

Marie Sester Biography

By Holly Willis
Creative Capital Foundation
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Marie Sester began her career as an architect, earning her master's degree in architecture from the Ecole d'Architecture in Strasbourg, France, but her interest was less in how to build viable structures and more in how architecture affects our understanding of the world. "What do these signs, these forms, these things that surround us mean?" asks the New York-based artist. "What do they say about ideology? About capitalism? I realized after I finished my degree that I was interested in architectural forms on all levels, from the concrete elements such as city streets to ideological values, and how they evolve together."

Sester, who grew up in Paris, decided not to become an architect, but instead to pursue a path that would accommodate her more philosophically inclined interests. She began making installations that investigate the ways societies implement forms, focusing primarily on ideas of transparency, visibility, and access.

" 'Transparency' is a term that comes from architecture in the last century, due to the concept of the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham, 1791, and the desire to have everything be transparent, using glass, light, and clean lines," Sester explains. "And transparency also became a major value in politics, media, and business."

Sester's interest in visibility is related to transparency. "Visibility is connected to transparency in that you can see through and through and through; in a way, transparency removes the visibility of things." Her fascination with visibility is also linked to the evolution of visual culture in the 20th century, from the Hollywood star industry in the 1910s, to the explosion of advertising beginning in the 1940s, through television, Pop art, and more recently, the Internet.

Sester's third interest, access, emerges from the fact that a wired culture increasingly demands regulated forms of entry. "From bank cards to your telephone number, you always need some kind of way in, a way to enter," she notes.

All three of these interests are fundamental to Sester's latest project, ACCESS, an installation that will combine surveillance technology, a website, a unique robotic spotlight and acoustic

beam system. The surveillance cameras will be mounted in a public, but undisclosed, place outside the museum or art spaces, and web users will secretly be able to track anonymous people as they enter surveillance zones. Overall, the project illuminates our fascination with voyeurism and technologies for spying on others. However, as Sester points out, it also sparks fears of being watched, of being controlled by an increasingly panoptic culture that coerces and controls its subjects through invisible forms of technology.

"The piece plays with the ambiguity between surveillance and the fascination with forms of control," explains Sester. "Think of the people who have web cams at home: the popularity of JenniCam [a website that uses digital cameras and the Internet to make a private space public], for example. Then there are the TV shows such as *Big Brother* that have become games, something that is very attractive. But these devices are used to control people at the same time, and people fear it. So with my project I'm looking at that, too."

Sester recently returned from Japan where she enjoyed a 10-month stay as an artist in residence at the Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences. During her residency, she worked on the project's complex tracking system, audio program, and the website design. She is currently booking the piece into working with museums and art spaces and trying to lock down public spaces that will allow to mount her temporary surveillance cameras, robotic spotlight and acoustic beam system. Her Creative Capital grant is to help secure venues: *ACCESS FOR "ACCESS"*.

Sester knows that ACCESS will spark mixed reactions. "Some people will really hate it and run away, while others will just enjoy being under the light," she says. "But it's my job to look at values and assess how you get access to information, and how we behave within those values. I want to look at things that we accept as a given, generation after generation, the things that make up a whole world, a whole system. ACCESS, with its embodiment of the pleasures and fears of authority, surveillance, and control, offers a good starting point.

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