

ArtReview



Pierre Huyghe

Life or something like it...

Julia Scher *I'll Be Gentle, No Consent*
Galerie Drei, Cologne 30 June – 25 August

It seems odd that, until a couple of years ago, Julia Scher's work hadn't been much exhibited for about 15 years. The US artist's pointed and humorous preoccupation with surveillance technologies, machine learning and voyeurism in the name of safety is as relevant now as it was when she emerged during the late 1980s, especially considering that Scher has evidently kept up with technical developments over the years. Following a string of shows since 2016, her exhibition at Galerie Drei proves this again, by restaging – typically for her – elements of a much earlier exhibition, but giving this historicisation of her own position a contemporary framework. Specifically, behind the broad windowed facade of the gallery there is a white plywood wall with a barred balustrade on top. The only opening, a doorway offering a glance into the dramatically lit interior, is crowned by the words VOYEURS CORRIDOR in capital letters and underneath that, a bit smaller, "I'LL BE GENTLE", set off in quote marks.

With this architectural setting Scher quotes her 1991 exhibition *I'll be gentle* at Pat Hearn Gallery, New York, where two such corridors split the gallery into three thematic zones. Yet the reference works very differently in this case, with the installation of the wall reestablishing the separation of outside and inside seemingly abolished by Galerie Drei's welcomingly glazed

facade. The 'voyeuristic' glimpse into the gallery is mostly blocked, but Scher does place a sad-looking houseplant in between the window and the wall; the plant barely conceals a video camera (*Hallway Cam*, 1991/2018) filming the entrance to the Voyeur's Corridor. The direct broadcast is played back on one of two antiquated monitors that sit on the windowsill. The second monitor shows a medley of text and images generated by visitor interaction during the aforementioned exhibition at Pat Hearn Gallery, using the installed camera system and a data-collection programme. Interestingly, the two stacked monitors show in their juxtaposition of different technical generations not only how certain surveillance practices stay the same, but also how our dealings with them change. As self-aware gallery visitors act up for the cameras in the historical footage, it appears that Scher's surveillance equipment was, despite its criticality, taken as an invitation to enter into a flirtatious game.

The crisp colour broadcast on the top monitor shows such little activity at the entrance to the Voyeur's Corridor that it might as well be a freeze-frame. The monotony of the feed could be representative of how unsensational surveillance is today, even with a much greater awareness of its problems. The visibility of this technology is completely different, too. Instead of a monstrous

installation consisting of a multitude of cameras, monitors and hundreds of metres of cable, which were visible in the Voyeur's Corridor back then (the installation is now called *The Schürmann House*, 1991) and is permanently installed at the eponymous collector couple's house), the interior today stays almost empty. Inside – you can go in, but it's viewable from outside too – there are spotlights, magically charging the view from the outside. Other than that there is only *AI on Location* (2018), Amazon's 'smart speaker' Echo Plus, which is viewable through the aperture in the corridor and emits a female voice – Julia rather than Alexa. The voice is completely devoted to service and recites a sort of techno-poetic spoken word, contextually often askew ("biowars are treatment options for trauma"), but occasionally referring to the exhibition and data security in general. Here, Scher seems chiefly interested in the dark abyss that opens behind this eerie design object, which never gives away which information it is gathering and processing. The surrounding emptiness in the Voyeur's Corridor enhances the dark aura of this little machine: Scher could not have found a better way to emphasise how topical her works and her interests in the embraces and strangleholds of surveillance technology still are today. *Moritz Scheper*

Translated from the German by Liam Tickner



I'll Be Gentle, No Consent, 2018 (installation view).
Courtesy Galerie Drei, Cologne