

Julia Scher: Surveillance Artist

Julia Scher creates gallery-bound and site specific (de)installations that wrench surveillance from its normal context and blur the distinctions between viewer (voyeur) and subject (target). Scher maintains that only from within the experience of being immersed in multiple surveillance roles are we able to expose and neutralize what Foucault called panopticism—a state of unremitting surveillance—and de-install the apparatuses of control.

Scher's work incorporates live and pre-recorded video footage, interactive computer bulletin boards, spoken word/sound effect audio collages, and sometimes props and actors. Within these environments she weaves audio/visual textures with techno poetics to create a thick atmosphere of mock-paranoia and enlightened bafflement in which simultaneous states of mind and perception are common. The circulation of images in the context of surveillance inherently suggests a complex series of power relationships and perceptual dynamics. Her work challenges commonly held beliefs of surveillance as a static, linear phenomenon. Scher retains the original form of security equipment as it highlights the invisible and effective nature of surveillance captivity. In concert with its new function as a messaging system within an aesthetic context, the equipment itself becomes a fetishistic totem of scrutiny.

The audio component of the transmission sites often consists of gentle, lulling voices cooing a bricolage of techno-speak such as cut up fragments of surveillance/technological jargon, mock voicemail menus, and cyber-koans relevant to interactive surveillance and control: "Please feel free." This pseudo language consistently bangs up against the other features of the piece to undo and break up the words, the logical wallpaper of technology. This bricolage happens within the monitors where the words and images collide with each other in an attempt to understand what is being withheld or distorted. The soundtrack, in other words, is an ironic ubervoice juxtaposed with relentless images of control. This hypertext overlay sardonically twists the rhetoric of security and is meant as a deconstruction of the panopticon. The cooing, stewardess-like voice spewing techno word salad is indicative of instability yet suggests an imaginary identification with the apparatus. In regard to control, one effect of the tension between identification and opposition is a phantasmagoria of simultaneous technophilia and technophobia.

Panopticism has developed into an intangible network(s) of control. The technology of surveillance has reached such a level of effectiveness and pervasiveness that there is no way of knowing precisely when we are actually targets of surveillance. If we assume that we are being observed at all times, there is no need for an overtly oppressive KGB-like mechanism of control. In this scenario, panoptic circuits have been internalized and existence unfolds (or implodes) within a womb of surveillance. The surveillance state is self-regulating and essentially oppressive, but in a very subtle way. Ambiguity is built into most surveillance situations through the stylized, even inviting design of material sites.

Although panoptical circuits are being forged all around, spearheaded by a plethora of technological innovation, the patterns are not seamless and can be recognized. Normally we do not have the privilege to watch, the freedom to participate in the collection of surveillance, but Scher's transmission sites allow interaction with the mechanisms of control by showing watchfulness, sometimes to fetishistic degrees, and providing the opportunity for dual expectations (of the watcher and the watched). These de-installations essentially create isolated points of understanding along the huge, undifferentiated grid of control.

The Pathology of Desire: Deconstructed Emblems

The escapist fantasies represented by porn stars and Harlequin romance novels serve as the central metaphors in the proposed series of assemblages and installations. Using a variety of materials, the specific artifacts in which these symbols are embedded are drastically processed, manipulated, and combined with seemingly unrelated, ordinary items in order to critique and caricature the very nature of culturally mediated desire.

The section of the installation whose source material primarily consists of Harlequin romance novels resembles a series of mutated bookracks (*Shred and Bound: Petrified Romance*). In these works up to 500 individual books are cut into pieces, drilled, threaded with metal rods, "bound" with metal plates, and bolted on each end. The individual book pieces are coated in acrylic emulsion, tar, enamel, and encaustic wax.

In this process, the narrative is literally shattered and the romantic ideal embalmed. The whole rigid, tightly bound structure suggests that a principal element of the romance novel's escapist fantasy is its comfortably fixed image of the exchange between the sexes at the very moment when the social actuality is confusing, shifting, and anxiety-ridden. The mutations derived from these highly formulaic, essentially pornographic artifacts parallel their denatured and wholly artificial character.

Other variations on the books include more elaborate visual metaphors and combinations of materials. In one series, hot water bottles are placed between the rows of book pieces, with strips of a fire hose connecting them to water bottles located in another individual book piece. The hoses suggest a conduit (or a drain) for desire. A physical link between distinct entities and the possibility for emotional, intellectual, and spiritual transference is another possibility implied by the hoses.

The water bottles evoke a warm, healing balm for romantic pain. However, proceeding from the Victorian origins of the romance genre, a more sinister subtext of the water bottle as romantic metaphor emerges from 19th century medicine, in which it was common practice to cure a woman's "broken heart" by administering an enema. In one assemblage, two separate petrified romance racks are connected by a length of fire hose shaped like a fallopian tube. This fallopian tableau is pregnant with the subtext of the Harlequin worldview: sex is bounded by marriage and marriage is bounded by procreation.

Another set of works that recontextualize cultural symbols of desire uses the names of porn stars. The signature work in this series is a carpet sample board, each of whose layered carpet strips is dipped in a mixture of varnish and encaustic wax and stenciled with a porn star's name. The ironic juxtaposition of porn star names with crusty bits of carpet is representative of the general idea in all of these works: cultural criticism as visual pun. The name of a porn star connotes mythic potency, boundless libido, and unrestrained pleasure. The porn milieu is one of glossy exhibitionism and, like the romance novels, escapist fantasy. The carpet sample board represents a more practical, less emotionally charged form of exhibitionism. Both entities represent objects that are bought and sold, extreme opposites on the continuum of commerce. To wrench these names from their slick, overlit realm is to debase this most exalted variety of (debased) commerce while exalting something as lowly as a carpet sample board by encoding it with meanings and symbols it would otherwise never possess.

To use imagination and art to transform and reinterpret is to create meaning and formulate new strategies of analysis. While a dense critique of culturally-induced perversions of desire is intended by these works, the sheer visual levity of each piece creates an overwhelming spirit of thorny satire and ironic impertinence.

