Julia Scher
'The Ecology of Visibility'
June 4 – July 4, 2020

White lettering, ghostly and grand as the writing on tombstones, on white glossy signboards threaten to vanish from view on the gallery walls at any moment. Some of these phrases like „Tell me when you're ready" (1994) seem to lure the viewer into comfort and safety, like charming service personnel. Usually such warning signs are planted on roads or in front of property boundaries, suggesting "users" of a given space to condition their behavior according to certain rules – along the tried and true legal principle Caveat emptor: May the „user" of this space beware. Yet the twenty signboards – arranged in a grid, handy and seemingly guileless, made from recyclable metal – aren't your typical warning agents of control in the name of the state or a private property owner once spurned in the The Five Man Electrical Band hit song „Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign" (1970). Scher's signs tie on her early instructive series of Signs from the 1980s as well as her ongoing series of performance, web and multimedia works „Security by Julia" (1988–). In times of an increasingly controlled public space her works to this day recap the two-faced aesthetics of security systems by means of application, infiltration and alienation. Formative for her work were also protest movements emerging in the 1980s in which the language of advertisement and publicity were appropriated in order to make a case for everyone's „Right to have Rights" (Hannah Arendt) and to free the oppressed bodies from governmentality during the AIDS pandemic. Be it posters of the activist-collective GRAN FURY like „Kissing doesn't kill – ignorance does" or the logo of the organization Queer Nation who reclaimed the originally demeaning slur and connected it with their own imagination of a „nation" divergent from a heteronormative dictate. What was clear back then is clear today: „We buy into the ideas of signs".

Today, as neo-Benthamic "smart policy" has long since smoothly designed and totalitarianised the everywhere surveillance zone under the guise of individual development with guaranteed security for everyone, Scher's "whiteboards" deconstruct the idea of the warning sign itself: They defy all coherence and order in their hanging. They are without relation, even detached from the actual physical space and utilize invisibility as a multi detector of self absorption. „You are the one that does it all, the one that you control, the one that you can check (...). It is your own Independence". Thus the teaser text of Scher's online project "Don't Worry" floats virulently in space and elicits its own situated point of view in a dynamic surveillance environment, in which any external border of a personal territory seems to have dissolved.

That our libidinal drives, which also drive us into digital serfage, are in line with a corrupted vigilance under the umbrella of harmful protection and service industries is illustrated by an Alexa speaker with gas horn attachment. It sounds echoes of the wall texts recited by the artist herself conjuring up paranoid bugging phantasies and „Weeping Angel" cyber attacks in the gallery space. Ultimately, Scher's works here don't stop at a simple transfiguration of perpetrator and observed victim as ethical virgins and a mere sensitization against intruders, but rather encourage the use of latitudes of invasion. That the promise of territoriality is still fulfilled on the lived side; the acting side of power (Claude Raffestine) is demonstrated by an installation consisting of two used spray cans. Each in black and white colour coding of the brand "Montana Black", probably one of the most popular spray cans among graffiti sprayers and vandalists („best coverage, strong colour, quick drying") next to a lid in Scher's signature pink as if ready to hand: „I'm only reclaiming, taking back space." (Lone Sloane/Julia Scher)

Elisa R. Linn
(translated from German)

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Julia Scher (*1954, Los Angeles) lives and works in Cologne where she holds a professorship in Multimedia Performance & Surveillant Architectures at the Kunsthochschule für Medien (KHM).

Scher did have solo exhibitions at Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Aachen, Germany; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA), San Francisco; the Maurine and Robert Rothschild Gallery, Harvard University, Cambridge; Fri-Art Centre d'Art Contemporain Kunsthalle, Fribourg, Switzerland (two-person exhibition with Vanessa Beecroft); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; The Wexner Center, Columbus a.o. Among the public collections including her work is Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Neue Galerie Graz, Austria; The Guggenheim Foundation and MoMA PS1, both New York; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA); and the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain (MAMCO), Geneva, Switzerland a.o.