

Object Lessons

Jenny Holzer AND Philippe Starck BRING A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO THE PHRASE "THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT".

WORDS: Iain Stiller
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BARBERISOTTO

The advent of digitally smart objects raises the intriguing question: now that things can talk to us, what should they say?

One answer comes from HOOO!!! and HAAA!!! – two lamps from Flos that confront us, in luminous LED messages rather than the spoken word, with the enigmatic texts of conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. “Protect Me From What I Want” has been on my car in Paris for the last 20 years,” says Philippe Starck, who designed the Baccarat crystal lamps that now convey this and other epigrammatic statements by Holzer. “That particular phrase is the message of the whole product,” adds Piero Gandini, president and CEO of Flos. “The lamps are saying that luxury for its own sake doesn’t make sense. They are not decadent; they have a courageous concept.”

The collaboration involving Flos, Baccarat, Jenny Holzer and myself comes from a shared way of thinking, vision and point of view, and from a strong desire to combine seemingly incompatible elements in order to create a tension that would give birth to something new,” says Starck. “It took us four years. It was an impossible love that became possible.”

Having these exquisitely elegant hand-cut crystal objects make statements such as ‘Decadence Can Be An End In Itself’ and ‘Abuse Of Power Comes As No Surprise’ lends them an ironic resonance that removes them from the banal world of luxury goods to which such traditionally crafted items all too often belong, according to Gandini. In limited editions of nine for the HAAA!!! (Hoor model and 49 for the HOOO!!! table model), the lamps are necessarily expensive because of the difficulty of production, he says, and not because of any predetermined exclusivity.

Switched on for the first time at the Salone del Mobile in Milan earlier this year, HOOO!!! and HAAA!!! deliver their wordy conundrums via a white LED display that runs through the centre of the lamp’s crystal bases. Holzer selected the messages from her texts, a collection of brief but provocative aphorisms that have made her one of the most widely recognized, and imitated, of all contemporary artists. Holzer has explained her choice of digital technology as ‘a conscious decision to work with electronic displays that are used for news, advertising, and the financial markets – to insist that despised subjects must have an equal prominence.’ The juxtaposition of a prosaic ‘official’ technology with unofficial popular wisdom is what lends her work its enduring relevance.

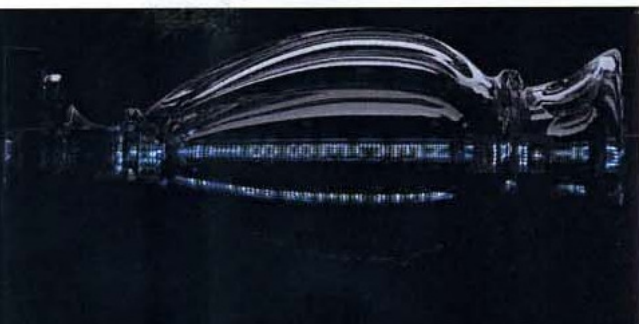
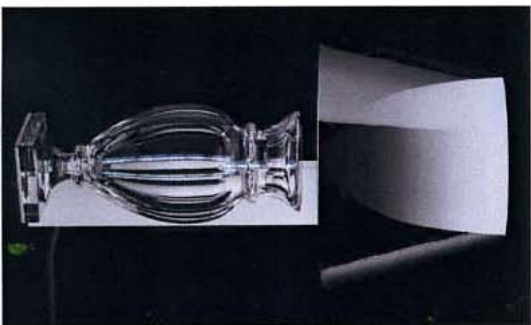
Perhaps only a design heavyweight like Starck could create an object with enough personality to resist being completely overpowered by Holzer’s words. The Baccarat lamps succeed in offsetting the weighty conceptual art content with a contemporary, Starckian take on the classical language of form. Starck exaggerates the shape of the designs to neatly frame their LED messages, while Moritz Waldemeyer provides the seamless electronic design.

“This project started by chance because Philippe Starck was working at Baccarat,” says Gandini. “It developed slowly, and it was hugely challenging. I’m very grateful to Jenny Holzer and to Brigitte Bury at Baccarat for

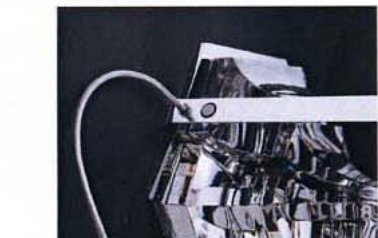
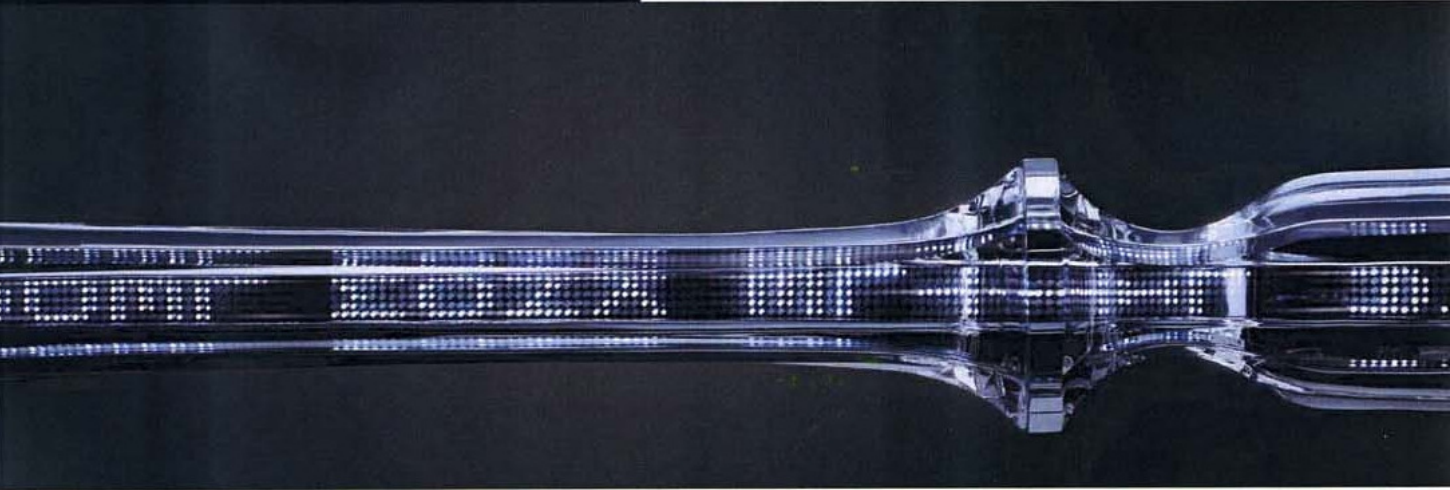
their collaboration – together we’ve created something based on tradition yet completely new. Something in which handmade crystal, LED technology and air form conspire together to project Holzer’s texts into an ethereal animation.” The lamps are a fantasy,” says Starck.

“They’re composed of three contradictory elements: crystal, electronics and poetry. I’ve always been fascinated by what lies beneath the crystal: the mathematical equation of poetry from the human intelligence. It was fascinating to be able to use technology to give a voice to the crystal so that we can hear its poetry. The lamps are composed of mathematical poetry, metamorphosed human poetry (the use of sand and fire to create crystal) and the poetry of Jenny Holzer. On the one hand, you have an incredibly sophisticated yet archaic material and on the other modern electronics, and both are in the service of a contemporary artist who is also highly political. It’s a kind of paradox.”

STILLER



HOOO!!! (THE TABLE MODEL) IS PRODUCED IN AN EDITION OF 49.



WORD PERFECT: THE HAAA!!! LAMP MODEL IS PRODUCED IN AN EDITION OF NINE.

“PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT” HAS BEEN ON MY CAR IN PARIS FOR THE LAST 20 YEARS’ PHILIPPE STARCK

