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ArtSeen

Julia Scher: *American Promises*

by **Charlotte Kent**



Julia Scher, *Information America*, 1995, Metal office desk, 5 9" NTSC monitors with metal, wall brackets, 13" color monitor, plastic and vinyl signage, 3 black-and-white surveillance cameras, removable lenses, transformers, 2 homing bridging switchers, 2 time-lapse recorders, Amiga A1200HD computer, Sony WatchCam, 2 media players, desk lamp, office chair, wires and cables. Overall dimensions variable (desk: 29 x 60 x 30 inches). Courtesy Ortuzar Projects.

When a child walks over to Julia Scher's *Information America* (1995), on display at Ortuzar Projects, she's delighted to suddenly discover herself on a television screen. She waves to figure out how she is being recorded, looking at the mess of machinery rising from a monumental gray desk. An adult points her towards the many cameras and explains how each one captures different images. One lens stares from the top of the big block television centrally positioned on the desk. Two other cameras frame the titular sign "Information America"—so called for an Atlanta-based company that provided clients with data on relationships between corporations, individuals, and commercial transactions. An anachronistic multitude of wires lead to five monitors that flicker among views of the gallery and scenes filmed in the past. The child and adult try to track which camera does what. As Julia Scher once said in an interview with Lynne Tilman, "It's hard to extract the narcissistic desire to see oneself."

NEW YORK

Ortuzar Projects

May 30 – July 26

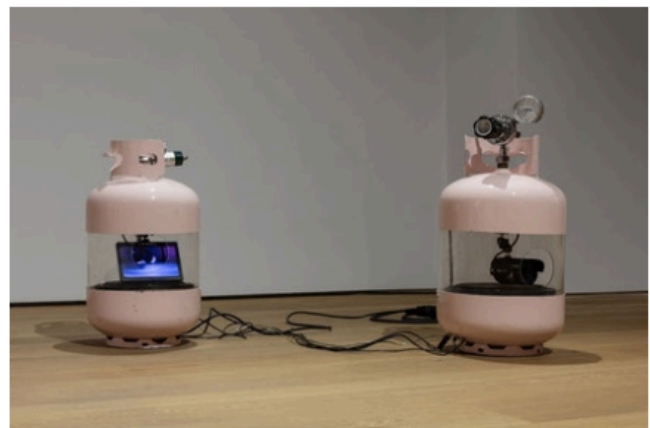
For over 30 years, Scher has examined the nature of surveillance in American culture. She started installing home security equipment for women who got to know her when she was head janitor at an aerobics studio. For these women, security meant surveillance, which required a vulnerable self-revealing, too, and this woman who saw them stripped down in the locker room became worthy of their trust. Such strange transactions seem typical for Scher and help explain the unusual connections her works offer. In this case, those gigs unlocked an affinity for the gear and the public-private tension in cultivating security. Scher's work never simply blames government, corporations, culture, or person, but reveals the cybernetic feedback loop of engagement across them all.

Ortuzar Projects presents *American Promises* with examples of major works from the last three decades. A new sound installation *North to South* (2019) literally welcomes people to the gallery at "Column #1" and proceeds to follow visitors with obscure message at subsequent columns in the gallery: "Column #2 is broadcasting you... There is no content here at Column #2. It's for you." By "Column #3," amidst references that seem to allude to surrounding works, Scher's computerized voice reminds viewers, "You love the chase when you can capture and control." Many of the works in the show, however, capture audiences as screens are everywhere reflecting back movements. Adults may not express the same glee as a child at being recorded, but their curiosity is equally engaged as they too move around the works to identify the mode of their capture.

People gravitate to the empty spotlight of *Mothers Under Surveillance* (1993). An old television stares down, revealing its viewer in the circle of light, now caught in the live feed of the gallery, but also interspersed with film of elderly women shuffling around a care facility. Their age makes them both socially invisible and constantly watched over. Motherhood is a role partly defined by its expectation to survey, observe, and discern, so the work also shows the shifting roles of surveillance within familial relationships. Nearby, Scher describes many disconcerting childhood memories of her mother in the video work *Discipline Masters* (1988), a durational experience at four hours. The style is now typical of YouTube and reality TV show confessions, but unlike those short ejaculations, this seemingly endless narrative forces viewers to make the choice about when to walk away from Scher's uncomfortable recollections, with all that it implies.

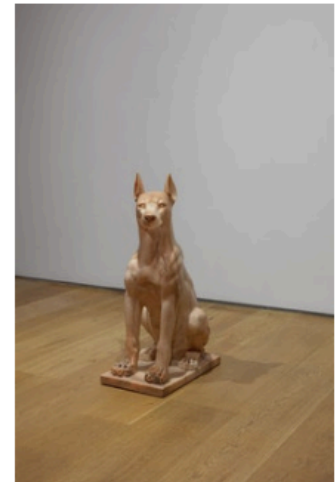


Julia Scher, *Mothers Under Surveillance*, 1993, Live black-and-white camera with 16mm lens, 25" monitor and metal wall bracket, 2 media players, time-lapse recorder, switcher, cables. Overall dimensions: 80 x 20 x 25 1/2 inches. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects.



Julia Scher, *American Tanks*, 2001, 2 modified gas cylinders, OLED TFT color monitor, digital color CCD camera, speakers, amplifier, CD, player, cables. Overall dimensions variable (each cylinder: 25 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches). Courtesy Ortuzar Projects.

American Tanks (2001) presents two propane tanks, each with a clear band, revealing the recording equipment capturing feet in one and the small screen displaying the footage in the other. Of course, people shift to determine where the filming occurs. Here, the static input-output relationship also invokes the limitations of binary relations. The tanks are painted Scher's characteristic pink, pointing to both the cultural encoding of femininity and the queer community: gender-coded clothing appeared in the 1940s to sell more product and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACTUP) used pink to symbolize resistance and empowerment. It is just another example of the complex layers that Scher adopts in her work to destabilize simple understandings. Included in the show is one of her pieces from the "Surveillance Beds" series (1994-2003), *Mama Bed* (2003) that is guarded over by *Girl Dog (Hybrid)* (2005), a pink marble statue of a Doberman who could clearly do nothing to protect or attack.



Julia Scher, *Girl Dog (Hybrid)*, 2005, Marble, 30 1/4 x 17 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches. Courtesy Ortuzar Projects.

Scher is a trickster and her works are cautiously amusing. Audiences are compelled to interact but also to think through the desire that flows among relations of safety, security, and surveillance. Now living in Cologne, Germany, this is her first solo show in New York in over 15 years and a rare chance to experience how her works complicate the easy blaming prevalent in discussions about contemporary surveillance. We are all complicit in *American Promises*.

Contributor

Charlotte Kent

CHARLOTTE KENT recently completed her PhD at the CUNY Graduate Center, where her dissertation was on contemporary experiments in art writing. She teaches at NYU, CUNY Baruch, and SVA. She lives in Brooklyn with her artist husband, their cat and dog, and is happiest reading, writing, and editing. The rest of the time, it seems like she is on email, but when the lights go out, she loves to dance.