

Laetitia Gendre - This is not Versailles

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The electronic ankle monitor continues to enjoy great popularity among statisticians, politicians and legal professionals alike. While in the 1980s it was considered a way of relieving overcrowded prisons and a more humane alternative to incarceration, in the current war on terror it is seen as one "measure for improving security". Yet it is only more recently that critical questions regarding ankle monitors have been raised.

What is this device and what does it do? Laetitia Gendre has reflected on and extensively researched such issues. She discovered that the history of the ankle monitor began with the U.S. judge Jack Love and, quite tellingly, with a drawing - a Spiderman comic from the year 1977. Love recognized the great potential contained in this sequence of images and developed - based on the weapon used by the diabolic Kingpin character - an ankle monitor that was soon implemented as an effective measure to improve the untenable conditions in U.S. prisons. In 1983 he posed as the first wearer of an ankle monitor on the front-page of the Albuquerque Journal. The historical newspaper that Gendre copied even features a close-up photo of his ankle. The portrait of the shackled judge is only one of many images that Gendre presents to shed light on the phenomenon of the ankle monitor and to subtly raise critical concerns. Is the shackled judge in reality the first victim of a merciless surveillance system? Or rather a hero who revolutionized the idea of surveillance?

"This is not Versailles" poses these questions to the viewers by offering them a glimpse behind the statistical curtain. Gendre presents the monitoring location - a single-family home that embodies the suburban dream - and exhibits it together with recorded interviews, video images, paintings and drawings to circuitously reveal the uncertainty and ambivalence in which the wearers of such monitors dwell as they serve out their sentences. This condition is the motif at the center of the exhibition: the model of a private apartment is shrunk to the size of a single cell, over and over again the video images depict a longing for the ocean, while the motifs of the drawings and depictions of birds initially remind us of the interviews. Yet the distinction between fact and fiction - as is made clear in the first episodes - doesn't hold up. Instead stories, reports, pictures and facts are interfused, yielding a surreal overview that is so disturbing precisely because it seems to have been taken from real life.

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