

Jenny Holzer awakens disturbing awareness in text art

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Renowned American conceptual artist Jenny Holzer brings her provocative text work, for the first time in the Korean language. The pieces will show at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA) in "MMCA Commissioned Project FOR YOU: Jenny Holzer" through July 5, 2020.

MMCA director Youn Bum-mo said this commissioned project represents the artist's first engagement with the Korean language presented in an institutional setting.

"I hope that Holzer's newly commissioned works for the museum will give visitors, both Korean and foreign, new insights into contemporary art and draw the attention of the world," Youn said.

The project consists of two parts — posters and LED art piece "FOR YOU" at Seoul Box in MMCA Seoul, and permanent engravings of 11 selected texts from the artist's "Truisms" on the stone bridge of MMCA Gwacheon.

Holzer said it was her desire to be an abstract painter, but she failed miserably.

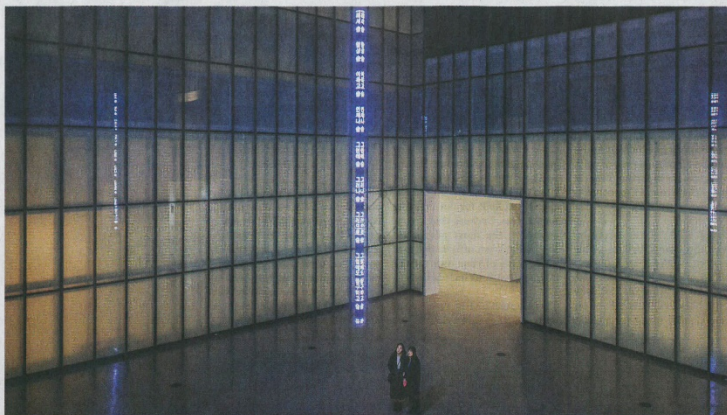
"Simultaneously, I wanted to have very explicit content in my work and I couldn't reconcile these two things. So in despair and hope, I went to language because when you have a good day, language can be used to communicate many things very directly and that was how I came to be" the artist said.

On the wall of the lobby at MMCA Seoul are colorful posters full of text from "Inflammatory Essays" (1979-82) and white posters covered in extracts from "Truisms" (1977-79).

To translate her work into Korean for the first time, Holzer collaborated with novelist and translator Han Yu-jo and typography designer Ahn Sang-soo of the Paju Typography Institute.

"It was difficult to translate those implicative and intentional phrases into Korean. So we went through a co-translation process to best convey the artist's intention," curator Lee Hyeon-ju said.

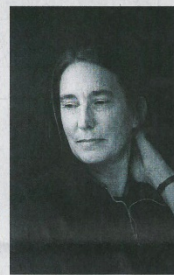
The English and Korean versions of the "Truisms" posters are arranged in different orders — in English and Korean alphabetical order, respectively. "Since they do not match each other in the same order, viewers can



Jenny Holzer's LED artwork "FOR YOU" installed at MMCA Seoul features texts by five female writers — Svetlana Alexievich, Hawzhin Azeez, Han Kang, Kim Hye-soon and Emily Jungmin Yoon. Courtesy of MMCA



Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essays" (1979-82) and "Truisms" (1977-79)



Jenny Holzer

read between the lines from different perspectives in each language," Lee said.

While Holzer's earlier works from the 1970s and 1980s feature her own writings, or truisms, she borrowed historical documents and other writers' words for her later pieces.

"I tried to write myself a little bit and then constructively turned to writings by professional authors and these I gather and try to determine how best to represent," Holzer said. In "FOR YOU" her LED installation,

Holzer selected texts from five female writers — Svetlana Alexievich, Hawzhin Azeez, Han Kang, Kim Hye-soon and Emily Jungmin Yoon. "I tend to believe that one should address the most difficult things because these can hurt us. I tend to present things that worry me and other people. I asked around to see what was central here as best I could and what has been a concern of mine for a long time — that being what happens to women. That's why I went to it. I wish it weren't a subject

for now," Holzer said.

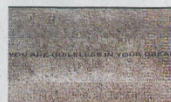
The moving texts include English and Korean excerpts from Kim's poem "Asphyxiation" from "Autobiography of Death," Han's poem "Winter through a Mirror 11," Yoon's "A Cruelty Special to Our Species," Alexievich's "The Unwomanly Face of War" and blog posts of Azeez, a Kurdish activist and poet.

"I was tremendously lucky to have worked with a number of others, foremost three Korean writers. I won't speak too much about

their work, because I worry about me mistakenly characterizing it. But I can say that the text supports the work — the content is of paramount importance."

The artist also emphasized that the piece was made specifically for the Seoul Box space.

"The space is quite generous in providing any number of reflections at night. Please may I invite you to come at night for I like it even more. The text has hours and hours of special custom programming, not only



A selected text from Jenny Holzer's "Truisms" engraved on the stone bridge of MMCA Gwacheon. Courtesy of MMCA

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how the text is presented but for how the sign itself moves," Holzer explained.

At MMCA Gwacheon, 11 select text are engraved on the stone bridge, in English and Korean. The carved sentences are the ones "she doesn't hate" after decades, according to Holzer.

"I offer ones that could possibly interest people and the subject varies. It is quiet and peaceful there and the texts are meant to be encountered by accident," Holzer said.

Holzer worked in Korean language despite her not knowing it at all because it is only sensible to use the language of the country for public art piece.

"I must confess my profound ignorance about Korean characters. I can say that I like how they are different from English alphabet that they seem to represent an image," she said.

"What was scary is my ignorance. I had to run to any number of experts to find the proper fonts — not only to function in electronics but to have the right feeling for these text. I routinely lean on people who know what they are doing in order to work as broadly as my studio needs to. So I'm glad to be a little less ignorant now."