# Julia Scher's Aesthetic Occupations

Looking at Julia Scher's installations, we might be tempted to imagine the future conditions of public life as decidedly dystopic. But to think of her work simply in this way would be to close down precipitously its complicated engagement with the ways in which we inhabit public space. There is something that is at once more subtle and more obvious at work here. It is precisely within the orbit of the question of rights, and more precisely, aesthetic rights, that this something might be glimpsed.

With their claustrophobic layering of points of view, Scher's installations present different forms of occupation that make public space (and the space of the museum or the gallery is, at least in its Enlightenment conception, a utopian public space) a troubling and disturbing place to inhabit. On one hand, there is the occupation of the real space of the installation – the museum – by citizens who have a claim to that space. These citizens, or viewers, make no attempt to conceal their presence and indeed are only slowly and painfully made aware by the very operation of Scher's work that their "disinterestedness," their refusal to conceal and arrive by deceit, is itself the very subject of her work.

Then there is a second form of occupation, the occupation signalled by the act of surveillance. Literally we are presented with an actual view (of ourselves) that at first seems to be seen and controlled from elsewhere. We are invited, however, through a strangely perverse form of masquerade, to identify with that view (from elsewhere), to be part of its operative imperative, to watch ourselves from the point of view of a presence whose indifference eventually becomes the only thing we can be sure of (it looks, but it appears to look "democratically," shifting across the horizon of the gallery according to the speed of the cameras' motors, etc.). I think that this indifference is key, because it returns us to the question of the Kantian viewer, a viewer whose disinterestedness is startled by this other look which itself is mockingly disinterested.

This extraordinary double envelope of looks demonstrates that the question of what we might call aesthetic rights seems to have an importance equal to that of the questions of "power-knowledge" that have been so eagerly applied to Scher's work. Perhaps we need to acknowledge more forcefully that Scher's installations take place in the museum (or if not in the museum then with a nod to it). They are operative within the traditional public space of aesthetic concerns, of a public space where we believe, or at least once believed, the formal foundation (natural finality) for political judgement might be achieved or imagined. Perhaps Scher's work should be read less as an exemplary articulation of a certain global situation, and more as a meditation on the experience of occupying "the museum," and occupying it now at the end of the twentieth century when its importance seems less articulated.

This is not to say that the more general question of surveillance is not important in Scher's work, for it returns incessantly in any discussion of it. However, rather than simply decrying the condition of surveillance and its omnipresence in our everyday lives, Scher's work suggests that the very act of surveillance has a certain a priori neutrality which makes it more difficult to cast positive and negative poles, respectively, to "the watched" and "the watcher." Museums obviously require surveillance to guard against any nonprescribed behaviour: everything from stealing works of art to having sex next to a painting (even, perhaps, under the influence of the effect that painting aroused in us). But in Scher's work things are complicated: here, the object that the museum would need to be put under surveillance is the work of surveillance itself.

It is not simply that we do not know what the real image is, but more radically, that we can never be sure if there is any purpose to the confrontation that would presuppose a body that is to watch and a body that watches. As I have suggested, in Scher's installations, this is often (but not always) the same body, and it is a body that is required to work hard in experiencing the work of art as precisely not the refractive presence of an outside content (all we see is the occupation of the space that is already *marked* for aesthetic occupation). One might even think that the perfect spectator for her works is the one who is frozen in a kind of perpetual critical equivocation. Frozen, because once the spectator spots herself in the work and also grasps that she has not been asked, finally, to surrender her right to look freely (that she herself might be the only thing/body that is watching her), she might exhaust herself in continually tracing the map of vision that the work marks out.

Scher's work makes us think about how identity is always granted, given from somewhere else by something (or someone) else. The identity business is the business par excellence of the state. It needs to grant it, and grant it incessantly. Perhaps we misunderstand the state's apparent "generosity" in this respect for we are always demanding it as if it were something we have been wrongly denied. So when we receive it (in whatever form), we often believe that a victory has been accomplished. Certainly victory is there, but also loss. Because in being granted an identity we give up our right to be useless or irrelevant to the state. Being useless is a condition of the aesthetic and is one of the reasons why the latter can be so troubling, even dangerous. What is most dangerous to the state is the being or act that is without identity; in being literally untranslatable, the thing without identity will never know where it should or should not be seen. Scher's installations give us a sense of this problem of identity, this problem of receiving an identity and, perhaps, the problem of embracing that identity just a little enthusiastically. **— Public Access**

following pages from *Predictive Engineering*, Julia Scher, 1993 (photography T. Charles Erickson)