

SPEAKEASY

BY ADAM QUEST

The *New Art Examiner* periodically invites an art-world personality to write a "Speakeasy" column on the topic of his or her choice. The ideas and opinions expressed in the "Speakeasy" are those of the writer alone, and not subject to editorial influence.

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EXAMINER

Adam Quest is a security-conscious freelance writer living in New York City. He has recently been working with Julia Scher, an artist who uses surveillance equipment in her installations. Quest attended a commercial security trade show last summer, which gave him occasion to muse about his personal relationship to surveillance, the pervasiveness of security systems in contemporary society, and Scher's strategic use of these systems. Some of the following commentary was developed in conjunction with Scher's writings on her work.

The Art of Watching the Watchers

In some ways, a trade show is like an interactive art installation. Objects and ideas are presented with flair and artifice; everything on display beckons with alluring surfaces, though another agenda usually lurks behind the bells and whistles. Of course, a trade show is not an art installation. The context is wrong and the intent utilitarian; a trade show is an arena of commerce, not culture. For me, however, last summer's International Security Conference (ISC) at the Javits Center in New York represented more than just a chance to peruse the latest security products. I wasn't there to shop, but rather to immerse myself in the mechanics of vigilance and, hopefully, peer into the inner workings of the control apparatus.

My decision to attend the ISC was inspired by my recent work writing for Julia Scher, an artist who has made a career of creating simulated surveillance environments where individuals play multiple surveillance roles, becoming subjects and moni-

tors of their own behavior. In this instance of my own role-playing, I attended the ISC as a representative of Scher's nominal company Safe and Secure. Scher is a licensed surveillance technician as well as an artist.

I have long had a personal connection with the security industry. My father was involved in the business for over 25 years as an entrepreneur and marketing executive. When I was young, he owned a company that sold burglar alarms and other "defensive instruments," so I grew up in an environment where the tools of the trade were always prominent. My brother and I would occasionally borrow the Mace samples Dad left on his dresser and have battles, the loser (usually me) being the one to get an eyeful. Sometimes on weekends he took us to his office where he let us run loose as he took care of business. My favorite part of the office was the testing room, in which there was a simple wood structure that resembled the frame of a house, with windows and doors wired with alarms. It was a huge thrill creeping around that skeletal house, feigning stealth and purposely tripping the alarms, basking in the barrage of noise and flash. (Ironically, when I was 15, I was arrested for burglary after I broke into several houses during a summer crime spree. Maybe those sessions in the testing room were less play than practice.)

In the last years of his life, my father conducted seminars and sold videotapes titled "How to Become a Serious Money-maker in the Business of Selling Residential Alarm Systems." In the video, he comes off as a wily veteran of the sales trenches. Using no notes and smoking incessantly, he raspingly invokes a mythical work-history selling "the three things people want least: life insurance, cemetery plots, and burglar alarms." The seminar is rife with old-time schtick, including pregnant pauses, copious laugh lines, and colorful, mostly fabricated anecdotes. He used vaudevillian panache to sell himself and his vision of sales.

Just as a trade show is not an art installation, my father was not an entertainer. He dispensed a form of wisdom geared toward a specific commercial realm—home security. However pragmatic his intent might have been (teaching "winning sales techniques"), his message was awash in cynicism, which he well understood, even reveled in. This passage from one of his tapes, which evokes the hustlers in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, sums up his whole approach:

It's not a question of if you're going to be intruded upon, it's a question of when. Scare tactics? That's just a pejorative, unlearned description of the ways we make certain that people know they have a problem. Every home in this country that is not electronically protected is an invitation to a personal tragedy. They



Photos by Larry Shea.

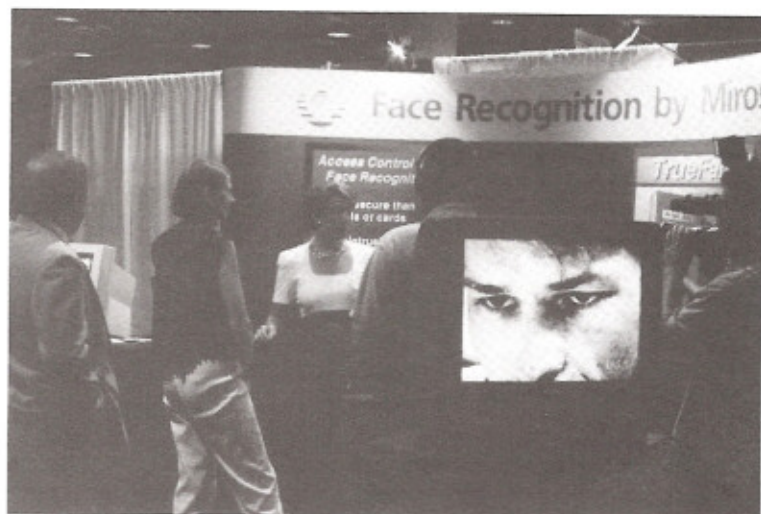
absolutely need what I'm selling, they're just too stupid and hypocritical to realize it. . . . You can't sell these systems intellectually because they're bought emotionally. Don't get into their homes, get into their hearts. They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Embedded within this hard-boiled message is an ideology that currently defines the whole security industry and affects everyone who comes in contact with it, which is to say everyone. This kind of rhetoric relentlessly avers that the social environment dictates the need for increased vigilance and security. But the security industry and its major clients—mostly governments and large corporations—have actually constructed a social environment through the trope of a dangerous landscape. The defining question then becomes not whether you need security, but what kind of security you need.

A trade show is essentially a convocation of peddlers amassed in a cavernous room saturated with the steady roar of chatter and, in the case of the ISC, constant sonic ejaculations from a plethora of devices. Sales pitches careen through the air and data is exchanged at a feverish pace as sirens wail and multiplexers hum. Tactical-sounding company names and vaguely menacing rhetoric is festooned on banners, brochures, and just about every flat surface: "Put them on film and put them away" . . . Scanco . . . Detex . . . "Deny access to trouble" . . . Silent Knight . . . "Bullet resistance systems specialists." State-of-the-art this and state-of-the-art that vie for limited attention spans as surveillance cameras, on display and working their watchful magic, scan every part of the room and broadcast quadrants of this paranoia matrix on the ubiquitous video monitors.

Many booths feature cheesy come-ons like bowls of candy or voluptuous young women tarted up in gleaming silver Spandex handing out sales literature and demonstrating products (reminiscent of the wiretapper's convention scene in *The Conversation*). One elaborate booth is fashioned into several small-scale replicas of surveillance environments, including a functioning blackjack table (I beat the dealer and won a deck of playing cards decorated with the company logo). Another booth is conceived as a nightclub replete with throbbing techno music, a smoke machine, and, of course, a bank or two of video monitors. But try as they might to inject a carnivalesque element into the atmosphere, security remains serious business and the pitchmen and -women hawking their wares at the ISC are a purposeful breed.

My presence at the conference, among the technological overkill and legions of security professionals with well defined commercial imperatives, was highly anomalous. I engaged a number of sales representatives by claiming to be writing an article for the *Safe & Secure Newsletter* and asking them questions designed to elicit both an uncharacteristic (non-utilitarian) response about the industry as a whole and a demonstration of their product expertise. In a sense, I was enacting a mock infiltration of the security industry, or at least an infiltration of their principle showcase. My intent at the ISC, as an envoy from another dimension of the security realm, was to



watch the watchers and hardwire my consciousness to the panoptic circuits being forged with each pan and zoom of each lens of every camera.

The product manager of a company that sells face-recognition software touted his product as unique among "biometric" security measures. He opined that security has become thoroughly ensconced in the private sector and that there has been a discernible shift in general attitudes about it. "Corporations are starting to see it more as a requirement than a nicety . . . an employee benefit—you're in our facility and our facility is secure—rather than a need to protect corporate assets."

The marketing manager of a turnstile manufacturer believes that the atmosphere in society today is steadily becoming more dangerous, thus more security is required. He doesn't, however, feel that a time may come when there will be too much security—the market will see to that. "It's not like putting marble in the lobby because it looks good. It's one of those unfortunate necessary evils." He adds, with unintentional irony, "If everybody was honest and wasn't afraid and didn't assault one another, we'd be out of business. But unfortunately that's not the case."

"There can never be too much security, there can never be too many police. It's for the good of the public and industry," says a crusty but genial manufacturer's rep for a closed-circuit TV company. After 35 years in the business he should know, right? Another CCTV salesman describes the expanded use of surveillance technology for other applications, like management and prevention of insurance fraud: "We have a customer with 44 stores and on a daily basis he dials [accesses cameras by modem] into every one of his stores to make sure they're neat and, for example, if a sale is going on, to see whether there's a 'sale' sign in the window. We're also working with a gigantic supermarket chain that is using security to thwart insurance scams. There was actually a situation where the camera caught someone taking a bottle of ketchup off a shelf, throwing it on the ground, then laying down and claiming they fell."

Although he feels that the courts in their overreaching liberal rulings have "put a damper" on expanded surveillance (such as

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in employee locker rooms), society, as it stands now, he believes, cannot have too much security. "You tell me it's not a sick world. Look at Nanny-Vision where they're catching baby-sitters abusing and molesting kids all the time. Invasion of privacy is not the issue, the issue is protecting what's important to you."

The industry is growing by ten to 20 percent a year, according to another CCTV salesman. He says selling surveillance equipment is far easier now than it was when he started 25 years ago, and it's not just because of all the "criminals and degenerates" running around. "International competition is getting fiercer and America is a prime target for industrial espionage, so a higher level, both in quantity and sophistication, of security is necessary."

An increasingly threatening climate is not the only reason security sales are at an all-time high. The equipment is far better, cheaper, and easier to use than ever before, due mainly to miniaturization and computerization. Everything is getting smaller and more dependent on digital technology.

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The steady eradication of personal liberties in favor of some assumed public good has opened the floodgates for the ubiquitous presence of friendly security systems, especially surveillance. Eventually you start to feel good about these innovations and are happy to exchange freedom for protection. However, these systems have an unstated function, one that goes beyond protection. They are deployed to effect behavior modification through their very presence, which induces self-surveillance and self-regulation. As Foucault wrote, "[it] assures the automatic functioning of power, so to arrange that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action."

Security is really a form of social engineering designed to seem benevolent and noncentralized while masquerading as a moral force. This contradicts the "Big Brother" trope, in which a repressive, blatantly authoritarian regime bends the masses to its will. The deployment of security today is far more subtle, although the ends are not much different. Surveillance is a key component in the authority of command, the strategies of control, and the technologies of communication that form the structure by which dominance is maintained. It facilitates the

management of many by a centralized few and automates the machinery of power. Surveillance promotes obsessive gathering of information; it registers all and then selects, all the while training us so that even when we see it in progress, we will not react. The placement of the equipment is obvious now: You realize you're being watched, whereas ten years ago everything was covert. Like the equipment itself, the methods of surveillance have greatly evolved.

In our high-tech world, where security pervades every niche of society in ways never before imagined, how can we tell the difference between protection and intrusion, between our own need to look out for ourselves and others and the propensity of an act of vigilance to turn abusive, indulgent, and invasive? Ignorance and passivity are the normal responses to this state of affairs, and for those with any awareness, resignation seems to be the easiest route. But resignation is the greatest weapon of any control system. In this counter-revolutionary epoch, how do we define ourselves against the insidious threat that is suggested by these units, these webs we all plug in to?

Julia Scher uses the paraphernalia of security systems—salesmen, guards, police equipment, architecture, codes, sounds, visuals, spaces, bodies—to highlight this environment of relentless surveillance, engaging viewers with experiential simulations of watching and being watched. Her work saturates a social setting with the new technologies, opening it up as a critical space. Many of Scher's installations have a trade-show atmosphere, which seems an apt translation of her desire to examine the generalized presence (and distribution) of surveillance systems throughout the social body. But unlike the slick environment of a trade show, she leaves tangles of loose cables and fixtures, suggesting a sprawling system in a continuing state of reconfiguration. Scher's goal is to show both the irregularities of power and the subtle incursions into freedom that these systems create by exposing their hidden mechanisms in order to enable the viewer to question the strategy behind our collective need for security.

She contends that the only way to effectively challenge or counteract the alienating effects of a disciplinary administration of society is to literally re-take some degree of control over those very instruments and techniques to which we have become unwittingly subjected. Her work introduces ambiguity, doubt, nameless desires and fears, and unauthorized perceptions, interrupting the speechless howl of applause that authority demands.

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After talking to the turnstile salesman, I wondered whether he could ever see himself as a "cog in the machine," a contributor to the environment of heightened security. After all, he's just a guy doing his job, and who could deny the need for turnstiles? (The subway system would go broke without them.) How would the CCTV salesman fare at a Julia Scher exhibition? "You call this art?" he might ask rhetorically. Nevertheless, I have attempted to find the juncture where these two worlds intersect and reconcile my history as a child of the industry with my compulsion to watch the watchers and protect myself from their dubious scrutiny.



