the sign, passed through the viewer's field of vision, and gave way to another. Reading became temporal and bodily, shaped by the pace of the display and by the viewer's position in the city.

The LED sign became one of Holzer's defining media, but her practice has never been reducible to technology. She has placed texts on T-shirts and caps, in prints and paintings, on marble and granite benches, in architectural projections and in installations that respond to the movement of viewers. Her language has travelled across the Louvre, the Guggenheim museums in New York and Bilbao, the New York Public Library, the Arno in Florence and other sites where architecture already carries cultural and political authority. Each setting alters the terms of the encounter.

As Karl Janssen explains, "Jenny Holzer has always attempted to reach more than one audience. By employing multiple viewpoints and an ever-growing array of media, her practice affirms the individual in the face of a society that sees only types. For Holzer, working in public means reclaiming a space for the voice of the individual."¹



Fig. 3 Jenny Holzer, *Abuse of Power*, Spectacolor billboard, Times Square, New York, 1982.

Photograph: Lisa Kahane. Courtesy Jenny Holzer

¹ Karl Janssen, "The Duisburger Akzente," foreword to *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.

In 1990, Holzer represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, where her installation in the American Pavilion received the Golden Lion. The work enveloped visitors in a dense field of language, combining electronic displays with inscriptions and stone elements.

From the 1990s onwards, Holzer's work increasingly engaged with testimony, grief, war and the violence embedded in political history. *Lustmord* (1993–94), developed in response to the atrocities committed during the Bosnian War, addressed sexual violence through texts inscribed on skin, bones and other supports, confronting the viewer with the body as both subject and evidence. Later, her use of declassified United States government documents brought the language of state power into the gallery. In the *Redaction Paintings*, pages bearing censored passages, black bars and blank spaces are overlaid with oil paint and metallic leaf.

What distinguishes Jenny Holzer's work from that of many of her contemporaries who engaged with language lies in the rigor of the system within which she operates. From the outset, Holzer sought to produce work of considerable intellectual and emotional force through the most elementary of means. Her approach bears a close affinity to the procedural clarity and structural economy that informed the practices of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Smithson, artists she greatly admired.

A similar approach can be found in LeWitt's self-reflexive *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968). There, as in Holzer's early series, meaning unfolds through the accumulation of concise propositions arranged in sequence. The list functions as a form in its own right, establishing the conditions through which the work is read and understood. In both cases, the proposition operates simultaneously as statement, material, and method.

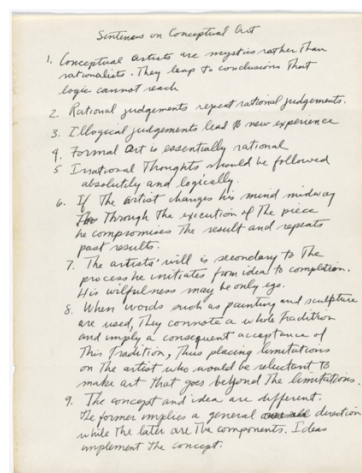


Fig. 4 Sol LeWitt, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, 1968
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
© 2026 Sol LeWitt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Holzer's work has been presented in major museums and public settings internationally. Her exhibitions include the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Tate and numerous institutions across Europe, Asia and the United States. Recent presentations include Jenny Holzer: Light Line at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2024, an exhibition at The Pavilions at Glenstone in 2025, and projects in 2026 at Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves in Porto and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Alongside her early text series, she has continued to develop paintings based on documentary sources, kinetic electronic displays and site-responsive projections. In 2026 she was named the recipient of the Praemium Imperiale in Painting.



Fig. 5 *The future is stupid* (Selection from the *SURVIVAL SERIES*) (detail) & *Living* (detail), DEVALS, installation view, 18 october – 28 november 2026. Courtesy DEVALS & Jenny Holzer.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2026

J'ai vu, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France (20 October 2026–21 February 2027)

Wrong Answers, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal.

2025

Jenny Holzer, The Pavilions, Glenstone, Potomac, Maryland, USA.

2024

Light Line, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA

WORDS, Sprüth Magers, New York, USA.

2023

Jenny Holzer, K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany

READY FOR YOU WHEN YOU ARE, Hauser & Wirth, West Hollywood, California, USA.

2019

Thing Indescribable, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain

Tutta la verità (The Whole Truth), GAMeC, Bergamo, Italy

FOR YOU: Jenny Holzer, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea

Tate Modern, London, UK.

2017

Jenny Holzer, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, USA

SOFTER: Jenny Holzer at Blenheim Palace, Blenheim Art Foundation, Woodstock, UK.

2011

Jenny Holzer, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany.

2009

PROTECT PROTECT, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA;

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland.

2008

PROTECT PROTECT, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

2006

Jenny Holzer XX, MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria.

2004

TRUTH BEFORE POWER, Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria.

2001

Jenny Holzer: OH, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany.

1997

LUSTMORD, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas, USA.

1993

Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany.

1990

Laments 1988–89, Dia Art Foundation, New York, USA

United States Pavilion, XLIV Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.

1989

Jenny Holzer, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA

Dia Art Foundation, New York, USA.

1988

Jenny Holzer: Signs and Benches, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA.

1984

Concentrations 10: Jenny Holzer, Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA.

1983

Investigations 3: Jenny Holzer, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

Essays, Survival Series, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

1981

Living (with Peter Nadin), Le Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France

Eating Friends (with Peter Nadin), Artists Space, New York, USA.

1978

Jenny Holzer Installation, Franklin Furnace, New York, USA

Jenny Holzer Painted Room, P.S.1, New York, USA.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2025

The Art of Food, Long Beach Museum of Art, California, USA

Breaking the Mold: Brooklyn Museum at 200, Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA.

2024

For What It's Worth: Value Systems in Art since 1960, The Warehouse, Dallas, Texas, USA.

2020

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA (selected group presentations).

2019

Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011, MoMA PS1, New York, USA

Artistic License: Six Takes on the Guggenheim Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA.

2017

The American Dream: Pop to the Present, British Museum, London, UK

Age of Terror: Art Since 9/11, Imperial War Museum, London, UK

An Incomplete History of Protest, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.

2015

Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.

2013

Hayward Gallery, London, UK (group exhibition).

2012

Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea

Malba, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

2008

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

The Barbican Centre, London, UK.

2007

Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.

2006

Surprise, Surprise, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK
Singapore Biennale, Singapore.

2005

Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

2000

Around 1984: A Look at Art in the Eighties, MoMA PS1, New York, USA
Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

1996

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Florence Biennale, Florence, Italy.

1990

Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

1987

documenta 8, Kassel, Germany
Sculpture Project Münster, Münster, Germany.

1985

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA
Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

1983

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.

1982

documenta 7, Kassel, Germany.

Selected Public and Institutional Collections

Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, USA

Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas, USA

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Bilbao, Spain

Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., USA

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., USA

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, USA

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA

Tate, London, United Kingdom

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA