

JULIE BECKER

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a Master Piece  
to pay the Rent



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by Richard Birkett,  
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by Jocelyn Miller,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Richard Birkett

*I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent* is an exhibition devoted to the work of Julie Becker (1972–2016). Becker lived and worked in Los Angeles, where from her time as a student at CalArts in the early 1990s up to her death, she produced a remarkable body of drawings, collages, photographs, installations and videos with a singular vision. With the psychological, material and cinematic geographies of the city playing a central role in her work, Becker articulated a (sub)urban imaginary, in which filmic fantasy and the desire for self-realisation are deeply entangled with social and economic fragility.

For the majority of her adult life, Becker lived in Echo Park, an underserved area of Los Angeles that in the 1990s was home to a predominantly Latino community, but in the last two decades has undergone dramatic shifts due to gentrification and real estate speculation, causing the displacement of many long-term residents. In his book *City of Quartz*, the scholar and activist Mike Davis defined the early 1990s as the ‘worst crisis period since the early Depression’ for Los Angeles, wrought by the uneven impact of economic globalisation and an ‘explosive convergence of street anger, poverty, environmental crisis, and capital flight.’ Rather than commenting on these conditions, Becker addressed the impossibility of finding a place from which to perceive them, working from within a conflux of material and psychic precarity—what she described as an ‘uneasy coexistence between reason and intuition.’

Becker herself experienced the instability of single-room occupancy accommodation and dilapidated rentals. These spaces appear in her work as physical and mental architectures expressed through everyday ‘research’ into the

lives of those living immediately around her combined with imagined narratives and cultural references. The references she selects speak to the mythology of the late 20th century American Dream turned nightmare, drawing from sources as diverse as Stephen King's *The Shining*, Disney's fantasy *The Gnome-Mobile*, Kay Thompson's children's books *Eloise*, and suburban stoner myths espousing the 'karmic convergence' between *The Wizard of Oz* and Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

*In my work I try to mimic the process of how we think and integrate ourselves into the world so that we can see without dividers. Characters abstracted from real life and locations taken out of books and movies all interact within these walls, and invite the viewer to travel with them. I hope my work will move people—from one place to another!*

Becker's epic installation *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–96) takes the form of an architectural structure, partially divided into a series of rooms and zones. Beginning with what appears ambiguously as both a waiting room and an office, complete with an equally cryptic set of floor plans, the arranged spaces veer between film-set realism and sculptural assemblage. At the centre of the installation are two large architectural models that mirror some of the installation's rooms and extend into multiple further segmented spaces containing varying miniature tableaux. The models are absent of any figures; instead, Becker stages an object theatre of found items and carefully constructed scale replicas, with a sparse psychodrama enacted in each room.

Among these miniature sets and within the wider installation are documents and objects suggesting particular 'residents' of these spaces. One of the most notable

characters is Danny Torrance, the child from *The Shining*, who is endowed with psychic abilities and able to see the horrific past of the Overlook Hotel where his father works as caretaker. Another signature character is Eloise, the protagonist of the eponymous 1950s children's book series, who is the privileged sole inhabitant of the New York Plaza Hotel's fifth floor. The Hollywood psychic Voxx is also present. Voxx's room in the model is marked on the front office's floor plan as 'The Intuitive Approach', in contrast to the room opposite, labelled as 'The Objective Attempt.' Among this spatial and narrative network of lives, fictional and real, the viewer of *Researchers, Residents* is given the standpoint of both inhabitant and omniscient observer.

*The goal of installation art should be to create an experience between objects so that viewers are transported outside themselves to recognize a larger, more complex world. Dislocation, an uneasy coexistence between reason and intuition, a sense of touch and smell.*

*Researchers and Residents throws the viewer into an unfocused state. It's like getting in your car and driving without any particular destination. This kind of openness can be scary but its also potentially comforting and challenging. In this project you can route yourself, create your own itinerary. You can follow the plans in the front office. Or you can see it as a network to progress through. You can draw your own conclusions from connections already there.*

Throughout Becker's work, interior spaces appear volatile and provisional, conjuring sites for temporary refuge and fantastical escape. The writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus has identified the sequence of model rooms in *Researchers*,

*Residents* as indicative of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels prevalent in American urban areas – ‘the last stop before homelessness.’ In two spaces adjacent to the models, flattened cardboard refrigerator boxes line the floor and others stand upright or on their sides. Becker has stated how ‘a refrigerator box, in American cities, can be the last refuge of the homeless. They’re also temporary places for children to play in. But in this installation, the refrigerator boxes are also people—they take on human characteristics.’ If the ‘residents’ of the rooms in the model hotel are largely anonymous, present only through the traces left by their possessions and notes strewn around the spaces, then these anthropomorphic boxes, positioned to convey particular affect, take on an added physical presence.

The back room of the installation suggests another perspective, that of the ‘researcher.’ Filled with objects, papers and photographs, it appears as a physical manifestation of patterns of enquiry and association that connect back to elements throughout the installation. Here, we find research files related to the ‘residents’ and notebooks purporting to belong to Danny and Eloise. Photographs previously reproduced in miniature in the models appear in full scale and a videotape of an interview with Voxxx plays on a small TV. If Becker herself is both the literal and fictional author of this space—at once a workshop for the production of *Researchers*, *Residents* as an artwork and the library of an obsessive researcher into the lives of the occupants of the anonymous SRO hotel—then the viewer becomes complicit in this blurring of roles.

*The presentation of this room makes people wonder exactly what role the viewer is supposed to take on: Are the viewers researching the ‘topics’ raised by the exhibition or are they just trying to figure out what they*



*want from the installation and what I want from them? What exactly do we mean when we describe something as being ‘behind the scenes’? Where is it? From what place do we normally view a situation?*

*The back room should feel privileged to not be privileged—rather, to be included in the flow that moves through physical and mental spaces. A ghost moving through the walls?*

Becker's work mines the psychic spaces between cultural imaginaries and personal experiences and draws directly from states of dreamlike fantasy. Her video *Transformation and Seduction* (1993/2000), which was first produced with a voice-over by her father, combines found footage from live-action Disney films such as *The Gnome-Mobile* (1967) and altered spoken passages from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936). Much of the footage shows a young girl, seemingly stuck in a repetitious cycle, wandering through an ethereal forest glade. Further images follow the trope of a fairy-tale quest, with figures running through shining fields, peering into the nighttime gloom of a castle ruins. In Nabokov's novel, the narrator comes across his doppelganger, a homeless man, sleeping under a bush, and conceives a plan to fake his own murder in order to collect his life insurance. He ruminates on this scheme as a grand artwork, dwelling on the nature of the double, the mirror, and the deceitfulness of representation. Becker's altered excerpts create their own form of mirroring through uncanny correspondences between image and text. In her rephrasing, the substitution of the homeless man for a girl creates a disconcerting and psychologically loaded twist. The position of the subject shifts between the male narrators (both fictional and real), the Disney archetype of the young girl and Becker herself.

...as if I were looking for, and finding (and still doubting a little) proof that I was I, and that I was really in the forest, searching for one particular common girl, named -----, but had nothing in common with her, who, at the moment, was probably lolling under a bush. And then again, the thrill of that marvel made my heart miss a beat. That girl, especially when she slept, where her features were motionless, showed me my own face, my mask, the flawlessly pure image of my corpse.

The uncanny nature of the alignments between cultural artefacts created in *Transformation and Seduction* is taken to another level in the video installation *Suburban Legend* (1999). The work pivots on an urban myth, relayed to Becker by her brother and his 'stoner friends', that the Pink Floyd album *The Dark Side of the Moon* is an alternative sound track to the ultimate American family film, *The Wizard of Oz*. When the film and album are played together with the album on loop, curious correlations between sound and image form. Becker's installation presents the synced film and album using a home movie set-up, accompanied by a series of notes marking the time codes for each particular moment of correspondence.

Like all urban myths, any concrete explanation for these seemingly beyond-coincidental synchronicities is subsumed by conspiracy theory and an aura of 'karmic occurrence'—the feedback loops of paranoiac suburbia. *Suburban Legend* points towards a space of production of meaning outside the realm of human agency – one that lingers between drug-induced visions and the surfacing of repressed systems and wider cultural psychosis. Perhaps one of the most noted points of synchronicity occurs when Dorothy opens the farmhouse door to reveal Munchkinland, the 'cha-ching' of the cash register sounds on the track *Money* and the film shifts from black and white to Technicolor – Becker's accompanying



notes beg the question: 'A better future (supposedly) for Dorothy and the possibility of progress?'

*What is a force field? Is it something you can create or something that pre-exists human intervention? Did man invent this in his own home planet Earth? Or did Superman bring it back from his planet (Krypton) before the planet exploded? In other words, is a Force Field invented by God (Hanna Barbera?) or is something manufactured by a scientist (what kind of a scientist?) in a government laboratory existing underneath the earth in a secret location close to the Arizona/New Mexico border?*

In 1999, Becker began work on a project titled *Whole*, which was initially conceived as a totalising installation, but rather, became a fragmented and open-ended series of individual works. *Whole* centred on the Echo Park building where she lived—a bungalow owned by the California Federal Bank that was entangled in a series of lawsuits, and was slowly sinking into the mud on which it was built. Becker occupied the space at a reduced rent with the arrangement that she clear out the basement containing the personal belongings of its previous tenant, a stained-glass maker who passed away from an AIDS related illness. Instead, she proceeded to build a cosmology of works around the former occupant's belongings, with the building operating as both a studio and as a stage for a series of photographs and a film. Moreover, she produced multiple drawings and books filled with notes that take the psychic, material and mythological associations within and around the building as their starting point, generating speculative plans for installations and fantastical machines.

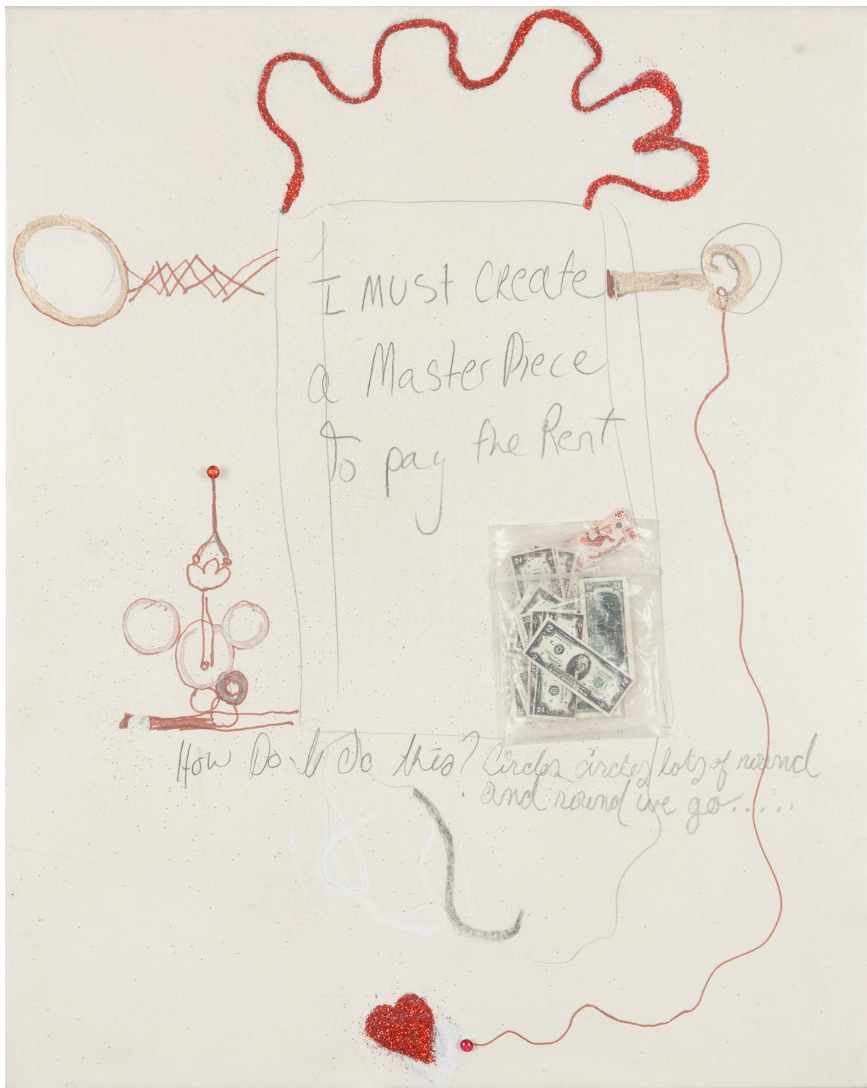
*No one ever came to collect [his] things. It's like he mattered to no one. He was about as invisible as a person could be. I guess I wanted to bring him to life again and ask him some questions... as well as honour him just for making it through life as long as he did.*

For Becker, the relationship between the ground floor of the building where she lived and the basement filled with remnants of the previous occupant's life, constituted a flow of energy and possible alchemy, which Kraus described as a "metaphysical-conceptual lab." Appearing in many of the *Whole* works, as a looming external force in this psychic network, is the figure of the California Federal Bank building, an imposing modernist monolith complete with a rooftop helipad visible from the window of the bungalow, which has dominated the Echo Park cityscape since the 1960s. The long-term owner of the land on which the Cal Fed building stands is the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel—founded by the Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson in the 1920s—an institution that encouraged a short-lived wave of business and real estate development in the Echo Park area in the 1960s.

The video *Federal Building with Music* (2002) features a model of the Cal Fed building being winched through a hole, penetrating Becker's building, connecting the basement and ground floor. The accompanying music is appropriated from a cassette tape Becker found discarded in the car park of the bank, of the Mexican technobanda outfit Banda Arkángel R-15. And the sculpture *1910 West Sunset Boulevard* (2000), a realist depiction of a section of pavement outside the bank building, is loaded with enigmatic traces of the abstract and concrete forces that shape an urban environment. Highlighting these forces further, and their operation as much in the realm of the mystic as the material,

on one of her notebook pages Becker wrote FEDERAL BABEL/CALIFORNIA, casting the Cal Fed building as a looming end-of-times monument to the hubristic alignment between capital, evangelism and real-estate development. As throughout Becker's work, in *Whole*, objects and physical structures take on deep, almost forensic import as connective tissue between individuals and systems, and the 'consensual hallucinations' that underpin 'reality.'

*Of course, if we tried looking at the world 'all at once' we would most likely go nowhere. I like the possibility of looking at everything in the world, especially at the same time. I call it the incredible disappearing experiment. Who knows what would really happen if we could do this?... I tried to figure out how space, time and the human beings that live within them all coexist.*



## AUTOFICTIONS

### Interior Progressions in Julie Becker's *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–1996) Jocelyn Miller

Julie Becker's (1972–2016) masterwork, *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–1996), resembles a cabinet of narrative curiosity in the shape of a haunted house, where the everyday and extraordinary, commercial and domestic, and public and private, collide and collude. Interlacing residential housing and mental states, the work develops a distinct psychoaesthetic through imaginative architectural arrangements and outgrowths of mundane objects. An immersive exercise in transporting, narrative architecture, this large-scale work dramatizes the fusion of the psychological and the spatial through the interior scapes of both rooms and minds.

Upon entering, we encounter a reception desk absent a host. The desktop name plates bear the titles “Real Estate Agent,” “Entertainment Agent,” “Psychiatrist,” and “Concierge,” and we get the sense that each of the named service professionals who works here represents an aspect of Becker's artistic inquiry, which comes together to present what the artist described as “an inner world turned inside out.”<sup>1</sup> What unites these professions is that in one way or another, all are caretakers—of one's property, one's job, one's mind, and one's aspirations. Each of these vocations exists in service to the ego, converting interpersonal emotional skills into capital through the transformative medium of human need.

After studying briefly in Berlin in 1991, Becker transferred to California Institute of the Arts, where her thesis culminated in the first version of *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*.

1 Becker, Julie and Bernhard Bürgi, eds. *Julie Becker: Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*. Zürich: Kunsthalle Zürich, 1997. p. 24.

Partitioning a student gallery, Becker created a progression of discrete environments, each borrowing vernacular architectures both actual and fictional.

The first room is an archetypal waiting room, a purgatorial buffer zone that, as Becker explained, could have been plucked from “an industrial park in the San Fernando Valley.”<sup>2</sup> Amidst dingy yellow paint, goldfish swimming in a bowl, and a chintzy rug, the only hint at what’s to come is a mysterious map declaring: “You Are Here.” The question of where “here” is located becomes more complicated as we are funneled out into a large central space and confront a miniature version of the waiting room we have just left. Having taken us down the proverbial rabbit hole, this tiny reception area opens out into two elaborate, reduced-scale architectural models that pay homage not only to Becker’s full-scale installation itself (a meta-model), but to a selection of famous interiors as well—from the iconic Overlook Hotel of Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1980) to the elaborate botanical fuss of The Plaza Hotel’s Palm Court. An assembly of anthropomorphized cardboard boxes evoke provisional temporary shelter as well as classical statuary, or else vessels for child’s play (this latter reference made especially vivid in contemporaneous 1990s comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, where cardboard boxes become time machines, or other inventions like the “Transmogrifier” and “Cerebral Enhance-O-Tron”). The final room in the installation serves as both a backstage and an engine for the work, with masses of files, papers, notebooks, photographs, goldfish crackers, a Ouija board, and cassette tapes strewn about. One cassette tape, titled “conversations about my art after 3 days of no sleep,” and a rolled-up sleeping bag, suggest sleepless, forensically fervent nights dedicated to divining some unnamed mystery.

2 Ibid, p.12.



Of the roles laid out in the work's title, Becker chooses that of "researcher" to take primacy. The rooms, only recently abandoned by their inhabitants, are littered with intersecting, multidirectional breadcrumbs that lead visitors down countless paths. Minuscule papers and notebooks are filled with even smaller type, legible only through the use of magnifying glasses the artist has placed throughout the models. Confronted with this, the viewer is seduced into the role of researcher through sheer curiosity; there is something both banal and salacious about whatever has taken, or will take place, within these rooms. As Becker noted, the work "allows viewers to experience themselves alternately as participants and observers."<sup>3</sup> Devoid of inhabitants, the evocative traces of life make us wonder if the "life" implied by the artist is real or fictional. Earlier examples of Becker's play with real and fictional space can be found in her *Interior Corners* series (1993). Comprising close crops of corners of rooms that are both actual-size and miniature, the resulting photographs confuse the real and staged spaces through printing at uniform scale.

Becker's work resonated within the Los Angeles art community. Upon graduating in 1996, she was invited to realize *Researchers* anew for the São Paulo Bienal, with the support of a curator and an institution. Shortly thereafter, in 1997, Becker was invited to realize the piece again at the Kunsthalle Zurich, during which time collectors acquired the work, with the ultimate promise of donating it to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. This gift was made official in 2003, on the occasion of MoCA's collection show *Sitings: Installation Art 1969–2002*. It was the final time the work was installed with the artist's guidance.

3 Ibid, p.24.

In *Julie Becker: I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent*, the installation is presented for the first time without the benefit of the artist's presence, raising the question: How does her absence change the work? Her presence lingers, eerily reminiscent of Becker's own description of the work as a "flow that moves through physical and mental spaces. A ghost moving through the walls?"<sup>4</sup>

While she was alive, the work's status shifted over time, first, as a scrappy and economically-realized project in an academic setting, then as a more developed work under the auspices of institutional exhibition presentations, and finally, as a work in a major museum's collection. This lifecycle had an impact on the work, but never so great as that of the artist's own absence. This loss proposes a sad, fraught, and fascinating task for the institution that holds the work in its collection, as well as other individuals and institutions who wish to exhibit it in the future. In earlier renditions, *Researchers* was a hive of interactivity between the viewer, the installation's environment, and the artist herself. As Becker said of the "Researcher" room:

*the back room is the brain center for the entire installation—it's the workshop, storage room, the library. It isn't separate. This room contains versions of objects exhibited throughout the space. But here, the outtakes aren't thrown away...there are files, drawings, motivational stickers, an unfinished painting of a cabin in the forest, and a copy machine to copy any materials you might want to take with you.*<sup>5</sup>

4        Ibid, p.35.

5        Ibid, p.35.

Indeed, in some versions of the work, viewers were invited to rifle through the many papers, books, VHS tapes, and other items, and even take a piece of the work with them, by making xerox copies. This interactive element further expanded the physically dispersed, even virtual footprint of the artwork. This striking detail echoes the then-still nascent 1990s practice of digesting and entering into dense information fields, like clicking deeper and deeper into hypertext online. The work's multidirectional mappings anticipate the forking narratives we have come to expect from videogames and virtuality. "I like the possibility of looking at everything in the world, especially at the same time. I call it the incredible disappearing experiment," Becker once remarked.<sup>6</sup> She described *Researchers* as a "network," and observed, "some people think my work is like a homemade CD-ROM because of its nonlinearity, with various entering and exiting points. I think this is pretty funny because we would not have invented 'being everywhere instantly' if our minds were not there already."<sup>7</sup> This foregrounding of the piece in terms of new media and its attempts to more closely approximate the ineffable properties of our brain's mental processing reveals the proto-virtuality at play in Becker's work. Despite its ostensibly analog materiality, the piece asks the viewer to choose their own adventure, and, through exaggerated shifts in scale, to virtually inhabit the elaborate miniatures populating Becker's world.

Among the cast of protagonists to which *Researchers* makes reference is the privileged, insouciant Eloise of Kay Thompson's eponymous 1955 children's book, who has the run of New York City's Plaza Hotel. Her foil is another young loner living in a hotel, Danny Torrance of *The Shining*, who

6 Ibid, p.24.

7 Ibid, p.33.

is by comparison vulnerable and financially insecure, yet endowed with psychic abilities. Both negotiate the isolation of living in conditions designed for impermanence, coping by means of a natural knack for digesting fantasy and horror through vast mental capacities; while Eloise converses richly with her pets, Danny has a prophetic imaginary friend. Through extensive personal journals, Becker described the inner lives of these fictional characters, producing a kind of experimental auto-fanfic.

The paranormal references that link the architectures housing these characters to their states of mind underscore a throughline in her work: the psychological residues that inhabitants imprint upon the spaces they occupy. In addition to narrative traces of Eloise and Danny, Becker authored twelve profiles for the imagined “residents” of the work’s title, illustrating her fascination with the societal cross sections offered by occupants of transitory spaces like hotels, motels, and single-room occupancy hotels (SROs). These liminal places, which are never fully vacated, maintain a sense of being continually haunted. Becker’s staged sets and cryptic maze of associations have an almost taxonomic quality, to which her close friend, the writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus, alluded when she said if “the universe is a movie, the artist’s job is neither to decode nor to create, but to identify some temporary systems within the chaos.”<sup>8</sup>

But Becker was always circumspect about attempts for clarity or conclusion. “It’s also supposed to be fun,” she cautioned, “thinking, you know, can be completely suicidal. Sometimes it’s better to just zone out.” Despite all her demands for a forensic level of scrutiny, Becker simultaneously wants us to fuzz our focus, making way for

8 Kraus, Chris. *Video Green*. South Pasadena and Boston: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2004. p. 185.

extra-logical intuition and fantasy, and to use dissociation and play as powerful analytical tools. Resisting rational sense-making in favor of the open-ended and associative, Becker described her own art-making as a “delirium of digression.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than coax coherence, Becker encourages dissolution, even irrelevance, as a way of pointing to its impossibility.

Kraus has observed that in Becker’s work, “The faux grandeur of commerce and the constriction of poverty exist on the same plane, both are equally present.” For Kraus, this shuttling between abundance and squalor suggests art might offer “a form of astral travel between social realms.”<sup>10</sup> In her work, Becker questions art’s ability to generate value in the theater of contemporary capitalism, as indicated by the title of this survey, *I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent*, which refers to text in her drawing *watering* (2015). In thinking about home—one possible “place to rest”—the work poses the painful question of who gets to have a place to rest, and whether this rest is something literal, or perhaps a burial, or a haunting. Much of Becker’s art directly addresses the realities of physical displacement that she personally confronted in her own life, whether as the daughter of artists moving from one low-rent, turnkey apartment complex to the next, or as a gifted, brilliant adult—and artist herself—grappling with the realities of urban precarity alongside the additional hardships of addiction. As critic and scholar Bruce Hainley writes:

*Becker opened up a dossier on wonder (aka the sublime) that glimmers throughout her oeuvre and that includes the sorcerous and pubescent as well as the dissociative and stupefying, not to mention the psycho-aesthetic,*

9 Ibid, p. 33.

10 Kraus, Chris. *Video Green*. South Pasadena and Boston: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2004. p. 215.

*shuddering aftermath, myth to many, of being fucked and/or fucked over by a god in beast mode.*<sup>11</sup>

Becker's work forces us to trace for ourselves the direct linkages between security, safety, shelter, and mental well-being, as well as the systemic social structures that aggravate these connections. In *Gentrification of the Mind*, writer and historian Sarah Schulman notes that gentrification can be understood as "the removal of the dynamic mix that defines urbanity—the familiar interaction of different kinds of people creating ideas together." When it comes to artists, Schulman contends, "conventional bourgeois behavior becomes a requirement for surviving socially, developing professionally, earning a living."<sup>12</sup> In one drawing, Becker comments on the dispossession and discrimination she witnessed in her own gentrifying East L.A. neighborhood: "The cops can get away with anything in Echo Park."

Power dynamics are often at play in *Researchers*, amounting to a psychodrama of surveillance and selfhood. Even as we the viewers are positioned as agents—as looking, searching, reading subjects—it becomes difficult to shake the feeling that we are complicit in something more nefarious, that someone or something may be watching, choreographing, or even controlling us. Cardboard boxes begin to take on unsettlingly human characteristics, and desk lamps become interrogation floodlights pointing to pieces of evidence. Like any good analysis session, where the patient rambles on, producing an inventory of the self, subjectivity is revealed to be as strong or as fragile as the systems imposed upon it, whether by society and its values, by familial or

11 Bruce Hainley, "Fugue State," *Open Space*, SF MoMA, May 10, 2016, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/05/fugue-state>

12 Schulman, Sarah. *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.



legislative authorities, by geological landscapes, or perhaps most consequently of all for Becker, by financial capital. There is the sense that Becker herself is watching us—like Eloise—from within the elaborate, slyly scaled worlds she makes. “He does not notice me watching him because I am small,” writes Eloise in her journal, describing a married gentleman she has observed sneaking around The Plaza in the throes of an extra-marital affair. “This is to my advantage. I am always watching.” She later elaborates on the mischief she makes:

*It could have been especially good for Future ventures to organize more tricks to mess everyone up. I think I mean Diversion. This is what they have done in ALL important wars. One side makes the other believe that they should pay attention to a bird. Then they Attack them when they are not looking. Actually, now that I think about it, people in everyday Life do this All the time.*<sup>13</sup>

Becker endows her installation with the whimsy and mischief of Eloise’s childhood imagination. The work is an auto-curious, cosmic whirlwind that asks us to consider the relationship between the self and private spaces—the inside of a service professional’s office; behind the locked door of an impersonal motel room; beyond the cover of a private journal; alone in a studio; or else in the catacombs of our mind’s secret detective agency. Such interior zones might suggest a map for the contours of the self we summon to face the world. In a powerful autofiction that weaves her own life together with those of invented avatars, Becker presents her vision of social order and forces us inside it. She constructs the divided

13 Julie Becker writing fictional diary entries as the literary character Eloise from Kay Thompson’s 1955 children’s book *Eloise*, as included in her installation *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest* (1993–1996).

interior spaces of her installation because she wants visitors to be “transported outside themselves” so that they can “see without dividers.” In so doing, she also hopes that they might dwell for a moment in that state of rest, giving their time and attention to the space she has created. “I am sick of the ‘fast read’ that most people give in a gallery setting,” she writes in a personal notebook. “If you bring them ‘Home,’ maybe they will stay around for a while.”



Chris Kraus

## WHAT I COULDN'T WRITE

1.

When she was 43 years old, after struggling with addiction and mental illness for many years, the artist took her own life.

(the repetitive picking of one's own skin; excoriation)

(the body's glandular reaction to a handful of hastily prescribed psychotropic meds)

(the use of opioids to strike a balance between numbness and pain, sometimes reaching a plateau where one can feel and even think)

Unicorns and force-fields; sweetness, sparkles, little dogs and light.

The storefront studio on Sunset Boulevard where the artist also lived was a storeroom and lab, to which domestic touches had been added over many years as it became clear that this would be her permanent domain.

'She'd said: "Some things in life are really harsh and troubling. And if you can find a way to be less cynical – well, all the better. Thinking, you know, can be completely suicidal. Sometimes it's better to just zone out"'.

... And he realised something that in his heart he had always known: that the *Whole* is impossible, that knowledge is the classification of fragments. —Roberto Bolaño, *Woes of the True Policeman*

From about 2000 until her death in 2016, the artist launched herself into an unfinishable, ongoing project that she titled *Whole*. She began constructing it in the basement of a ramshackle, bank-owned bungalow where she briefly lived. The bungalow was perched halfway up on the hill on Morton Street in Echo Park. The bank had given her a rent break in exchange for clearing out the unclaimed belongings of the previous inhabitant, who'd died of AIDS.

She knew from the beginning that the *Whole* was built to fail. The work consisted of, among other things, a scale model of the soon-to-be-dissolved California Federal Bank building on Sunset Boulevard (she saw the building in the distance through the double window of the bungalow); a Tiki Bar, an elevator shaft, a videotape, glitter-drenched drawings of the pyramid on the US dollar bill and a sidewalk concrete cast. She'd said: 'There's always an attempt to be whole. Everyone in the universe has spent time trying to become whole through religious means, from sitting in a church to yoga to swimming, and everybody is trying to get more energy and become more whole'.

But then she couldn't do it. She realised that *Whole* could only be 'an endless exposing of parts and not ever reaching a whole'. When asked if being whole was the same as being dead, she said: 'But I haven't even had coffee yet!'

Founded in 1926, the California Federal Bank was absorbed by Citigroup in 2002. Its demise fell somewhere between the Savings & Loan crisis of the 1980s and the Dodd-Frank Act of 2010.

‘The circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorisation of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless’ —*Karl Marx, A Critique of Political Economy*

‘When more than one person (i.e., artist and viewer) entertains the same illusion’, Mark von Schlegell wrote, ‘it’s woven into the fabric of the real’.

And, then again—

WE MUST CONTENT OURSELVES WITH THE MYSTERY,  
THE ABSURDITY, THE CONTRADICTIONS, THE HOSTILITY,  
BUT ALSO THE GENEROSITY THAT OUR ENVIRONMENT  
OFFERS US. (Philip K. Dick, *The Last Interview and Other  
Conversations*)

WANT  
3.

The memorial for the artist was as inconclusive as her work, or anybody’s life. Organised haphazardly on Facebook by one of her old friends, it was held beside the ‘lake’ in Echo Park in the middle of a heat wave on a summer Sunday afternoon. For an hour after the appointed time, ten or twelve of us sat around in thin wedges of shade waiting to see if others would show up. But no one did. And then Eve Wood, a former classmate of the artist’s from CalArts, recalled her striding through that long concrete gallery on the first day of school, tossing Gerbera daisies into the air from a bouquet. And then the artist’s



father, who'd studied art but worked a series of odd jobs and never pursued a gallery career, talked about their aesthetic differences as if they had been peers.

A photograph of the artist, taken at her graduation from CalArts shows her smartly dressed in a black blazer and a patterned shirt with its wide pointy collar perfectly arranged over the lapels. She's wearing sunglasses. Her long hair, parted to the side, flows neatly down her back. As if to say: she's left behind a childhood marked by constant shifts from one Move-In Special to the next in low-rent apartment complexes across LA. She's every inch the gallerina. The photo could have been taken here.

'You could hear in her voice how badly she wanted it', Eileen Myles wrote about listening to a reading by the young Patti Smith.

'Someday I shall write about this in greater detail', Peter Handke concludes his elegaic essay on his mother's suicide (*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*). Of course he never did.

## AN ILLUSION OF NEUTRALITY

### 4.

Rectangular windows cut into the concrete walls looking out over a lawn. Behind it, blocking the horizon, a single line of towering trees.

## USA

### 5.

Invited to judge a non-fiction competition for a Midwestern university press, she was amazed that *every single manuscript* was a memoir. Each featured a different recitation of American childhood. Some were told retrospectively, the authors having recently become parents themselves; some

were immigrant; some were gay. The United Solipsists of America. USA.

SCHIZOPHRENIC SYSTEMS:  
A STORY FROM MY YOUTH  
6.

Among my old notebooks I find one labelled 'CAPITAL—notebook #2'. It's a notebook I kept during my first year in New York, which was most likely 1976, although I've lied about these dates so long in an attempt to keep my age, or rather my generational identity, ambiguous, I'm not really sure.

The notes in my *Capital* notebook came from a series of classes I took at the School for Marxist Education with Arthur Felberbaum, its founder-director. Newly arrived from New Zealand where my family had emigrated, I was a Marxist, i.e., I still thought that effects could be traced back to causes. Tuition was free, I wanted to meet other people, and everyone knows you're not a real Marxist until you've read *Capital*.

The School occupied several rooms on the third floor of a building in the West Village, on Sheridan Square. Amiri Baraka and other political activists taught workshops there, but the core of the curriculum was a close reading of all three volumes of *Capital*. Patiently, night after night, Arthur explained the mechanics of dialectical materialism to a handful of us, sitting in front of a chalkboard on folding chairs.

A barrel-chested man in his late 40s, Arthur taught Marx with fervour and discipline. Classes took place in the evenings, in deference to the School's presumably working class audience, although only a few of the students held actual jobs. I sold counterfeit subway slugs in the park. Others were collecting unemployment or SSI disability benefits.

Arthur despised capitalism with the most luminous, and at heart utterly reasonable, form of hate. He was a born

raconteur, dressed like a math teacher in button-down shirts with plastic pocket protectors. Sometimes Arthur digressed from the complex equations of the Quantitative Determination of Relative Value he wrote on the board:

$$Ilc + Ilv + IIs = Iv + Is + Iv + IIs$$

—*isn't this blindingly clear!?* he'd exhort, with a gleam in his eye—to tell stories of real-life repression that were the logical consequences of the economic laws Marx described. Arthur had just returned from demonstrating against the arrest of Assata Shakur in New Jersey. A Black Panther educator, Assata was presently being held without bail in the Clinton County Correctional Facility for Women, for a murder she did not, could not have committed. She was a slight, bookish woman in her mid-20s with a Hunter College BA, and she'd grown up in the Bronx, like Arthur himself. Arthur told us about the police beatings she'd suffered while chained to a hospital bed, as anguished if they were siblings. 'And all of this is taking place in broad daylight, in Clinton, New Jersey, a town which—you would not believe, is full of roses and white picket fences, straight out of *Leave It To Beaver*—don't think the *Times* will report this, you've got to open your eyes'. Years later, after Assata's daring escape, I'd make a pilgrimage to the women's prison in Clinton, a place that had become more vivid to me, thanks to Arthur's descriptions, than some places I'd actually lived.

Like all the most scorching hatreds, Arthur's was driven by love. It was his belief that anyone has the capacity to understand, and then transform the world. *All the keys to understanding societal function can be traced to the means of production*, he argued night after night. Labour, i.e. time, once congealed in commodities becomes abstracted through laws of exchange.  $C + V + S = -C + V = S$ , Arthur said, and I wrote.

He never moved on from even the most difficult point until he was certain even the slowest amongst us had grasped it. He was a good man, a simple heart. As a young woman alone in the city, I was an open receptacle for all the projections of pain of those I encountered, and at that time, the idea of goodness moved me to tears. I held it tight in my chest like some kind of salvation.

Arthur's school attracted a disproportionate number of schizophrenics, but this isn't surprising, since the analysis of systems is where they excel.

7.

POTENTIALITY OR REST

8.

The gallery is a place where things are held.

Tanglewood, MA  
September 16, 2002

Julie Becker  
2852 Berkeley Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA 90026

Dear Julie,

On September 11th (the anniversary of) I was in this ashram in Tanglewood Massachusetts, and I'm not even going to tell you what put me there, the fit of despair, the endless crying, the pull in my heart towards going all the way into that blackness, which would be death, or wanting to die ... all I can say is that Alexandra Kollantai, the Russian revolutionary who wrote *Red Love* (her manifesto of the multiple human relationships of sexuality, friendship and love that might be possible in a revolutionary society), had a very brave project and it isn't her fault that it failed. I was exhausted.

Immediately after arriving I began to feel better; it was a strange and beautiful culture being practiced there. The path to the lake was wide and well worn but enclosed on both sides by all kinds of foliage: chokeberries and I don't know the other names, but yellow and purple and red. I felt extremely protected. Everything was held in place—the lake by the hills, the hills by the white strands of cloud in the sky—and I began to feel whole. The 'hole' being filled by the 'whole'.

The yoga they practice here at Kripalu is based on presence, acceptance and love. They say that Everything Matters. They call it Intentional Living. You can feel it by the way they smile at the check-in desk and open the door. Or the swathes of white and pink cosmos they've planted up on the

hill. Or the utterly rational way they've deployed technology within their 20,000-square-foot physical plant towards the greatest efficiency, comfort and pleasure. Money is effortless here, the result of an affirmation. Some of the ones I'm learning to say are, 'Money rushes to me because I am a master at multiplying its abundance' AND 'A full love surrounds me' AND 'Financial success comes easily to me' ... And seeing that there are so many expensive new cars in the ashram parking lot with New Age bumper stickers, maybe it's working, although I must say it's in their total exclusion of relativity (i.e., their banality) that the affirmations begin to lose me ...

There are hardly any rules in the ashram except for the absence of cell phones and sexualised clothing. There is even an area designated for smoking, except this area isn't marked or disclosed. You have to declare yourself to the front desk staff as a smoker and then they will tell you, but I didn't do that. I tried to find it myself, unsuccessfully. Still, I was curious how this culture deals with taboos. Because it seemed to me, the Designated Smoking Area on the 'east hill' above the ashram would be like the bone yard outside the Marquis de Sade's chateau ... the back end of the institution, the place where they throw all the used up dead girls, the place that everyone knows of but nobody wants to go.

A couple of weeks ago when you were preparing your show for Greene Naftali, I asked you, What does it mean to be Whole? You answered, That's a good question. Because you'd been preparing this show called *Whole* for nearly four years, and you were starting to realise it would never be finished. It was becoming an endeavour as gorgeous and doomed as *Red Love*, or the San Francisco sculptor Jay DeFeo's enormous white plaster rose that grew like a tapeworm inside her apartment until it threatened to take down the whole building ... or else, even jill johnston's early art writing in *Lesbian Nation*, which she later recanted, and here I am possibly imitating—



You said: 'There's always an attempt to be whole. Everyone in the universe has spent time trying to become whole through religious means, from sitting in a church to yoga to swimming, and everybody is trying to get more energy and become more whole'. But you couldn't do it. You'd started to realise that the real project of *Whole* would be 'an endless exposing of parts and not ever reaching a whole', you said that, and then you added, 'so I have tried to share that, that human process', but when I asked you if being Whole is like being dead, you complained, 'But I haven't even had coffee yet!'

The show you mounted this month at Greene Naftali was a part of the Whole. We both agreed that showing these parts over time was the only way you could do it. Because in fact, we agreed, it's sort of a quantum tautology to think you can capture the (W)hole without falling into it ... And this gets close to something like madness, a state both of us know.

In the videotape you made, called *Federal Building with Music* (2002), you cut a square hole in the floor of your living room-studio and hoisted a model of the California Federal Bank building down through it on pulleys into the basement ... The CalFed Bank was the building you saw then, looking outside the window, when you were still in the Echo Park house that became the site of this project called *Whole*. When you moved in, the house was owned by the bank, and then later it wasn't. During the three years you lived there the place changed hands several times, it kept being bought and sold. Except no one knew what to do with it, because Echo Park hadn't gentrified yet and the real estate market was flat. The house was really a shack falling into the ground, there was constant flooding. No one fixed the place up, but the land wasn't worth

enough yet to bother tearing it down. The lot hadn't reached its maximum value yet.

I think we were talking, later, about the mystical power of money: the way the US dollar bill is engraved with 27 masonic symbols. The bills change hands many times every day but nobody knows what they mean ... You made a drawing then, called *Playful Embellishment*, with the eye of the dollar bill pyramid blinking in front of the CalFed building, all brightened with candles and glitter.

Anyway, before you moved in, when the bank took it over, a gay man with AIDS was living in the basement apartment downstairs. It was really only a room built over cement. The man had been a stained-glass maker, but when he died nobody came to reclaim his stuff. The bank let you use downstairs for free in exchange for clearing it out, and this stuff became part of the *Whole*.

The walls of this room were covered in cheap pine panelling, and the basement became the metaphysical-conceptual lab for the yet-to-be-fully-realised *Whole*. You found it strange to be living on top of this stuff, it was like something was brewing down there beyond your control. But really things were happening outside the house, the buying and selling, the change in the market, as well. There was a Tiki Bar built into the wall, one of those shingled-roofed things that they use to sell poolside drinks. It seemed to be holding the whole place up. As you told me once, the Bar (which you later rebuilt and called the Mysterious Object Bar), is the underside of the belly of *Whole*.

The bar, as it appears in your installation, contains certain disturbances at the 'bottom' of a house that is decaying at its very foundations and has been tied up in lawsuits for years. Is the bar and alchemical centre of the production of negative energy? Obviously, your work *alludes to the social fact of gentrification and its attendant displacement*, as they'd say

in art criticism, *while probing the psychic underside of what we call 'real estate'* ... the troubled lives of actual property occupants, whose troubles are only compounded by official papers and documents.

In your videotape, the camera hovers around a sign hanging on the pine-panelled wall left behind by the previous tenant. The sign is a riff on the kind of inspirational slogans hung all over the ashram (that say things like YOU ARE PERFECT IN YOUR IMPERFECTION), but his sign said, IF YOU CAN KEEP YOUR HEAD IN ALL THIS CONFUSION YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION ... and I was struck by his use of the word 'situation', the way it can be both a noun and a verb ... as you, as a sculptor, i.e. a visual thinker, must have been, because it seems that part of the project of *Whole* is to wilfully resuscitate things. In *Federal Building with Music*, the camera holds on a piece of the urban landscape, i.e. the bank, as seen through your living room window. And then it cuts to the model you've built of the bank, which is small enough to be hoisted down into the hole ... The actual bank itself is full of holes. It has those porthole windows designed to make a large building look like a plane in the hi-tech imagination of the 1950s, when commerce, like God, took off like a jet.

The landscape seen through your window was all blurry and smeared.

At the ashram this week, I kept thinking about Alice when she fell down through the hole, or Ariadne, how she didn't forget to tie a string to her wrist when she left for the land of the dead. Mexican radio music blasting on the video soundtrack, the frequency of the pirate radio station someone runs near your house, the way that music enters the wires whenever we talk on the phone ... Eleanor Antin quoting *Baudelaire in*

*her installation Minetta Lane—A Ghost Story (1994): The city changes faster than the human heart.*

At the ashram they always light candles at the heart of the circle when they gather to meditate. Everyone wept for the 3000 dead on September 11, because these are the dead we can imagine, they are triggers of grief, and you said, *What attempt to move forward isn't an attempt to become Whole?*

Love, Chris

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Julie Becker: I must create a Master Piece to pay the Rent* at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York, June 9-September 2, 2019.

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Page 1, 40: Julie Becker, *Postersize Copy Machine*, 1996.  
Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Page 12: Julie Becker, *watering*, 2015 (detail). Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Page 22: Julie Becker, *Whole (Projector)*, 1999. Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York

Page 39: Julie Becker, *Researchers, Residents, A Place to Rest*, 1993–1996 (detail). Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York.  
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