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ART & DESIGN

Taking It to the Street With Jenny Holzer

By Brett Sokol

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Some of Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essays," which will be at Alden Projects in January. Credit Jenny Holzer/Alden Projects

Set aside your image of Jenny Holzer, the reigning art-world star whose popularized aphorisms — such as “Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise” and “Protect Me From What I Want” — have been emblazoned on marble benches and massive LED screens from the Guggenheim Museum to the Venice Biennale. Instead, meet Jenny Holzer, urban guerilla-style anonymous artist. That’s the thrust of a new show at [Alden Projects](#) in Manhattan, opening on Jan. 13 and featuring more than 100 of the “Truisms” and “Inflammatory Essays” posters that Ms. Holzer began creating in 1977 and then proceeded to plaster all over New York City in the dead of the night.

The work quickly garnered a cult following. Filled with short strings of provocative political dictums, and composed in all caps to resemble newspaper headlines, the posters could read like Maoist screeds, right-wing rants or thoughtful philosophizing, depending upon where one started or stopped.

**REJOICE! OUR TIMES ARE INTOLERABLE.
TAKE COURAGE, FOR THE WORST IS A
HARBINGER OF THE BEST. ONLY
DIRE CIRCUMSTANCE CAN PRECIPITATE
THE OVERTHROW OF OPPRESSORS. THE
OLD AND CORRUPT MUST BE LAID TO
WASTE BEFORE THE JUST CAN TRIUMPH.
OPPOSITION IDENTIFIES AND
ISOLATES THE ENEMY. CONFLICT
OF INTEREST MUST BE SEEN FOR
WHAT IT IS. DO NOT SUPPORT
PALLIATIVE GESTURES; THEY CONFUSE
THE PEOPLE AND DELAY THE INEVITABLE
CONFRONTATION. DELAY IS NOT
TOLERATED FOR IT JEOPARDIZES THE
WELL-BEING OF THE MAJORITY.
CONTRADICTION WILL BE HEIGHTENED.
THE RECKONING WILL BE HASTENED BY
THE STAGING OF SEED DISTURBANCES.
THE APOCALYPSE WILL BLOSSOM.**

“Untitled (Rejoice!),” by Jenny Holzer. Credit Jenny Holzer/Alden Projects

To Todd Alden, the director of Alden Projects, on the Lower East Side, the show is a needed response in the wake of a presidential election in which the news media was as much a subject of heated debate as any of the candidates’ positions. “It’s an important time for people to examine what’s implicit in Holzer’s project: questioning the way ‘the truth’ is generated, questioning the whole premise of Enlightenment culture, which is that if everyone reads, the culture will inevitably improve,” Mr. Alden said. Equally important was Ms. Holzer’s “bypassing the conventions of galleries and museums and taking conceptual art to the street.” It was a lesson he hopes today’s activist-minded artists will take to heart.

In keeping with the spirit behind these posters’ origins, Mr. Alden explained that he didn’t ask for permission from Ms. Holzer or her gallery, Cheim & Read, to stage the show, which runs through Feb. 12. The posters, most of which are for sale, come from his own collection of art ephemera, many purchased in the late 1970s and early ’80s when leftovers from Ms. Holzer’s street campaigns would be sold at shops like Printed Matter, 10 posters for \$10. (These posters can now fetch over \$1,000 each.)

Ms. Holzer said she was intrigued by the exhibition of her earliest work and had no intentions of stopping it. Her original aim in 1977 was fairly modest. Then attending the Whitney Museum of American Art’s

Independent Study Program, she said, she was so daunted by the director Ron Clark's reading list that she rewrote it as one-liners which became posters. "I wanted to see if these ideas — as contradictory as they could be — might be capable of stopping people in their tracks and having them muse over them," she recalled. Passers-by began writing responses on the posters — call it proto-social media. "There was some voting, pre-Facebook 'likes'," Ms. Holzer said. "People would star things or underline parts. Sometimes I would come back around and stand close enough to listen to people argue over them."

Ms. Holzer's message to young artists seeing this work for the first time is: "Do it yourself, do it now," she said, noting the enduring visual power of a simple run of street posters. "It's not hard and I was only arrested once," putting up posters at 3 a.m. in SoHo, she added, and chuckled. Tossed into the back of a police car, "I launched into a rambling explanation and they decided I was not worth keeping," she said. "I was dripping with so much wheat paste they probably didn't want me on their back seat much longer."

"REJOICE! OUR TIMES ARE INTOLERABLE: Jenny Holzer's Street Posters 1977-1982" runs at Alden Projects from Jan. 13 through Feb. 12; www.aldenprojects.com.

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