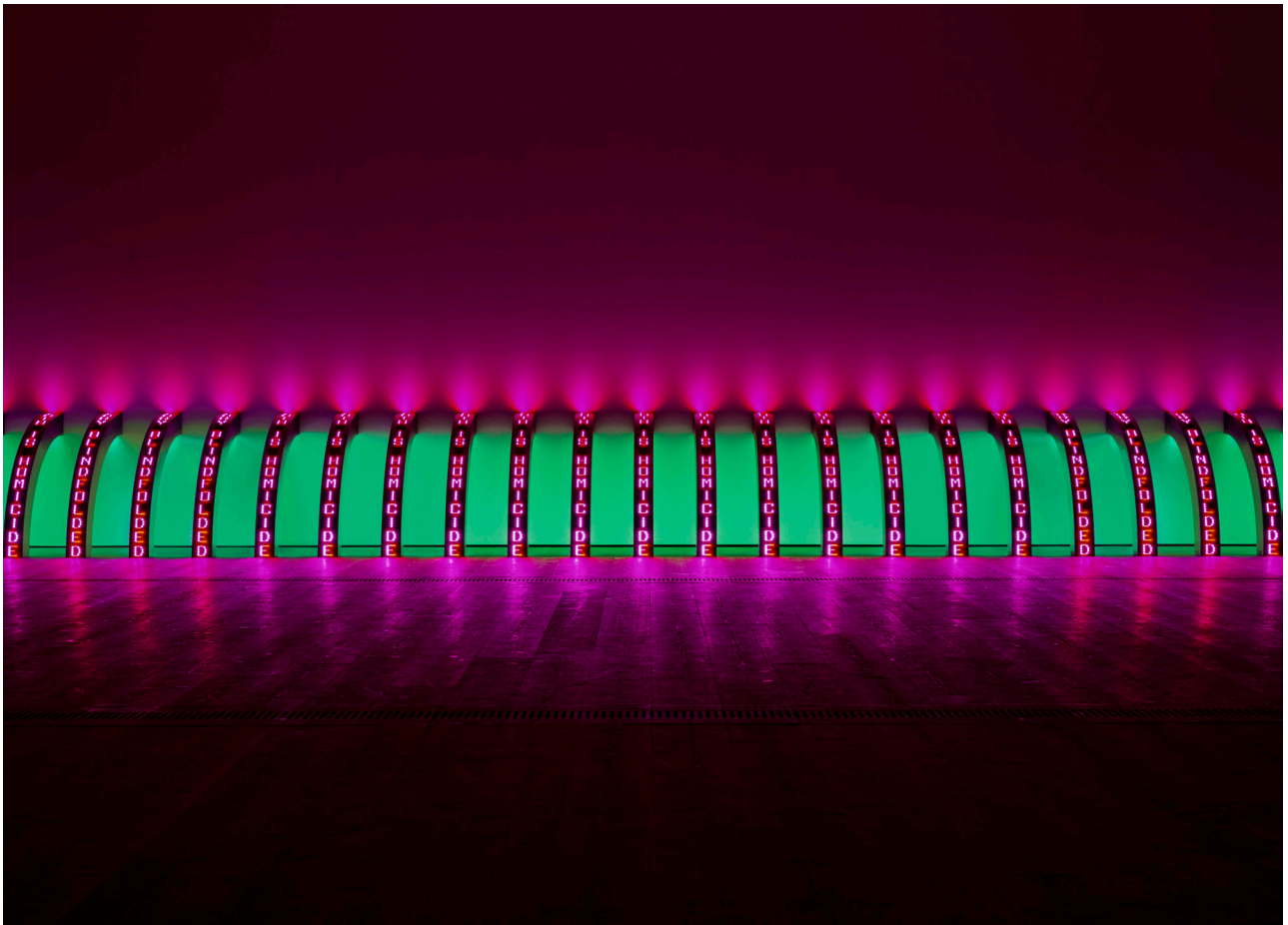


GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening March 22, 2019

Jenny Holzer: Thing Indescribable

Sponsored by

Fundación **BBVA**

Jenny Holzer:
Thing Indescribable

- Dates: March 22 to September 9
 - Curated by: Petra Joos, curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
 - Sponsored by: Fundación BBVA
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- The art of Jenny Holzer centers on language. With stark, incisive text, she addresses fundamental elements of human existence—including power, violence, belief, memory, love, sex, and killing.
 - In Bilbao, visitors will encounter the reflections and ideas that Holzer has articulated throughout her career, presented through a diverse range of installations made especially for the Guggenheim.
 - The artist's aim is to engage the public by creating evocative spaces that ask viewers to consider and potentially define their positions on contentious issues including the global refugee crisis, violence against women, and systemic abuses of power.
 - The exhibition features newly created works, including electronic signs animated by robotic assemblies, paintings, and light projections. Writing by Basque, Spanish, and international poets will be projected onto the museum's facade after dark from March 21 to March 30, creating a series of nighttime public events.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Jenny Holzer: Thing Indescribable*, a survey of work by one of the most outstanding artists of our time. Sponsored by the Fundación BBVA, this exhibition features new works, including a series of light projections on the facade of the museum, which can be viewed each night from March 21 to March 30.

Holzer's work has been part of the museum's fabric since its beginnings, in the form of the imposing *Installation for Bilbao* (1997). Installed in the atrium, the work—commissioned for the museum's opening—is made up of nine luminous columns, each more than 12 meters high. Since last year, this site-specific work has been complemented by *Arno Pair* (2010), a set of engraved stone benches gifted to the museum by the artist.

The reflections, ideas, arguments, and sorrows that Holzer has articulated over a career of more than 40 years will be presented in a variety of distinct installations, each with an evocative social dimension. Her medium—whether emblazoned on a T-shirt, a plaque, a painting, or an LED sign—is language. Distributing text in public space is an integral aspect of her work, starting in the 1970s with posters covertly pasted throughout New York City and continuing in her more recent light projections onto landscape and architecture.

Visitors to this exhibition will experience the evolving scope of the artist's practice, which addresses the fundamental themes of human existence—including power, violence, belief, memory, love, sex, and killing. Her art speaks to a broad and ever-changing public through unflinching, concise, and incisive language. Holzer's aim is to engage the viewer by creating evocative spaces that invite a reaction, a thought, or the taking of a stand, leaving the sometimes anonymous artist in the background.

Gallery 205: *Truisms, Inflammatory Essays, and Laments*

Holzer's *Truisms*, comprising a list of over 250 single-sentence declarations, were written between 1977 and 1979. Resembling existing aphorisms, maxims, and clichés, they bring together a wide range of conflicting theoretical, philosophical, and political positions. Arranged in alphabetical order, the *Truisms* were first shown on anonymous street posters pasted throughout downtown Manhattan and have since appeared on T-shirts, hats, electronic signs, stone floors, and benches. Each sentence distills a potentially difficult and contentious idea into a seemingly straightforward statement. Privileging no single viewpoint, the *Truisms* examine the social construction of beliefs, mores, and truths.

In the artist's words, "With a sign or a poster in the street you have the space of time it takes a person to walk a few feet. With *Truisms*, I offer what will work in seconds, or in slightly longer blocks of time for people who are willing and able to concentrate.... You must remember that viewers are volunteers.... There are sentences that are complete messages, that you can absorb in an instant, but, if someone wants to stay longer, there's an entire series in which these three-second lines are embedded that gets more complicated."

The *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), also on display in this room, were first printed on colored paper and, like the *Truisms*, pasted throughout the public spaces of New York City. This series was influenced by the artist's reading of political, artistic, religious, and other manifestos, and as originally printed in English, each text consisted of 100 words on 20 lines. As in any manifesto, the voice in each essay espouses a strong and specific ideology or point of view, taking a particularly urgent tone. With this series, Holzer invites the reader to consider the necessity of social change, propaganda's potential to manipulate the public, and the conditions that attend revolution.

These posters are arranged for Bilbao in a new wall-spanning configuration and include translations into Basque, Spanish, French, and German.

Inside the room, two stone sarcophagi (one made from red Ankara marble and the other from Nubian black granite) feature sections of Holzer's text *Laments* (1989). Written at the height of the AIDS epidemic, *Laments* chronicles unnecessary death in the first-person voices of unknown and unnamed speakers, including women, men, children, and an infant. A third, more recent sarcophagus made from Breccia Medicea marble features an excerpt from Anna Świrszczyńska's poem "Still Life," a devastating record of the brutality of war, pointing to the continuity of Holzer's concerns and material over the years even as her practice has expanded to include the words of others.

Of her work in stone, Holzer says: "I appreciate and depend on the ephemeral and disembodied—and on solid rocks. I arrived at stone as a material when I started to do gallery shows. I didn't want people to have

to stand to read my texts on electronic signs. I wanted people to be comfortable, and to take time to look. So I thought to provide benches, and it came to me that I could put writing on the seating, and the benches should be stone.

“When words are carved in stone, they can be touched, they can be read with the hand; they might be perceived differently than when on the page. Marble and granite lock time while electronic signs and projections signal differently. Rows of benches might have people imagine waiting rooms, courtrooms, hospitals, and churches, for better and worse.”

Gallery 206: Drawings, benches, painted signs, and electronic signs

This gallery includes six stone benches, a selection of process drawings executed on tracing paper, a range of hand-painted metal signs, and three electronic signs. The selection demonstrates the wide range of media Holzer has harnessed to present and distribute her texts, from the expensive to the ephemeral, the highbrow to the lowbrow, including some that might not initially strike spectators as “art” but instead are more evocative of elements drawn from the experience of everyday life. Like Holzer’s posters, the hand-painted enamel signs take advantage of the influential role language can play in public space. But unlike the posters, the painted signs evoke official modes of display and public address, such as street signs displayed throughout urban and sometimes rural areas. Pointing to the power of institutionalized language, Holzer effectively spreads her text by showing the viewer a contradiction—a text that looks official but unexpectedly says something very different from what an official sign might say.

The black granite benches in this room represent Holzer’s first work in stone. The text, *Under a Rock* (1986), explores the effects of politics on the human body and the manifestations and persistence of pain in an attempt to approach the unsayable. *Under a Rock* was written with stone benches as well as LEDs in mind, and addresses Holzer’s desire to explore the differences between reading fleeting electronic text and tracing one’s hand across letters cut in stone. The use of benches, like the painted signs, again reminds the viewer of institutional mechanisms for presenting text, such as the inscribed benches found in corporate lobbies, museums, and many other public sites. Here, the contrast between the staid medium of the monumental yet mundane stone bench and the potency of the text intensifies the work’s impact.

To produce benches like these before the process became digital, Holzer prepared a drawing in graphite on vellum tracing paper. In these drawings, many of which are displayed in the gallery, the text is laid out carefully before being transferred to the stone surface of the bench, where it is inscribed by master craftspeople. More fragile and ephemeral-looking than the benches, the drawings have their own unique, sometimes eerie beauty when presented as works in their own right.

The electronic signs include selections from two of Holzer’s best-known text series: *Living* (1980–82), which presents a set of quiet observations, directions, and warnings, and *Survival* (1983–85), a cautionary series that questions the ways individuals respond to their political, social, physical, psychological, and personal environments. Unlike the *Inflammatory Essays*, the *Living* texts are written in a matter-of-fact, journalistic style suited to descriptions of everyday life. They comment on how the individual negotiates landscapes, persons, rules, expectations, desires, fears, other bodies, and the self. The tone of *Survival* is more urgent than that of *Living*. Perhaps the best known statement from the series is “PROTECT ME

FROM WHAT I WANT.” *Survival* was the first of Holzer’s texts to be written especially for electronic signs. Originally displayed on large electronic billboards in Times Square and other urban centers, the sentences are short and pointed so as to be easily accessible to passersby.

Gallery 207: The unfulfilled promise of the Arab Spring

This gallery presents a new robotic LED work, *THERE WAS A WAR*. A site-specific installation of stone benches, a few upended, circles the LED in a display of chaos and destruction. Curved benches from the museum’s permanent collection are engraved with lines from Holzer’s 2001 text *Arno*, a sometimes elegiac meditation on pain, intimacy, and absence. The installation also includes benches inscribed with *Erlauf* (1995), a body of text commissioned as a peace monument in Austria, which treats war as an authorless compendium of fractured memories, events, disruptions, and questions. Also included are benches with texts from *Under a Rock*, *Living*, and *Survival*.

THERE WAS A WAR is a four-sided vertical LED sign that swings from a robotic assembly suspended from the gallery’s recessed ceiling. For this work, Holzer sought out information on the international refugee crisis and the devastating humanitarian consequences of Syria’s ongoing civil war, including 131 individual eyewitness accounts collected between 2011 and 2016 by the organizations Human Rights Watch and Save the Children. Interviews with civilian protesters arrested, detained, and tortured by the Assad regime, and with defectors from the Syrian military and intelligence agencies offer insight into the unfulfilled promise of Syria’s Arab Spring. Statements from Syrian children and their parents give voice to the many families who have fled their homes over the past eight years and now struggle with daunting challenges.

Gallery 209: Sexual violence

This room houses another new robotized LED installation, *I WOKE UP NAKED*, displaying first-person testimonies from survivors of sexual assault and rape. The accounts, presented in English, Spanish, and Basque, are derived from interviews with aid workers and nonprofit organizations including Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, Protect Our Defenders, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as texts from *Voces para ver / Ikusteko ahotsak*, a book of testimonies published by the Department of Employment, Social Inclusion and Equality of the Provincial Council of Biscay. The electronic sign traverses the length of the gallery on a track system, its movement sometimes processional and at other times uncontrolled and startling.

I WOKE UP NAKED extends toward *Purple* (2008), a 19-element array of curved LED signs reminiscent of human ribs, which is set in motion for the first time in this exhibition. *Purple* displays another of Holzer’s texts, *Lustmord* (1993–95), in English and Spanish. Prompted by the instrumentalized use of rape as a weapon of war in the former Yugoslavia, *Lustmord* takes its title from a German word that denotes a murder committed for sexual pleasure. Written from the perspectives of perpetrators, victims, and observers of violent sexual encounters or their aftermath, the texts in this series record sexual violence in its many manifestations.

Gallery 208: The abuses of war

Hanging from the ceiling of this room is *SWORN STATEMENT*, a new electronic work that spotlights the impunity sometimes enjoyed by American military personnel and contractors in the face of accusations of systematic abuse of detainees in the war in Afghanistan. In 2004, the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) launched an inquiry after credible reports of abuse at the Gardez firebase were brought to light in a series of articles published by American news outlets. The CID tracked down and interviewed Afghan witnesses, doctors, and U.S. soldiers and veterans who had been deployed to Afghanistan, both at Gardez and at other facilities where the alleged abuse occurred. After hearing the harrowing Afghan accounts, the CID investigators ultimately accepted the U.S. soldiers' denials as credible. *SWORN STATEMENT* includes interviews from the investigators' reports.

Ram (2016), an LED sign measuring over seven meters long, represents one of Holzer's most recent explorations into the relationship between physical structure and language. Words scroll along each face of the horizontal sign at varying speeds, periodically flashing, blacking out, and breaking into a rainbow spectrum that casts a toxic glow on the surrounding floor. The differing speeds evoke speech patterns, which Holzer describes as "the kinetic equivalent to inflection in the voice." With the aid of robotics, *Ram* moves back and forth and rotates from side to side, suggesting the motion of military battering rams or sex.

Ram holds a selection of poems from the book *Building the Barricade* by Anna Świrszczyńska, whose work is also featured in Gallery 205. A Polish writer, Świrszczyńska joined the resistance during World War II and ministered to wounded and dying partisans as a volunteer nurse during the Warsaw Uprising. She wrote about her experience 30 years later, publishing her cycle of 100 poems in 1974. Selections from *Building the Barricade* will be presented in Holzer's projections onto the museum's facade and the nearby river.

Ram and *SWORN STATEMENT* are shown alongside installations of ethically sourced human bones. Holzer began incorporating human bones into her work in the early 1990s, and sometimes presents them encircled with silver bands engraved with the desperate words of *Lustmord*. The bones are often arranged on a wooden table, but for her exhibition in Bilbao, Holzer has created a site-responsive display directly on the floor.

Gallery 203: Paintings

Jenny Holzer: Thing Indescribable collects a group of paintings from Holzer's ongoing series of Redaction Paintings. Some are hung in orderly rows along the walls, contrasting with others placed in seemingly haphazard configurations on the floor. Since the early 2000s, Holzer has researched U.S. government documents released to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Working in oil on linen, the artist reproduces declassified but heavily redacted documents, including many from the military. Her sources include Bush-era material dating from the beginning of U.S. military initiatives in Afghanistan and Iraq and FBI documents concerning terrorist threats and cyber counterintelligence. New paintings, exhibited for the first time in Bilbao, depict recently released government documents related to Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller's investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Each document is digitally enlarged and its content

meticulously traced to faithfully reproduce both the text and the traces of censorship. Color and metal leafing are applied to the surfaces of certain canvases, at times intensifying the content and at other times pulling away from it, producing images that invite visitors to read as well as look.

Gallery 204: Watercolors

On display in this room are watercolors realized on the vellum process drawings used to transfer declassified documents to linen for Holzer's Redaction Paintings. In the artist's words: "I'll smudge select drawings to make them more graphic, and I'll smear then paint others. Watercolor demands quick decisions and fast action for good wet-on-wet effects, and that's more exciting than writing e-mail, my too-typical activity. I don't know that these are Abstract Expressionist in their look and materials, as I show more veils than slashes, for example, but I hope that the end result is expressive. We might declare the drips Expressionist, and that would make me happy." The watercolors offer a tactile encounter with the content often hidden behind the U.S. government's redactions.

Gallery 202: Inspiration room

Jenny Holzer has described drawing as a form of "thinking and knowing." Shown in this gallery are key artists who have inspired Holzer or caught her eye over the years, including Louise Bourgeois, Paul Thek, Alice Neel, and George Grosz. Some were friendly with Holzer. Most of the displayed works are taken from Holzer's modest drawing collection, though some come from other repositories, including the Paul Thek Estate in New York and the Louise Bourgeois Studio in Paris. The room reveals affinities, precedents, and a range of models for treating the same set of issues—violence, justice, beauty, love, power, and the abuse of power—that have preoccupied Holzer for decades.

BIO

For more than 40 years, Jenny Holzer has presented her astringent ideas, arguments, and sorrows in public places and international exhibitions, including 7 World Trade Center, the Venice Biennale, the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Bilbao, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Holzer received the Leone d'Oro at the Venice Biennale in 1990, the World Economic Forum's Crystal Award in 1996, and the U.S. State Department's International Medal of Arts in 2017. She holds honorary degrees from Williams College, the Rhode Island School of Design, The New School, and Smith College. She lives and works in New York.

DIDAKTIKA

The museum presents a number of displays and programs to help visitors familiarize themselves with the contents and concepts of its exhibitions.

For this show, the didactic space will place Jenny Holzer's work in its cultural context from the late 1970s to the present day through a selection of objects generated throughout her practice, ranging from early drawings to functional objects like engraved jewelry, dinnerware, pantyhose, T-shirts, and condoms. Audiovisual material from the artist's archives will sample early street art and collaborative work and

provide documentation of more recent projects in the public sphere. The space will also feature excerpts from a documentary film about her career.

Some of the programs and activities complementing the exhibition are listed below.

***Truisms and Inflammatory Essays* open to participation**

The *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays* were written by Holzer in the late 1970s and early 1980s and were originally pasted anonymously throughout the streets of New York City. Today, Gallery 205 presents these posters in English, Spanish, Basque, French, and German. Holzer invites participants in the museum's programs to interact with the installation by writing their own responses directly on the posters.

Additional information on the museum website as of March 22.

Shared Reflections

In these unique visits, sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre, museum professionals share information and interesting details about the exhibition.

- Curatorial Visit (March 27). Led by Petra Joos, curator of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and of the exhibition.
- Key Concepts (April 3). Led by Marta Arzak, the museum's associate director of education and interpretation.

Creative Session: Augmented Reality (April 5 and 12)

Jenny Holzer uses different mediums, some employing state-of-the-art technology, including augmented reality. In the 1990s, she produced a number of installations with a significant digital component, and more recently, in 2017, the app *OF WAR*, created for her show *SOFTER* at the Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire (UK), featured virtual content.

This two-session workshop led by professionals from the sector will discuss the bases of this kind of design.

Creative Session: Fashionable Words (May 3 and 10)

Jenny Holzer silkscreened some of her *Truisms* onto T-shirts and stockings. In this two-session workshop led by artist and designer Miriam Ocariz, design and language will make a perfect tandem.

Screening of *About Jenny Holzer* (April 25)

A film by Claudia Müller about artist Jenny Holzer shot in close collaboration with the artist over the course of 10 years. The film premiered in 2011.

Cover image:

Purple, 2008

20 LED signs with blue, green, red & white diodes

Each element: 148.1 x 13.3 x 14.8 cm

Text: U.S. government documents

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Collin LaFleche

For more information:

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Complete information about the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at www.guggenheim-bilbao.es (press room).

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At the press area (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en) you can register and download high resolution images and videos featuring the exhibitions and the building. Sign in to get access. If you are already a user, log in here (you need your username and password).

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- Only in connection with articles on the exhibition.
- In full, with no cropping, overprinting, or manipulation.
- Should not be used on covers or for any promotional purposes without prior written authorization from the rights holder.

For more information, please get in touch with the Press Room of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by calling +34 944 35 90 08 or by writing to media@guggenheim-bilbao.es.

Jenny Holzer
 from *Truisms* (1977–79), 1977
 Courtesy the artist
 © 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP
 Photo: Jenny Holzer



Jenny Holzer
 from *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), 1982
 Courtesy the artist
 © 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP
 Photo: Jenny Holzer



Jenny Holzer
 from *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), 1983
 Courtesy the artist
 © 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP
 Photo: Jenny Holzer



Jenny Holzer

Survival: Men don't protect..., 1989

Indian Red granite bench

43.2 x 106.7 x 45.7 cm

Text: *Survival*, 1983–85

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Larry Lame



Jenny Holzer

Living: More people will be building hiding places..., 1989

Bethel White granite bench

43.2 x 91.5 x 45.7 cm

Text: *Living*, 1980–82

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: David Heald



Jenny Holzer

Memorial Bench II: Eye cut by flying glass..., 1996 (detail)

Indiana Buff limestone bench

44.1 x 182.9 x 61 cm

Text: *Erlauf*, 1995

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Erik Sumption



Jenny Holzer

Living: Affluent college-bound students..., 1998

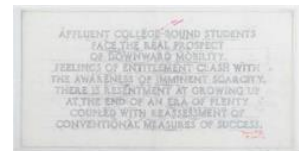
Carbon drawing on tracing paper

45.7 x 91.1 cm

Text: *Living*, 1980–82

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP



Jenny Holzer

Lustmord Table, 1994 (detail)

Human bones, engraved silver bands, wooden table

74.3 x 177.8 x 113.7

Courtesy Sprüth Magers

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Ken Adlard



Jenny Holzer

All Fall, 2012 (detail)

5 LED signs with blue, green, red & yellow diodes

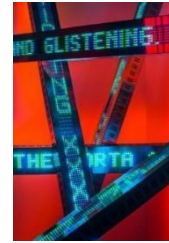
262.8 x 241.5 x 262.8 cm

Text: U.S. government documents

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Joshua White / JW Pictures



Jenny Holzer

Purple, 2008

20 LED signs with blue, green, red & white diodes

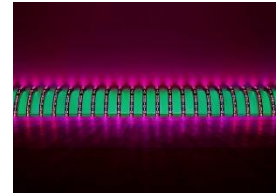
Each element: 148.1 x 13.3 x 14.8 cm

Text: U.S. government documents

Courtesy the artist

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Collin LaFleche



Jenny Holzer

Survival, 1989

LED sign with red diodes

13.3 x 138.6 x 7.6 cm

Text: *Survival*, 1983–85

Courtesy Sprüth Magers

© 2019 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY / VEGAP

Photo: Erik Sumption



Jenny Holzer

Ram, 2016

LED sign with blue, green & red diodes

14 x 762 x 14 cm

Text: "Two Faces the Color of Iron" from *Building the Barricade* by Anna Świrszczyńska, English translation by Piotr Florczyk, © 2016 by Tavern Books. Used with permission of Ludmiła Adamska-Orłowska and the translator.

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

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Photo: Collin LaFleche



Portrait of Jenny Holzer

Photo: Nanda Lanfranco

