

# Julia Scher

## Maximum Security Society

08.10.2022–15.01.2023

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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 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’) have 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 psychosocial 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).

We asked the artist to comment some of the works on show at *Maximum Security Society*.

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

DB: 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 hours of

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usable video was recorded, personal narrative in the form of a video confession-  
al. 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 seg-  
ments 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 of working with woven wire  
burglar bar gratings which reminded me of rock videos and movies with the  
priestly confessional.

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, but 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, it 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. So my  
first video art experience, watching, was with people on the floor being aggres-  
sive towards materials and the viewer. Then in the early '80s I drove ten hours  
down from Minneapolis to Chicago to The Video Databank and watched hours  
of women's work. So powerful. In a dark room.

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. 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 mate-  
rials just seemed natural.

DB: Let's jump to the installation *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 rec-  
ognised by Gary T. Marx as being components of the 'maximum security socie-  
ty'. 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. Now the language of surveillance is a world  
language that 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 1993 the idea was to take two identical hallways of the museum, at the old  
SFMOMA, 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 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.

DB: Which is also at the centre of the three works *Papa Bed, Mama Bed* and *Baby Bed*, (2003) placed right at the entrance of your show.

JS: In the idea of surveillance, the powerful component for me is its relationship to danger. How do you see danger? How do you perceive danger? 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 in a bedroom, on a bed or next to a bed. 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 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 named like a fibroid in your body. It's not a cancer, it's 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. In all the live installations everything is mutable, everything is updateable. It 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. 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: Let's finally move to the 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. 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.

A longer version of this interview can be found on the Kunsthalle Zürich website.

With warm thanks to Magnus Schaefer. We equally wish to thank those who have lent works to the exhibition including Esther Schipper (Berlin), Galerie DREI (Cologne), Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Mamco (Geneva), SFMOMA San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Galleria MASSIMODECARLO as well as Damian Weber and Moritz Engleberg. The artist and Kunsthalle Zürich wish also to thank Otto Bonnen, Tereza Glazova, Eugène Kaïmanovitch, Claire Megumi Masset, Oz Oderbolz and Leevi Toija for their contribution to *Predictive Engineering* (1993-2022).

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed

Exhibition tours every Thursday at 6.30pm (free entry). Please consult our website for up-to-date information: [www.kunsthallezurich.ch](http://www.kunsthallezurich.ch)

Kunsthalle Zürich receives funding from:



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