

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

Julia Scher
Maximum Security Society
08.10.2022-15.01.2023

Julia Scher (b. 1954 in Hollywood, CA, lives in Cologne) has traced the gradual emergence of a 'maximum security society' since the 1980s. This is how, in 2005, sociologist Gary T. Marx describes the current era of encompassing surveillance technologies and infrastructures:

'Many of the kinds of surveillance once found only in high security military and prison settings are seeping into the society at large. Are we moving toward becoming a *maximum security society* where ever more of our behavior is known and subject to control?'

Scher's first institutional survey brings together a selection of works from the last 30 years: multimedia installations, video works, sculptures and print and internet projects.

The central installation, *Predictive Engineering* (1993-present), a new production for the Kunsthalle Zürich exhibition, plays with the impression that visitors are being checked over for suspicious appearances or behaviour. The mix of real and staged video footage (so-called fake feeds) leaves it unclear what form of protection (or threat) one should anticipate. The pseudo-brand 'Security by Julia' under which Scher has operated since the late 1980s indicates the commercial interests that are behind much surveillance infrastructure. A sales catalogue from 1991 offers fictitious services and products such as 'random public evaluations' and 'behavior and productivity deviance detectors', while Scher has produced underwear, condoms and - more recently - hand sanitiser dispensers with the brand.

Maximum Security Society furthermore brings together the three 'embedded' beds *Mama Bed*, *Papa Bed* and *Baby Bed* (all 2003), which, equipped with cameras and monitors, make it evident how observation and communication (or, today, 'sharing') has permeated into the most intimate corners of our lives. The constellation of Mama/Papa/Baby also refers to another form of surveillance, that of the nuclear family and the normative constructions that are, we know, particularly evident in intimacy and sexuality - and can violently dominate there. In concert with these, the 1988 film *Discipline Masters* is a four-hour, confessional soliloquy in which the artist attempts 'to preserve her understanding of [her] life history'.

While Scher is known for her surveillance installations that address psycho-social dynamics and perversions, the formal, sculptural quality of her work is often overlooked. It is precisely this that the exhibition *Maximum Security Society* at Kunsthalle Zürich also aims to highlight, whether in works such as *Girl Dog Hybrid* (2005), *Hidden Camera (Architectural Vagina)* (1991-2018) or *Surveillance Area* (1994).

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

We asked the artist to comment some of the works presented at Kunsthalle Zürich in the exhibition *Maximum Security Society*.

Julia Scher: Today is October 1st, 2022. I'm Julia, sitting here with Daniel.

Daniel Baumann: I am sitting here with Julia. Let's start with an early work of yours, with *Discipline Masters* from 1988, a four-hour long confessional.

JS: The idea was to tape a continuous non-stop video recording in August of 1988, in the hot summer in New York. Over the course of three days, 11 usable hours of video was recorded, personal narrative in the form of a video confessional. These are repetition masters in a way; over the four hours of this work the same stories take a different shape and are modified by the heat, by tiredness and finding different aspects of the stories. The stories are intercut with segments from lip-synched rock videos. These are interruption portals: rock groups who use words singing from the heart, which I only borrow and re-use in my confessional. They say things that I can't say myself and this bespeaks to the quality of the lip-synch. I can never really synch up perfectly to the words of others, speaking from the heart. There's always something wrong or a little bit off. It's confessed stories about my experience with music. The genesis of the confessional came out of the physical experience with working with woven wire burglar bar gratings which reminded me of rock videos and movies with the priestly confessional. The first talking to the video camera [in my work] was from behind a burglar bar grating which had been up in a previous installation.

DB: What was the name of the installation?

JS: The previous installation was called *Recovery Agent*. It was also a multi-vectored, or multi-material, multimedia artwork that was participatory in nature and you could make videos and see them on a video printer, make audio recordings behind the gratings and take them home. The inspiration was from people walking up to the microphones in *Recovery Agent* and telling their stories and me capturing it on video from the other side of the grating. So a year later, I put myself into their position because I saw the kind of ecstasy that people were experiencing just speaking to a microphone, and that was very moving for a lot of reasons.

DB: Back in the day there was a thing called Video Art; it has dissolved since then because everyone uses all sorts of media, but were you part of a New York video subculture?

JS: Yes, I went to Monday Wednesday Friday video club with Alan Moore, was part of Downtown Television Network, and before that, in Minneapolis, Paper Tiger Television and learned video through Roger Cablevision when Cable TV first emerged before Satellite TV. The law prescribed that every cable company had to provide local people with hands-on knowledge, everyone local could be a producer, so I got my first big cameras from Rogers Cablevision. I never learned video in school; in UCLA in the '70s it was a rarity to use video or have video equipment. But the first contiguous video art I ever saw was while I was in LA – if you don't count regular broadcast television – was Vito Acconci in 1973, or was it '74? Bruce Nauman brought a Vito tape into the room and we were locked in for three hours. Or was it Vito who came? I can't remember. The first time that I met Vito Acconci later I just walked up to him and went "Na naaa, na naaa, na naaa, na naaa, na naaa" repeating the three hours that I had been locked in to watch him on the floor grumbling. So my first video art experience, watching, was with people on the floor being aggressive towards materials and the viewer. And by the time I saw Michael Clear, *The Giant*, in The Kitchen in New York I was totally blown away by his surveillance. In the early '80s I drove ten hours down from Minneapolis to Chicago to The Video Databank and there watched hours of women's work. So powerful. In a dark room.

DB: And that was in the early '80s?

**Kunsthalle
Zürich**

**Limmatstrasse 270
CH-8005 Zürich**

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

JS: Yes, I started graduate school much later because my fellow artists in LA in the '70s said "You don't need graduate school, what is that for, you're an artist. You just need your macrame bathing suit and your studio and you can roller-skate up and down the boardwalk." The impact of video on my time in New York was profound. When I came to New York I had three jobs already lined up and one of them was with Media Alliance, so I worked with Robin White at the public access television station Channel 13, which is where Media Alliance was housed. I was the organiser for materials for the arts. I drove around collecting used and unwanted equipment for pennies from big companies and collected them and redistributed them to artists and arts organisations. Equipment that didn't have a home yet I brought to the basement of the then PS1; the basement was filled with asbestos and very dirty, but a great storage area for all kinds of old equipment.

DB: Then ultimately you installed the surveillance system for PS1.

JS: Yes, I began installing surveillance equipment for other people during my job at the Sweatshop aerobics parlour in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was the janitor, because I wanted free aerobics lessons. I already had a studio in Minneapolis and was painting and began installing equipment in Minneapolis for women who had issues with protection and threats. And I began by installing door locks and control panels and surveillance and burglar bar gratings over the windows to keep people out.

DB: You started as a painter.

JS: Yes, my degrees are in painting, sculpture and graphic arts. I never studied, never held a camera other than still photography. With the feminist movement and the women's building, it was clear that every material was a raw material for art, and I carry that today. But in the early '70s it became clear that women could pick up everything and make it art experience and it wasn't regulated by the constraints of a patriarchal and disempowering list of gear that was required to produce.

DB: I guess the men were bound by tradition.

JS: Both. There were people like Kim Jones who got all screwed up in Vietnam and came back and did performances as Mudman going through the streets just covered with mud and sticks. The early '70s had a proliferation of war work, anti-war work, and anti-establishment work. But the women's building foregrounded a new perspective on both new, and embracing disregarded, materials. At UCLA they kicked out one guy of the Masters programme in the early '70s because he wanted to do quilting and they said "This isn't art". Now of course, look at quilting, the AIDS quilt, the explosion of materiality by different people.

In the early '70s the idea was to deal with American landscape, because I'd done a lot of photography inspired by Robert Adams, as well as Anselm Adams, and also Michael Bishop, but throwing in the blocks of the body like Robert Heinecken, who stripped out the normative magazine and filled it in with naked women. The idea of displacement and finding power in that was inspiring to me. I followed a lot of photographers who were there at the time. Jo Ann Callas, Victor Landweber, Lita Albuquerque, who was a friend, and Stephen Shore, who did these landscapes of bombed-out sites called *Silver Sea* which showed the destroyed or hurt sites where the body of the earth is disfigured, radioactive earth as a site of a photograph. Many photographers at the time inspired the hell out of me. Light and space artists. Lewis Baltz. So I went out and shot a lot with a 2 ¼ Graflex with a 180 lens, so far wide shot. They took up the immediate surroundings of where I lived. When I moved to Venice Beach I wasn't around so much with the camera.

DB: You got into paint?

Kunsthalle
Zürich

Limmatstrasse 270
CH-8005 Zürich

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

JS: No, I had been painting all this time. I was in a big car accident with a boyfriend at the time, I was in traction for six months and had just gotten a new studio in Hollywood. After Venice Beach the studio wasn't big enough, so I got a big studio near Jerry McMillan and the whole East Hollywood bunch on St. Andrews Place. Then the car accident slowed down the move into this studio. A long story, but I got a job learning sound engineering and then moved to a place called Coldwater Cutting Rooms in Hollywood and was cutting sound effects for movies. I was on the back end of deadlines working in a very filmic environment where everything needed to be done weeks ago. I learnt a lot and met John Carpenter and donated – he was looking for money for *Halloween*, I gave him three dollars, which was what I made an hour. I had the choice to stay on to work as a film editor, to be an apprentice for seven years at Universal, and then I could be a real editor. By that time, it didn't seem so appealing, I guess I just got tired of it. I didn't go that route because it seemed like the road was... not disempowering, but somehow I didn't want to give up so much of myself just for that. It was a high stress environment, which I loved, even if I can't get out of bed anymore. It comes out of tumbling out of car culture, the combination of television, television, television, movies and art. This typical LA combination where it all makes sense. Nothing seems out of place, nothing seems awkward. Outer space on TV, old ladies on a chat show, there were no complaints.

Then in 1977 there was this great photography show, *Mirrors and Windows*, with a catalogue by John Szarkowski that really opened up this idea: it a window or a mirror? And for people like me it was both, not a binary. This was before photography was art. Photography made me not afraid of other processes. Feminism gave me the chance to cut open trash cans in 1974 and put cherry candies in the middle and light candles as a kind of broken vagina. Playing with different materials just seemed natural. Then you move into the domestic landscape with the camera. You're moving inside, into interior space and surveillance is happening in domestic contexts.

DB: Let's jump to *Predictive Engineering*, 1993. What was the genesis of the work and how has it been adapted?

JS: The term *Predictive Engineering* is an actual field of study among six recognised by Gary T. Marx as being components of the 'maximum security society'. I began to read about it in magazines like *Dissent* in the mid-'80s. So by 1993 I felt I could imagine his sub-societies of the maximum security society. This piece was an ode to his research about the components of a futuristic society. It's about the future, predicted. All the categories were about looking ahead. What would be, not looking back at the landscape that was or is. Like Siegfried Zielinski would say, there's no now, only the past and the future. Now that the language of surveillance is a world language everyone understands. When I was giving talks in the '80s people would ask "Well what do you mean by surveillance?" But times have changed.

In '93 the idea was to take two identical hallways of the old SFMOMA war memorial museum leading to a show that was called *Thresholds and Enclosures* to get people to notice surveillance going on. The idea was to play with humour and with the landscape of the building and to have an introduction to the idea of what is a threshold. When do you come into a surveillance space, and are you stopped? Are you trapped by being recorded? Playing with the body so it was a performative piece that you the visitor, participant subject, would be caught under the surveillance camera's eye, and be recorded. There were warning signs everywhere. At the same time, there was humour about being seen or being uncovered on camera. This took place by having pre-recorded footage of situations around the museum. Originally the reason for having the fake feeds was that the museum would not let me put cameras everywhere and their insurance company said 'No, you can't tap into our system'. In reality it was a reactive construction based on being disallowed from deconstructing some systems, in the time of institutional critique, the wording then thrown about to get you to think differently about space. How to get people to think or see a space differently. So interstitial spaces – at the time – were the spaces that were interstitial through architecture, a camera up on a wall. The idea was to create fake feeds to augment the real cameras they did allow, to make it all present. To bring

Kunsthalle
Zürich

Limmatstrasse 270
CH-8005 Zürich

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

these non-seen spaces into an artwork. To bring the architecture into the space of the artwork. Insofar as it's a museum for people, visitors would be included because they are part of the magic of the museum, that it is open to people. So in the taped fake feeds people have encounters with the cameras and the architecture. People are falling down the stairs, fighting, on the roof, trying to get into doors that are locked, running down hallways. Of special note are the naked people running around. There were two identical hallways entering this art show, so my idea was to have naked people run around one hallway and be present for the camera's eye in the same position that visitors would then see themselves later. When it was up on screen, with two monitors viewable at the same time, you would see, if you were looking, naked people running around in the hallway next door, so people would run around the corner into the next hallway thinking the naked people were there - and they weren't. Of course [Bruce] Naumann inspires all this. At the end of the show the carpet was worn between the two hallways where people were running back and forth. The hunt for the invisible or the unseen added a humorous element. Though it's not so funny anymore, or it wasn't funny then. The idea of overexposure, being exposed to the camera. And the audio track accompanied that version.

In the first version people would see, in addition to this video action, two programmes created by Omega computers. One simulated a human guard typing into the screen as if he's trying to talk to the other guards. Like a private conversation between guards. On the other screen it looks like the computer, the machine, is spitting out identifications of people who appear in the camera's eye. So one screen would say: "I want to be vigilant in a world where no-one is vigilant at all" and the other screen would say: "You have a breast size of 47C" or "You are a girl who is not looking just right".

DB: Like facial recognition.

JS: Yeah, pre-ability of machines to do it. These programmes were written in Scala for the Omega 2000; they were running two Omega 2000s, there were four switchers and three quarter-inch playback decks. In fact, the cameras during the live install were very limited. But with identical equipment in each hallway.

DB: To finish we could talk about *Three Beds* at the entrance to the show. You've said it's a shift from public-private into fully private, and the classic Freudian constellation of Mama, Papa, Baby. It's a psychic landscape that comes into play with that work. It started as a one bed version, then what happened?

JS: In the idea of surveillance, the powerful component for me is the relationship to danger. How do you see danger? How do you perceive danger? I think when Rudolph Frayling talked about 'to be is to be perceived' it was about the relationship to surveillance and control devices: who was in control. These ideas of threat, warning and danger that using surveillance allowed me are also a reflection of domestic problematics and my own personal. It fit perfectly: the shape of warning has taken different forms in my work. It's always there. The first surveillance bed was called *Always There*. And the music track that went with that was the group Incognito singing *Always There*, and I do a voice-over with that in Spanish and English. Is the danger perceived or real, and could the equipment save you, or is it just flaccid, just sitting there? It's just art, not doing anything. Or produces danger, and safety. We can predict the behaviour in a bed: you give birth in a bed, you have sex, you sleep, you die in a bed. You have a dossier in your mind of the activities that are associated with it. And today we're more alert to what domestic violence happens. So much of this happens a lot of it in a bedroom, on a bed, or next to a bed. A bed is a reserve. A place where you can rest and fill your tank. It is a usually private space. The three beds are about family, connectedness or disconnectedness. The title also refers to the war that Americans started and the idea of journalists being embedded. And the story of the three bears. The baby bed, it's the future. The future bed is transparent, it's porous, you can see through it, it is 'seen'. The baby bed embraces cameras, which are embedded in the transparent blanket. The

Kunsthalle
Zürich

Limmatstrasse 270
CH-8005 Zürich

T +41 44 272 15 15
F +41 44 272 18 88
info@kunsthallezurich.ch
www.kunsthallezurich.ch

idea of journalists, people with cameras, it's all propaganda, in the war field, in a space of war, in a domestic scenario.

DB: Can you say something about the work *American Fibroids* (1996-2022), installed to the left in the space?

JS: It's all pretty much non-functioning surveillance equipment from my older shows. It's a flea-market, everything has a price tag. But it's so named like a fibroid in your body. It's not a cancer, just a blob that gets in the way of other functionality. It takes up useful space, it takes up blood. *American Fibroids* is like a darkness over the landscape of togetherness and telecommunications and bright spots moving forward. It's the past, it's old, it stops functionality, it doesn't enhance functionality but can be passed off, traded away, removed. It's like muscle, it's an accumulation of non-functioning parts which did have a function, in a live installation, but in this case none of the items have a specific duty. In a live install everything has a specific duty, but all the live works, things that hang on the wall, everything has to be like it was. All the live installations, everything is mutable, everything is updateable, goes with the DNA of art, where if something is not working, or you lose the piece, it can be replaced in the future with another part. It doesn't have to languish in the past construction. That's for the live works. But these works are displaced, these pieces no longer play a role in the active situation of an old live work. They perform another kind of role, to recycle, so the audio text of the reliquary table is "Recycle or die, recycle or die, you will be recycled or die!"

DB: That's also why it can change, you can always update it.

JS: Yes, and it metastasizes as well. The pieces from PE1 [Predictive Engineering 1] become PE2, 70% of footage goes into the next footage.

DB: Let's finally move to your most recent work, the film *Planet Greyhound* (2022).

JS: There is no imaginary centre in *Planet Greyhound* because there is no you under surveillance, but an incomplete other. The centre is off space, it's in outer space, it's a million miles away. It's got dogs in it. They don't see the way we do. They don't necessarily know things the way we do. The idea for new communications, new visions to come. I'm taking a chance with a new language, these journeys into Planet Greyhound via a bus station, a trans-station, a transportation space in space is a gateway out of older signifiers. So it's a journey to a bus station advertising sign in outer space, somewhere near Planet Greyhound. A trans-space. And it's a bus because most people understand bus. But the great beyond is unknown and not easy for me to picture yet. But I gave it some names and used familiar old-fashioned language names for now. And of course, a bus station is under complete surveillance for money, for people, but in this bus station in the installation there's no money and there's no stopping you under surveillance. You're freed from the normal coordinates of a bus station on earth to be more trans. And to be more in trans-it. And to take away only the song at the end of the advert, just as you take your baggage. Your baggage is welcome, your own interpersonal stuff is welcome. Might as well enjoy it while you can, bad or good. It's welcome on board the bus.