



Installation view of "In Practice: Magdalena Petroni," 2026. Photo: Charles Benton, Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York, the artist and General Expenses, Mexico City; Tomas Redrado Art, Miami and José Ignacio

Magdalena Petroni

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SculptureCenter

Drab carpeting, inert tennis balls, and a crushed Red Bull can littered the floor of Magdalena Petroni's recent exhibition at SculptureCenter. Above, popcorn ceiling tiles and harsh LED strip lights threatened collapse at any moment. Ergonomic products designed for human movement—dance poles, computer chairs, tennis shoes, car parts—monstrously conjoined and contorted

against a backdrop of faux-wood paneling, greenscreen walls, and a painted inspo-core sign reminding visitors, “EVERYTHING WILL BE OK.”

Over the course of six weeks, the Santiago-based artist scavenged materials from Queens junkyards, sidewalk trash piles, and thrift shops to build a dismembered replica of a corporate office. Curated by Jovanna Venegas as part of In Practice, the museum’s signature open-call program, *Say Cheese!*—a sculptural installation that Petroni describes as “part movie set, part crime scene”—also served as a stage to debut her first film work.

The five-minute video looped on a monitor set above a conference table fashioned out of recycled shipping boxes, on which two sets of headphones disquietly awaited visitors. Composed of YouTube clips from vehicular research labs, the subtitled film tells a deadpan love story from the perspective of two crash-test dummies coming to terms with their sole purpose: to endlessly cosplay human death. Since their invention in 1949, these anthropomorphic test devices have been subjected to a merciless re-enactment of violence in the name of scientific advancement and product development, instruments of accelerationist pursuits made in our mirror image.

“I’ve got this pink plastic face and fake body,” one dummy says, “but I don’t know if I’m me or whatever the fuck they stuffed inside me.” Collision after collision zips across the screen, the facial expressions of the dummies unflinching, unfeeling. “There’s no proof we’re alive and no proof we’re dead either,” muses the other. “We just live in a loop inside this operating room, under the flashes.” Techno music pulses through the video, punctuating scenes in which green rave lights beam from the distant horizon of a nocturnal highway. Petroni pulled these images from footage of a Chinese motorway, where bright lasers are projected to keep nighttime drivers from falling asleep at the wheel. Museum visitors bobbed their heads and swiveled in their computer chairs to the beat, perhaps with a sudden urge to pull an all-nighter at the club or office.

Petroni pairs her protagonists’ existential dread with an underlying desire for escape and sexual abandon: “I wanna feel this. The vertigo. Your body next to mine...I want more speed. I want more techno. I wanna break with you.” This sentiment encapsulates the extreme, all-gas-no-brakes/breaks spirit fueling *Say Cheese!*, which, Petroni told me, was inspired by J. G. Ballard’s 1971 novel *Crash!* about people who derive erotic pleasure from car accidents. Similar to Ballard, who adamantly cautioned against the 20th century’s rapidly evolving technological exploits, Petroni draws uncanny parallels between the dummies’ lust for “something real” and contemporary society’s compulsions and exasperation under capitalism (I would describe it as “late-stage,” but that feels too optimistic).

At a time when art discourse and museum surveys are probing our ever-changing relationship with anthropomorphic technologies, *Say Cheese!* flirted with hyperreality in ways simultaneously perturbing and amusing, exposing unwitting viewers to the hellish yet titillating price we collectively pay in a blind, high-speed chase toward so-called progress. “After all,” Petroni says, “nothing escapes the loop.”